

The heartbeat of racism is denial

When our reality is too ugly, we deny reality. It is too painful to look at. Reality is too hard to accept.

Mental health experts routinely say that denial is among the most common defence mechanisms. Denial is how the person defends his superior sense of self, her racially unequal society.

Denial is how America defends itself as superior to “shithole countries” in Africa and elsewhere, as President Donald Trump reportedly described them in a White House meeting last week, although he has since, well, denied that. It’s also how America defends itself as superior to those “developing countries” in Africa, to quote how liberal opponents of Trump might often describe them.

Trump appears to be unifying America — unifying Americans in their denial. The more racist Trump sounds, the more Trump country denies his racism, and the more his opponents look away from their own racism to brand Trump country as racist. Through it all, America remains a unified country of denial.

The reckoning of Trump’s racism must become the reckoning of American racism. Because the American creed of denial — “I’m not a racist” — knows no political parties, no ideologies, no colours, no regions.

On Friday, Senator Richard J. Durbin (Democrat from Illinois) affirmed that Trump did use the term “shithole” during a White House meeting on immigration with lawmakers. Durbin rightfully described Trump’s words as “hate-filled, vile and racist”, and added, “I cannot believe that in the history of the White House in that Oval Office, any president has ever spoken the words that I personally heard our president speak yesterday.”

But Trump is no exception. In framing Trump’s racism as exceptional, in seeking to highlight the depth of the president’s cruelty, Durbin, a reliably liberal senator, showed the depth of denial of American racism.

Begin with the eight presidents who held slaves while in the Oval Office. Then consider how Abraham Lincoln urged black people to leave the United States. “Even when you cease to be slaves, you are yet far removed from being placed on an equality with the white race,” Lincoln told five black guests at the White House in 1862. So “it is better for us both, therefore, to be separated.”

Raging then as we are raging now, the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison responded: “Can anything be more puerile, absurd, illogical, impertinent, untimely?” He added that “had it not been for the cupidity of their white enslavers, not one of their race would now be found upon this continent”.

Presidential history also includes the social Darwinism of Theodore Roosevelt, the federal-government-segregating, “Birth of a Nation”— praising Woodrow Wilson — and the bigotry that came from the mouths of presidents who are generally seen as essential to racial progress. President Lyndon B. Johnson said [the N-word] nearly as often as Ku Klux Klansmen did.

This denial of racism is the heartbeat of racism. Where there is suffering from racist policies, there are denials that those policies are racist. The beat of denial sounds the same across time and space. I grew up to the beat of racist denial in Queens, not far from where Trump grew up. I was raised in the urban “hell” of neighbourhoods he probably avoided, alongside immigrants from countries he derided last week. In school or elsewhere, we all heard recitals of the American ideal of equality, especially on the day we celebrate the life of the Rev. Dr Martin Luther King Jr. Those events often feature recitals of the words “all men are created equal”, which were written by a slaveholder who once declared that black people “are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind”.

Thomas Jefferson was not a founding father of equality. He was a founding father of the heartbeat of denial that lives through both Trump’s denials and the assertion that his racial views are abnormal for America and its presidents.

Fifty years ago, Richard Nixon transformed this historic heartbeat of denial into an intoxicating political philosophy. His presidential candidacy appealed to George Wallace-type segregationists, while also attracting Americans who refused to live near “dangerous” black residents, obstructed the desegregation of schools, resisted affirmative action policies, framed black mothers on welfare as undeserving, called the black family pathological and denigrated black culture — all those racists who refused to believe they were racist in 1968.

Nixon designed his campaign, one of his advisers explained, to allow a potential supporter to “avoid admitting to himself that he was attracted by” the “racist appeal”.

A new vocabulary emerged, allowing users to evade admissions of racism. It still holds fast after all these years. The vocabulary list includes these: Law and order. War on drugs. Model minority. Reverse discrimination. Race-neutral. Welfare queen. Handout. Tough on crime. Personal responsibility. Black-on-black crime. Achievement gap. No excuses. Race card. Colourblind. Post-racial. Illegal immigrant. Obamacare. War on Cops. Blue Lives Matter. All Lives Matter. Entitlements. Voter fraud. Economic anxiety. The denials using these phrases come from both conservatives and white liberals who think people of colour are stuck in cycles of unstable families and criminal cultures, and that the deprivations of poverty and discrimination spin out bad people.

Trump opened his candidacy with racism, calling Mexicans criminals and rapists. Since taking office, he has looked away from the disaster zone in Puerto Rico, he has called some violent white supremacists “very fine people”, and he has described Nigerians as living in “huts”.

When someone identifies the obvious, Trump resounds the beat of denial as he did before he was president: “I’m the least racist person that you’ve ever met,” that “you’ve ever seen,” that “you’ve ever encountered.” These are ugly denials. But it’s the denials from those who stand in strong opposition to this president that are more frustrating to me: Denials that their attacks on identity politics are racist. Denials that the paltry number of people of colour in elite spaces marks racism. Those denials echo the same ones that frustrated Dr King in 1963 as he sat in a Birmingham jail cell and wrote: “Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will.” Trump, I suspect, will go to his grave with his heart beating in denial of the ill will of racism. Many others will as well.

Because we naturally want to look away from our ugliness. We paint over racist reality to make a beautiful delusion of self, of society. We defend this beautiful self and society from our racist reality with the weapons of denial.

Denial is fuelled by the stigma associated with being a racist. Feeding the stigma is how “racist” is considered almost like an identity, a brand.

But a racist is not who a person is. A racist is what a person is, what a person is saying, what a person is doing.

Racist is not a fixed category like “not racist”, which is steeped in denial. Only racists say they are not racist. Only the racist lives by the heartbeat of denial. The anti-racist lives by the opposite heartbeat: One that rarely and irregularly sounds in America — the heartbeat of confession.

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