FEATURES#BLACKHISTORYMONTH 15 AUGUST 2015

Know your history: Understanding racism in the US

"And then you might understand how the death of Michael Brown became a tipping point in the US."

An African American woman yells 'Freedom' when asked to shout so loud it will be heard all over the world at the March on Washington in August 1963 [Express Newspapers/Getty Images/File]

by

A'Lelia Bundles

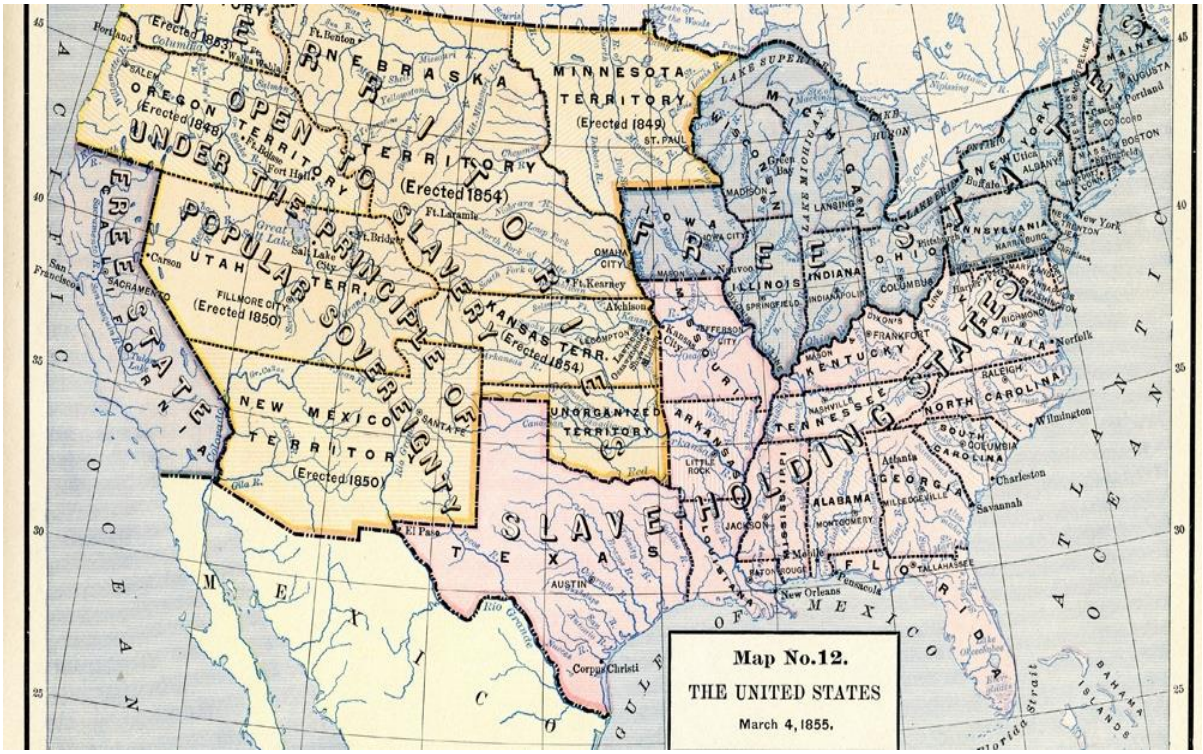
There will never be an acceptable explanation for what happened between Michael Brown and Darren Wilson in Ferguson but we will never fully grasp *why* the stage was set for such an encounter unless we know American history.

We cannot fully comprehend why Dylan Roof murdered nine parishioners at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston unless we study the Civil War and the Confederacy.

We cannot truly fathom how a minor traffic stop in Cincinnati could result in a white campus police officer blowing out the brains of an unarmed black man unless we delve into the role race has played in law enforcement from the enactment of the federal Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 to today's mandatory minimum sentencing statutes.

Examining American history provides us with the tools to analyse how the death of Michael Brown and the demonstrations on Florrisant Avenue became a tipping point and sparked a movement. Connecting the dots between the past and the present helps us to see the origins of our current national debate - about race, police misconduct, white supremacy, white privilege, inequality, incarceration and the unfinished equal rights agenda.

