

Racist Ideas in America

*A Q&A with NEA Higher Ed member Ibram X. Kendi,
winner of the 2016 National Book Award*

Q: This book challenges a common perception about racism, specifically that racist ideas propel racist policy. You say it's the opposite—racist policies have propelled racist thinking. Can you explain that?

A: That was something I certainly believed, going into the book, that racist ideas drive policy, and I didn't think I was going to turn it on its head. That wasn't my intent... I wanted to write a history of racist ideas, a history of America, and show how the historical context produced these people, who produced these racist ideas. That led me to figure out the motives behind why they were producing these racist ideas. I found, over and over again, that these producers were not ignorant. They were not hateful. Many of them were the most brilliant minds in American history. And they typically were producing these ideas to defend existing racist policies. The disparities were in place, their effects were profound, and these racist ideas were an attempt to normalize and justify those racist policies.

Q: In the book, you describe three kinds of people: the segregationists, who are racists basically; the anti-racists, who actively reject any idea that Black people are inferior in any way; and the assimilationists.

In his 2016 National Book Award-winning work, Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America, NEA Higher Ed member Ibram X. Kendi dives into the world of racist ideas. Recently, Kendi, an assistant professor at the University of Florida, talked with Thought & Action about the evolution of racism in the United States, how it continues to impact public education, and how educators can create anti-racist spaces.



This group includes people like Abraham Lincoln and Barack Obama. Can you describe them better?

A: The reason I wrote a history of racist ideas, as opposed to a history of racists, was because I realized very early on that there are people who hold racist and anti-racist ideas. These are the assimilationists. You can simultaneously believe that the racial groups are biologically equal, that they were created equal, but that they have become behaviorally unequal [because of environment, poverty, etc.]. Assimilationists will argue that Black people are capable of development, and they believe that this belief is progressive but it also is racist.

Q: Is the book written mostly with an audience of assimilationists in mind? You write that it's difficult, if not impossible, to move the segregationists from racism to antiracism, but the assimilationists sound like well-intentioned people. Can they be moved to self-reflect, to catch themselves?

A: Yes. That is more or less the story of W.E.B. Du Bois. Early in his life, he was basically an assimilationist. The more he studied race in America, the more he developed an anti-racist consciousness.

Q: If you take this filter of segregationists, assimilationists, and anti-racists, and apply it to public education, who comes out on top?

If we accept that assimilationists got the upper hand after *Brown vs. Board*, are they still running the show?

A: Yes. The effect of *Brown vs. Board* was basically to state that the reason Black schools are inferior is not because they are under-resourced, but because White students aren't in them, and so what we need to do is usher Black students into schools with White students. That's why you had busing in the 1960s and 1970s and why you have racial reformers, ever since, thinking that the way to create a better school system would be to bring more Black students into White schools.

Q: What can teachers, and their unions, do to make their classrooms, their schools, and their school systems more anti-racist?

A: Instead of so many teacher activists who care about racial justice issues focusing on closing the achievement gap, I think we should focus on closing the school resource gap. There is certainly a problem with the amount of resources dedicated to certain schools. And while it doesn't result in those children being intellectually inferior, it does lead to a different type of education and a different type of intelligence, which is not a type of intelligence necessarily valued in our economy. We need to focus on that resource gap, and teachers need to be at the forefront of that, because they can speak to how difficult it is for them to do their jobs in an under-resourced school. Those resources are based on local and state policies, and those policies can be changed.

In terms of the achievement gap, I've stated the achievement gap is a racist idea. The academic achievement gap is based on standardized tests, and those tests have been proven again and again to not measure intelligence. For us to believe that there is a racial gap, and that black children are achieving at a lesser level, basically means believing that white children are intellectually superior. The assimilationists say no, it's not that. They'll say Black children are capable, it's just about putting different teachers in

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those classrooms... We need to say that we don't accept that gap because the tests are not valid, and intelligence is subjective.

Q: How about what teachers do in their own classrooms? There are studies showing how educators' racial biases affect school discipline rates among 4-year-olds even.

