

NATIONAL REVIEW

Racial Equality: Much Progress Made, Much More Needed

The Smithsonian's new African-American museum reminds us of America's flaws and virtues.

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In less than two weeks, on September 24, the newest addition to the Smithsonian museum system will open on the Washington, D.C. mall. The National Museum of African American History and Culture will tell a story that reminds us of both our failures as a nation and our unique promise and ability to rise above our baser instincts.

Certainly the African-American experience starts in adversity. From 1619, when a Dutch ship brought 20 African slaves ashore at Jamestown, until the slave trade was abolished in 1807, nearly 600,000 slaves were forcibly brought to this country. At the start of the Civil War, roughly 89 percent of all blacks in America, almost 4 million people, were slaves. Overall, between the arrival of those first black slaves at Jamestown and 1865, when the 13th Amendment officially outlawed slavery, millions of Africans and their descendants were held in bondage and servitude in the United States. They were routinely murdered, raped, beaten, and deprived of the most basic human rights. That represents an indelible stain on this country's soul.

The oppression of African Americans hardly ended with the abolition of slavery. On paper, of course, the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments promised equality. In reality, however, the end of slavery marked the beginning of a century of legally enforced second-class citizenship. In fact, while the worst aspects of Jim Crow were outlawed by various civil rights laws in the 1960s, the treatment of African-Americans has remained unequal.

Far too many conservatives pretend that the mere removal of legal barriers to black progress instantly elevated African Americans to a level playing field. In reality, even if overt discrimination has greatly diminished today, the consequences of past discrimination are still with us. You cannot have a race in which one runner is loaded down with weights and chains for half the race, remove them, and suggest that from then on it's a fair contest.

Nor should we forget that, from abuses in the criminal-justice system to continued discrimination in employment, housing, and education to the rise of the alt-right, full equality remains more aspiration than reality. As a white man, with all the privilege that implies, I can't even begin to imagine the toll that constant exposure to racism, from minor slights to full-blown discrimination, must take on its victims.

But while the museum will appropriately highlight our sins and failures, it will also tell a uniquely American story of triumph over adversity. We should recall that even in times of oppression, African Americans raised families, educated themselves, started businesses, and formed charitable societies to care for each other in hard times. They became scholars, business owners, politicians, and leaders in all manner of fields. And before the tragedy of the modern welfare state, African Americans developed an extraordinary network of private charities, especially lodges like the Prince Hall Masons, to take care of their communities.

For all its faults, it is the American system — democracy, the rule of law, and free-market capitalism — that has made it possible for African Americans to overcome this legacy of oppression. Likewise, it is the basic decency of the American people that has helped transform the political and legal landscape to overcome racism — African-Americans who demanded change, and millions of white Americans who stood along side them. The civil-rights movement could really only have happened here.

Indeed, one can look around the world at simmering racial, ethnic, and tribal conflicts and see few countries that have come as far as we have. Racial equality may still be aspirational, but it is part of the American character to have such aspirations. After all, racism is simply another form of collectivism. It rejects the value of the individual. That's about as anti-American as one can get.

Given the current heated political climate, the National Museum of African American History and Culture will almost certainly arouse controversy. That's a shame. In reminding us of our flaws, it also reminds us how far we have come. In reminding us of how much remains to be done, it reminds us how much we can still achieve. In reminding us that we haven't been as perfect as we pretend, it reminds us of how great we really are.

That's a message, all of it, that we need to hear.

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