



TUCSON COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

Why American History Divides Our Nation



By Ana O'Neill

Tucson Committee on Foreign Relations, Graduate Student Fellow, Eller College of Management University of Arizona

On December 13, 2023, Dr. Hasan Jeffries delivered a fervent address, diving into the contentious narrative of American history, emphasizing the crucial need to educate future generations about the integral role of race and racism in shaping the foundation of our nation. He looks for Americans who are ready, willing, and able to take steps in this direction.

“To Know American Origins is to Know Slavery”

Dr. Jeffries emphasized the crucial link between understanding American history and comprehending today's world. He highlighted the danger of historical ignorance by citing his students' lack of awareness about the severity of lynching, a grim reality where 2-3 African Americans were killed weekly for 4 decades. This ignorance, he argued, leads to the justification of detestable acts like euphemizing slavery or romanticizing it as seen in the Sally Hemings TV portrayal.

Dr. Jeffries pointed out the tendency to selectively admire historical figures while ignoring their contradictions. He stressed how we praise James Madison for the creation of the Bill of Rights

but ignore the fact that he was simultaneously denying those very rights to his 100+ slaves. Jeffries also debunked the idea that recent events like the Capitol riot were anomalies, stressing that political violence is entrenched in America's history. He warned that by evading the past, we deny ourselves a true understanding of the present, depriving future generations of the tools needed to confront societal issues honestly and effectively.

“If You're Not Going to Address It, You Have to Explain Why”

Dr. Jeffries highlighted the reluctance to educate children about America's darker history, emphasizing how even young kids like his 4 year old daughter understand the importance of civil rights. He criticized the selective nostalgia that shields us from uncomfortable truths, a “sanitized “Disney version”—Citing James Madison's legacy intertwined with child slavery, he pointed out how we celebrate what happened inside the library where our rights were conceived, but shun the uncomfortable truth behind how it was built.

Dr. Jeffries debunked fears about indoctrination in history education, emphasizing that telling the truth is not only justified but crucial. He stated that people's aversion to confronting the past is rooted in discomfort; facing history's reflections makes them unsettled. Yet, Dr. Jeffries urged us to embrace this distress, advocating that genuine learning is done in discomfort. He particularly underscored the relevance of acknowledging and addressing this history as the enduring disparities from the civil rights era persist today.

Where Do We Go From Here?

1. Acknowledge the Past and Have a Honest Discussion

Dr. Jeffries highlighted a rare moment of honest reflection during the 2020 George Floyd protests, the largest in U.S. history with 20-30 million participants, contrasting it with the iconic 1963 March on Washington with 250,000 attendees. He stressed the current movement's impact, especially the active engagement of young individuals, including white youth, in discussion about dismantling systemic racism—a powerful response to honest education. Criticizing attempts to censor education, he noted that those who want censorship are fueled by the misconception that an excess of information led to protest violence, despite 90% of the protesters being peaceful.

- *Upon hearing the substantial surge in protestors compared to the March on Washington, I wondered how much more can be accomplished with such amplified political will?*

2. Have Agreed Upon Set of Facts

Using a compelling analogy, Dr. Jeffries compared the current state of politics to religion (particularly Abrahamic). Religion, he emphasized, relies on faith—a belief in the unseen, devoid of tangible evidence. Drawing a parallel, he asserted that politics is undergoing a similar transformation, with political stances becoming entrenched beliefs that cannot be swayed by factual evidence. Dr. Jeffries questioned the possibility of debate when there's no set of agreed-upon facts to navigate these discussions. Ultimately, the foundation of open and constructive discussions relies on politics being guided by facts rather than beliefs.

The questions this raised for me were:

- *How do we establish these agreed upon facts, and what should be these non-negotiable facts?*
- *Is establishing agreed upon facts feasible if we can't already agree on basic human rights?*
- *How will misinformation be mitigated in order to stop the spread of false narratives?*

3. Protect Our Current Rights

Dr. Jeffries' emphasis on the recent overturn of *Roe v. Wade* illuminates the critical need to not only discuss but actively protect fundamental human rights. Illustrating his point, he noted President Obama's silence on affirmative action during his presidency. Similarly, he cited the lack of attention over the last fifty years on the significance of *Roe v. Wade*'s preservation led to its loss. Dr. Jeffries' observation underscored the vital necessity for a collective effort. He reiterated the urgency of advocating for, safeguarding, and actively championing these rights to ensure their enduring protection and universal application.

- *Which other fundamental human rights should we be vigilant about, fearing their potential erosion or disappearance?*

4. Change Economic Structure

Dr. Jeffries examined global instances like South Africa, highlighting that genuine equality demands economic restructuring, a dimension yet unaddressed in the United States. While political shifts lean towards progress, the absence of economic restructuring is concerning. In our interview, he proposed a solution: tackling poverty inequality with a guaranteed minimum income, stressing the necessity of a substantial economic transformation for true equality.

- *In what other ways can we restructure our economic systems?*
- *How does capitalism play a role in systematic racism?*

5. Start Locally

Dr. Jeffries highlighted grassroots movements' significance, citing the origin of Black Lives Matter as an example. He urged open discussions at local levels, advocating scrutiny of power structures and leveraging strategic political influence for change. Referencing Martin Luther King Jr. 's book, "Where Do We Go from Here," he echoed King's call for deliberate action, emphasizing the need for collective, persistent efforts to bend the arc towards justice.

Sources:

Dr. Hasan Jeffries Speech, December 13, 2023