The pendulum



A colour-coded map illustrates the 'Free States,' 'Slave Holding States,' and 'Territories Open To Slavery Under The Principle Of Popular Sovereignty,'. It was published in 1898 [Getty Images]

The history of people of African descent in America - which is to say the history of America - is a pendulum of progress and setbacks, of resilience and retaliation, of protest and backlash. There have been allies and there have been opponents. There have been demagogues, who would divide Americans on the basis of colour and class, and visionaries who would seek to lead us to common ground.

The quest for "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" has been an American aspiration since the Declaration of Independence, but black Americans, Native Americans and women were not at the table in 1776. Forty of the 56 signers owned other people.

Lest there be any doubt about where the young nation's sentiments lay, the Supreme Court's 1857 Dred Scott decision made clear that people of African descent - whether enslaved or free - would not be considered American citizens and had no legal standing in the courts. It mattered not that some of their grandfathers had served in George Washington's Continental Army during the Revolutionary War.

Last month in Washington, DC, at the third annual March on Washington Film Festival, Clarence B Jones, a confidant and personal legal counsel to Martin Luther King, Jr., said "a definitive discussion and description of the institution of slavery, the concomitant supporting ideology of white supremacy and the impact it has had on subsequent generations" are missing from the history curriculum of most American high schools and colleges.

Without that knowledge, he said, it is impossible to understand America today.

"Our history has never taught the centrality of race as the key barometer to how well we are doing with the American Experiment," added Pulitzer Prize winning historian Taylor Branch that same evening. "If you don't have race at the forefront of an investigation of how America is fulfilling its goals, then something is wrong. And unfortunately right now we are paying the price for 50 years of trying to avoid and hide that subject."

Indeed every time we see another video - of Sandra Bland, of Freddie Gray, of Tamir Rice - we witness the horrifying evidence of our national failure to confront this legacy.

What used to be called "the Negro problem", really is a matter of the intransigence of white supremacists who are mired in the past.

Slavery was not the benign, paternalistic system described in the history textbooks of my youth. Instead, it was a brutal, often sadistic, form of domination over the bodies and minds of people who were kidnapped, whipped, beaten and raped. Generations of human beings toiled against their will without pay or legal rights.

For 246 years - from 1619, when 20 Africans were forced into indentured servitude in Jamestown, Virginia, until the end of the Civil War in 1865 - most people of African descent in America were enslaved. Those who had purchased or otherwise been granted their freedom lived a precarious, circumscribed existence.

Slavery and the slave trade were essential to the American economy and to the development of American capitalism, especially after Native Americans were driven off their ancestral land in the Deep South in the 1830s to make way for vast cotton plantations. The wealth of the nation was inextricably dependent upon uncompensated labour, which enriched not only the planters, but universities, banks, textile mills, ship owners and insurance companies, who held policies on their bodies. To settle a debt, an owner merely needed to sell one of his slaves.

By 1850, enslaved Americans, who were listed in their owners' inventory ledgers alongside cattle and farm equipment, were worth $1.3bn or one-fifth of the nation's wealth. When the first shot of the Civil War was fired at Fort Sumter in April 1861, the value of that human collateral exceeded $3bn and was worth more than the nation's banks, railroads, mills and factories combined. Now numbering four million souls, they were, as Ta-Nehisi Coates has written, America's "greatest financial asset".

Immediately after the Civil War, during the hopeful, but brief period of Reconstruction, black people were finally recognised as citizens with rights. But just as quickly as the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments abolished slavery, provided equal protection under the law and granted black men the right to vote, Reconstruction ended with retaliatory Redemption.

When federal troops abandoned their posts in the South after the Compromise of 1877, the defeated Confederates regrouped as the Ku Klux Klan and the Knights of the White Camellia. They regained control of their workforce, not by owning them, but by circumscribing their lives through terror, violence and voter suppression.

READ MORE: Reflections of a former white supremacist

In Louisiana, the number of registered black voters plummeted from 130,334 in 1896 to 5,320 in 1898. Fraudulent voting schemes pushed black elected officials from state legislatures and from Congress. During the late 19th

century, there were 20 black members of Congress . When North Carolina's George Henry White left in 1901, there would not be another until 1928, when Oscar DePriest was elected in Chicago. For virtually the first half of the 20th century the 15th Amendment had no value for blacks in the former Confederate states, where they were denied the right to vote through the cynical artifice of poll taxes, literacy tests and grandfather clauses.

