

OPINION: ON RACE EXHIBIT, SMITHSONIAN MUSEUM RICHLY DESERVES RIDICULE



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When [Pew Research Center](#) asked black and white Americans last year, majorities of each group agreed that race relations in the United States are generally bad. When Pew asked whether the legacy of slavery significantly affects the position of black people in American society, majorities of blacks and whites agreed that it did. The two groups differed in the extent to which they believed these things — blacks were a lot more pessimistic than whites — but that they agreed at all was remarkable.

2020 seems to have borne out 2019's public opinion data. The United States has become a racial powderkeg. The mere mention of George Floyd, or of the riots that ensued after his death at the hands, or more appropriately the knee, of a white police officer in Minneapolis demonstrates the point. While other forces are also at work, notably the nationwide shutdown that has people wondering how to cover rent and food, the nation's race problem remains at a low simmer.

It's not surprising that the Smithsonian National Museum of African-American History and Culture would enter this particular fray. Of all American institutions, this one might be the obvious choice to provide a sort of "safe space" for precisely the kind of constructive dialogue we need.

Sadly, it was not to be.

Instead, the Smithsonian offered their "Aspects and Assumptions of Whiteness and White Culture in the United States," a [graphic](#) the Smithsonian subsequently [removed](#) in the wake of near universal [ridicule](#). Among the things the Smithsonian claimed were somehow uniquely white were individualism, the nuclear family, objective scientific thought, hard work, delayed gratification, and competition.

Though well deserved, the ridicule largely missed a couple of important points. First and most important, whites and blacks have a tremendous amount in common, and their beliefs on race relations dovetail more than enough that we could have a very serious and constructive conversation about race in America.

Majorities of both blacks and whites [believe](#) that blacks are treated less fairly by the police and by the criminal justice system. More than 80 percent of whites and 90 percent of blacks [don't trust](#) the federal government. Three-quarters of both blacks and whites say racial and ethnic [diversity](#) is good for the country. Majorities of both blacks and whites agree on major [problems](#) facing the country: affordability of college and health care, drug addiction and the federal deficit. For all the press that racial differences get, there also exists significant common ground. Discussing our common ground will build stronger cross-racial ties that then can be leveraged to discuss our differences.

Second, we need to understand the Smithsonian's misguided attempt at analyzing white culture on its own terms. The most important takeaway here, beyond the profoundly offensive assertion that all kinds of indicators of success are somehow beyond the reach of blacks, is an unnoticed danger that has been brewing for a long time. The reason so many smart people at the Smithsonian could have produced something as ridiculous as they did is that they live in an echo chamber.

As divided as we may be along racial lines, Americans are far more divided along political lines. Black and white Americans don't routinely dismiss each other as being stupid, evil or both. But Democratic and Republican Americans do. For evidence, post a political question on any Facebook page or Twitter feed and watch what happens. When we dismiss those with whom we disagree, we miss out on valuable criticisms. And when, as is often the case in Washington, subordinates' abilities to rise through the ranks depend on unwavering agreement with one's seniors, decision-makers like those at the Smithsonian are left with no one to tell them when they have made a bone-headedly stupid decision.

In this case, people at the Smithsonian weren't willing to point out foolishness because they have become far too comfortable in excluding people with different points of view. In a pluralistic society with any number of different points of view, this is a real problem.

Americans agree that we have a race problem, and people of goodwill have every interest in addressing it. But for that to happen, people who believe different things need to be consulted. For that to happen, we all must walk out of our comfortable echo chambers. A good first step is to take seriously and treat with respect those with whom we disagree.