A: Clearly one of the most dangerous racist ideas about Black people is that their children have a behavioral problem that White children don't

have, which manifests in schools and leads to children becoming criminals. So the first thing is that teachers need to not think that Black children have behavioral problems. They need to see their Black students as complex individuals, and recognize their Black children's lives in the same way that they recognize their White children's lives. You try to understand them. You recognize them as individuals. You individualize your approach to each child to accom-

modate their interests, their culture, who they are. You become an expert on your students' lives.

Q: What if you apply this lens to higher education? How do we move our higher-ed policies, including admissions and affordability policies, to make them anti-racist?

A: At the higher-ed level, you have historically White institutions. You have disparities in student bodies, and faculty bodies, and administrative bodies. What institutions typically say is that we can't get more Black students because Black students are not qualified. Even the selective institutions say we'd be able to recruit more Black students if more Black students were applying or qualified. So the blame is placed on the students, on the faculty, and on the administrators. Those are racist ideas. Racist ideas have historically placed blame on Black people, as opposed to the policies that lead to racial disparities. These institutions have no problem recruiting the best Black athletes, but they turn around and say

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they can't recruit the best Black students. Look at the resources allocated to recruiting the best Black athletes and compare them to the resources allocated to recruiting the best Black students and faculty, and there's no comparison. And that's if we accept the existing standards of quality, which actually discriminate against Black students.

Q: There was a lot of talk about how in our quote-unquote "post-racial society," there was no need for race-conscious admissions policies, but the Supreme Court recently affirmed the benefits of diversity in higher ed. Would you characterize that as an anti-racist ruling, or was it a little more complicate than that?

A: It was a little more complicated. The Supreme Court decisions and rulings and cases regarding affirmative action, which I talk about in *Stamped from the Beginning*, essentially come down to racists versus racists. The concept that emerged in 1978 is that standardized tests are race neutral policies, while affirmative action is deemed race conscious. We ask, how is it that SATs are race neutral when there are racial disparities in SAT scores, and when we simultaneously know that SAT scores do not measure students' success in college or even their profession? We begin to question why are we using these tests? And the only thing I can come up with is that they benefit White students, and rich students, and male students. That's what to me has been problematic about affirmative action debate. This dichotomy is false to me.

Q: Let's talk about the election. Early in the book, you describe a pendulum swinging between anti-racist and racist reformers, so that the outlawing of slavery is followed by Jim Crow laws. Where are we swinging now?

A: If Obama's presidency is a sign of anti-racial progress, as so many people argued, then Donald Trump's presidency is going to symbolize the progression of racism.

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Q: In the book's epilogue, you describe the one percent, the straight White, Protestant men, who hold the vast majority of the world's power and money, and who use racism to control any threats to their hold, including threats by poorer Whites. It's almost like you were describing a Make America Great Again rally. Did you know he was going to win? Was it predictable to you?

A: It should have been predictable. The reason it was shocking to many people, was that even though many people on the left have challenged post-racial ideology over the last eight years, post-racial ideology had seeped into the left's consciousness. Consumption of post-racial ideology, the idea that we've literally moved past this type of mass manipulation and bigotry, caused people to be shocked.

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Q: How do the anti-racists strike back? You describe the act of protesting against someone or

some idea as a waste of time.

A: Racist powers will change policies when it serves their self-interest, and when the protest threat disappears they'll change them back. It's a short-term solution. The long-term solution is for anti-racist people to get into positions of power.

Q: The book strikes a very hopeful note in the end, saying that there will come time when Americans realize that the only thing wrong with Black people is that they think there is something wrong with Black people, and maybe that time is now. What makes you hopeful?

A: What has always made me hopeful is the resistance to racist ideas and racist policies. Basically the continuing presence of anti-racists in American society makes me hopeful. Clearly segregationists and assimilationists have won, on many occasions, but if you're involved in the struggle, there always remains the capacity to win. The only way in which an anti-racist America could never come to be is if anti-racists themselves decide it's impossible and they stop fighting for it. [nea](#)