

The Racial Reckoning Comes

Trump has changed our national narrative.

By David Brooks
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When I was a boy I was taught a certain story about America. This was the land of opportunity. Immigrants came to this land and found an open field and a fair chance to pursue their dreams. In this story Benjamin Franklin could be held up as the quintessential American — the young hustler, who through his ingenuity and dogged self-improvement created new businesses and communities, a new sort of person and a new sort of country.

This was a unifying national story. When it dominated, politics was over which party could offer the most opportunity.

But that story has been challenged over the years, most compellingly by the people we used to call multiculturalists. The Ben Franklin story, they point out, doesn't include the Native American or African-American experience; it doesn't take into account the ways America has not really offered a fair chance to many of its people.

The multicultural story gradually began to rival the Ben Franklin story, especially in schools. Over the past two years it has almost entirely eclipsed it in many parts of our society.

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I realized this while reading my friend and colleague Eric Liu's new book, "[Become America](#)." Eric's organization [Citizen University](#) hosts regular gatherings called "Civic Saturdays." These look like church or synagogue services, but the object of veneration is America. How can we tell our story? How can we be good citizens? What rituals embody our civic creed?

Eric Liu Credit Jared Soares for The New York Times





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Eric gives sermons in the middle of these sessions, and the book is a collection of sermons delivered between November 2016 August 2018 — nearly the first two years of the Trump era. The collection is like a penetrating time-lapse movie of the American mind over that period.

Eric is an enlightened Seattle progressive but with a reconciling, loving temperament. His hero is Abraham Lincoln and his goal is to heal a divided nation. In the early sermons, just after Donald Trump's victory, Eric is torn — he wants to empathize with Trump voters but also to judge them harshly. But, over all, the emphasis is on humbly understanding global populism.

Then come Charlottesville, the outrages at the southern border. As the months go by, Eric's attention turns more to race. Trump is no longer seen as a historic aberration, but the embodiment of white supremacy that has always been near the core of the American experience. He is the modern-day John Calhoun, just as mass incarceration is the modern-day Jim Crow.

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Eric is not alone in his shift in emphasis. As Zach Goldberg points out in [Tablet](#), over the past several years there has been a sharp shift in opinion, especially among white progressives, on all subjects racial. For most of the latter half of the 20th century, for example, about 10 percent of white liberals supported increased immigration; now it's 50 percent. As Goldberg writes, African-Americans are actually less progressive on these issues than white liberals.

Both Trumpists and their opponents have also de-emphasized the Ben Franklin narrative and embraced narratives that put race at the center. Trump's narrative is: We *real* Americans (white) have to protect our culture from the alien (brown) who would weaken it.

The opposing narrative is something like this: America began with a crime — stealing the land from Native Americans. It continued with an atrocity, slavery. The American story is the conflict between oppressors who seek to preserve white supremacy and people who seek to move beyond it. The essential American struggle is to confront the national sin, have a racial reckoning and then seek reconciliation.



“A religion provides a moral framework for choice and an ethical standard for action,” Eric writes. Both these narratives have taken on the qualities of a civic religion.

As many writers have noted, in the progressive account, racism has the exact same structure as John Calvin’s conception of original sin. It is a corrupting group inheritance, a shared guilt that pervades everything — it is in the structures of our society and the invisible crannies of our minds.

I don’t know about you, but I walk into this next chapter of American life with a sense of hopefulness and yet great fear. America needs to have a moment of racial reconciliation. History has thrown this task upon us.

But we Americans are not at our best when we launch off on holy wars. Once you start assigning guilt to groups, rather than to individuals, bad, illiberal things are likely to happen. There’s a lot of over-generalized group accusation in both these narratives.

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I’m haunted by that sentence in Lincoln’s second inaugural: “And the war came.” Nobody wanted it, but it came. Eric’s great contribution is to show how to mix conviction on racial matters with humility and gentleness. Moreover, he is always pushing toward an American creed that moves beyond both the white monoculture and the fracturing multiculturalism. He is always pushing toward a national story large enough to contain all the hybrid voices.

Somewhere in America a young artist is writing that story, that new vision that will serve as a beacon to draw us all onward.

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