Jim Crow laws and Black Codes obliterated Reconstruction wins and codified racially based discrimination. The sharecropping system, which left black farmers in debt at the end of every harvest, was equivalent to slavery. Black children were allowed to attend school only during times of the year when there were no farm chores to do. Historian Rayford Logan called the period "nadir of American race relations".

Those who got too uppity were lynched, firebombed in their homes and chased from land they owned.

In 1915, DW Griffith's technically groundbreaking movie, Birth of a Nation, glorified the Klan and fed the trope of black inferiority and criminality. Around the same time, a migration wave began that would eventually see more than six million black Americans flee the brutality and deprivation of the South for the relative freedom of the North and the West.

Four years later, when black soldiers returned from World War I military duty in France, they were attacked during the "Red Summer" as resentful whites instigated riots in at least 34 cities, from Chicago and Washington, DC to Memphis and Charleston. Their goal was to put men who had received France's Croix de Guerre back in their place as the Klan had done after Reconstruction. The NAACP investigated and black newspapers editorialised. During the succeeding decades - through the Depression, the New Deal and World War II - the pendulum continued to swing between progress and setbacks.

The attitudes that informed Jim Crow laws and discriminatory public policy existed in the North as well as the South. The results are evident today in major American cities, where banks refused loans to black home buyers in the 1950s and 1960s, literally drawing on maps red lines around predominantly black neighbourhoods and ensuring that those homes would not appreciate in value at the same rate as comparable white neighbourhoods.

In 1957, when my parents were ready to finance a new home in an all-black development of newly constructed residences in a suburb of Indianapolis, they were unable to secure a loan from any of the city's large banks. Both were college graduates and business executives. Our neighbours were doctors, teachers, coaches, plumbers, entrepreneurs, realtors, nurses, ministers, architects, insurance salesmen and carpenters. Many of the men were veterans of World War II and the Korean War and therefore eligible for the GI Bill's home loan guaranty. In other words, people who normally would have had no trouble qualifying for mortgages. Instead, they went to Mammoth Life Insurance, a black-owned insurance company then based in Louisville, Kentucky, for their loans.

In 1954, the Supreme Court's Brown v Board of Education decision struck down so-called separate but equal education and mandated that American schools be racially integrated. As a post-Brown v Board child, I always attended integrated schools, encountering the occasional racist, but, like my parents, rolling with the punches, keeping perspective and finding progressive kindred spirits in the process. But in many communities - both in the South and the North - the diehard segregationists responded with paranoia and bitterness, decrying the evils of race-mixing and miscegenation.

In 1957, nine students at Little Rock High School were harassed and spit upon. In 1963, Alabama governor George Wallace tried, but failed, to block the enrollment of Vivian Malone and James Hood. Across the South, federal troops were called in to facilitate the process.

For a time, it seemed that American schools might be integrated, but that pendulum soon began to move in the other direction as all-white academies opened. Today, most Americans are enlightened enough not to oppose interracial marriage and are much more tolerant than their grandparents and great-grandparents, but American

public schools in most areas are more segregated than ever, as Nikole Hannah-Jones' April 2014 ProPublica investigation of Tuscaloosa, Alabama schools so well illustrated.

Pressure from Martin Luther King, Jr., Fannie Lou Hamer, thousands of activists and a powerful cadre of civil rights leaders combined with the political muscle and willingness of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations to push for critical legislation during the mid-1960s. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 forbade discrimination on the basis of sex as well as race in hiring, promoting and firing. Today, our workplaces are undoubtedly more diverse than they were in the 1950s, with more people of colour employed as physicians, firefighters, attorneys, journalists, investment bankers and professors. But it is still true that when a white person and a black person with comparable credentials apply for a job, the white person is more likely to be hired.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 outlawed poll taxes and made it possible for thousands of formerly disenfranchised black Americans to vote. Now, throughout America, there are thousands of people of colour who are city council members, mayors, members of Congress, on school boards and of course, now in the White House. During the last two presidential elections, black voters turned out in record numbers because they were motivated and because many of the old obstacles to voting had been removed.

