

## *Who Needs a National “Conversation on Race?”*

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

For years, African Americans in particular have complained that what the U.S. needs is an honest national conversation on race. This idea is bandied about as though the supposed need for such a conversation should be obvious to everyone.

However, why is such a conversation necessary? Moreover, why do so many people assume that such a conversation would be beneficial to any or all of its participants? Has there ever been such a national conversation on *any* topic?

Who and how many would participate in such a conversation and where would it be held? What would be the purpose and goals of such a conversation? What would be the ground rules? How would they be enforced, and by whom? Now that the U.S. is a multiracial nation, the conversation would have to include Blacks, Whites, Browns, Reds, Asians, Arabs and others.

Such a conversation could be held in a huge stadium, or at a major institution of higher learning. There could be call-ins, Internet access, social media, etc. However, who would be the main speakers? If they were primarily college professors, elite intellectuals and scholars, journalists, and the like, would that not be unfair to the poor and ordinary citizens? Would Marxist thinkers be invited, or would the conversation be limited to capitalists? Would known racists be invited, and could an honest discussion of race even take place without such people?

Would there be a moderator of such a discussion? If so, who would that be? Would the moderator be Black, White, Arab, Latino, Asian, or someone from another background? How would such a determination be made, and who would make it? Would a multiracial panel be called upon to make the choice? If so, who would be on that panel?

The assumption seems to be that such a conversation would have primarily beneficial results. However, is such optimism justified? In my humble opinion, it seems more likely that bitterness and hostility would be the result. Indeed, whenever I have witnessed or been involved in such discussions, they have always ended in bitterness, division and *misunderstanding*. At such gatherings, Blacks and Whites tend to talk *at* each other rather than *to* each other. I have seen such conversations on talk shows such as *Donahue* and on PBS during the Boston school busing crisis in the 1970s. Such discussions seem to never end well.

To paraphrase syndicated columnist Clarence Page of the *Chicago Tribune*, there is *much* more racism in the U.S. than most Whites believe. But there is not *nearly* as much racism in the U.S. as most Blacks believe. This paradox makes a serious conversation on race between Blacks and Whites pretty much untenable. The starting assumptions are diametrically opposed, and it should not be surprising that conversations on race invariably fail.

Decades ago, a writer featured in *EBONY* observed that Malcolm X predicted racial separation and that Martin Luther King predicted integration and unity between Blacks and Whites in the U.S. However, neither of those visions has been completely realized. What exists seems to be an uneasy peace between Blacks and Whites.

However, while this situation is certainly not ideal, is it really so bad? The American people elected a Black president twice. Southern apartheid is over. The numbers of Whites joining White supremacist organizations are tiny compared to what they were up until the 1950s. At least until the 1970s, racist graffiti could be found on walls all over the U.S. Now one rarely sees it. Blacks and Latinos can generally go into White neighborhoods in the South, North, East and West without worrying about getting jumped or lynched. Celebrities such as Paula Deen, Michael Richards and Don Imus suffer at least temporary career setbacks for making racist comments. Indeed, though White supremacy still exists, there is not nearly as much racism in the U.S. as most Blacks believe. That is progress we should not take lightly.

For those that insist upon having a national conversation on race, it would probably be a better idea to begin with a national conversation on *class*. After all, there are people from all racial backgrounds in all classes. Such a conversation would no doubt deal with income inequality, which would be of great interest to Blacks of all classes. Such a conversation would also cover prisoners' rights and possibly prison abolition, as advocated by Angela Davis. Voting rights of convicts would also be a topic of interest to African Americans and Latinos. It would have been ideal to have had such a conversation on class right after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans.

It is just as well that there has never been a national conversation on race. Such a conversation would only pour salt on festering wounds. It would give certain groups a chance to vent, and most Whites would simply assume a defensive posture. What is much more important than a conversation on race is a progressive approach to combating racial injustice and fighting for freedom and justice for all.