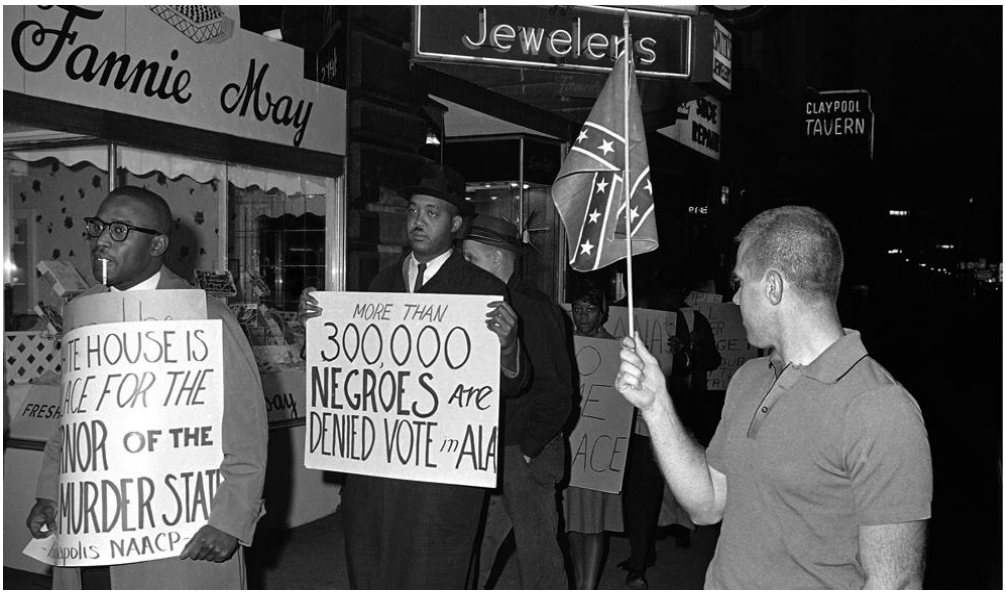
But a backlash has developed in that arena, too. Two years ago, in Shelby County v Holder, the Supreme Court gutted Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, removing the "preclearance" provisions that required states with a history of voter discrimination to seek permission for changes to electoral procedures. Despite no evidence of significant voter fraud, Republican legislators immediately passed new voter ID laws that groups like the Brennan Center for Justice and the Advancement Project argue will suppress voter turnout among black, Latino, elderly and young voters, who are more likely to vote for Democrats.

President Barack Obama's election in 2008 and re-election in 2012 provided evidence ofhow much the nation has changed in the last half a century . While arrival of the "post-racial" era was much overstated and a result of magical thinking, Americans rightly celebrated the progress on Inauguration Day 2009. The high of the moment, though, was accompanied by the rise of the Tea Party and the reminder of the strain of white supremacy that is baked into the American DNA.

Rattled by the presence of a black family in the White House, "birthers" emerged and fabricated a myth that America's first black president - by some amazing feat of molecular transference - had been born not in Hawaii, where his mother was located at the time, but in Kenya. In this age of social media, Youtube and cable television, their illogical stories took flight, promulgated not just by the poorly educated prone to conspiracy theories, but by people who clearly knew better.

READ MORE: A photographic journey through race and racism in the US

When the past isn't past



A man holds a Confederate flag as demonstrators, including one carrying a sign saying 'More than 300,000 Negroes are Denied Vote in Ala', demonstrate in front of an Indianapolis hotel where then-Alabama Governor George Wallace was staying [Bob Daugherty/AP/File]

William Faulkner famously said, "The past is not dead. It is not even past". This is certainly true when it comes to the Civil War. Most credible scholars and historians agree that slavery was the root cause of the war, whether they focus on the Missouri Compromise of 1820, the Kansas Nebraska Act of 1854, President Lincoln's election in 1860 or a myriad of other events and factors. But for an adamant segment of the American population the reason for "The Late Unpleasantness" remains in dispute, 150 years after Confederate General Robert E Lee surrendered at Appomattox Courthouse.

Five years ago, the Pew Research Center found that nearly half - 48 percent - of those polled believed "states' rights" was the main cause of the war, compared to 38 percent who thought that it was slavery. Particularly disturbing is that 60 percent of respondents under the age of 30 selected the states' rights option.

One suspects the current Red States/Blue States polarisation - where Republican-controlled legislatures resist federal programmes like the Affordable Care Act in the name of "states' rights" - has seeped into the historical debate and conflated the past with the present.

There is so much to remind us that the past is neither dead, nor past.

Later this month, when five million Texas students return to school, they will be learning American history from a syllabus that equivocates about the reasons for the Civil War.

"Slavery was a side issue to the Civil War," declared Texas State Board of Education member Pat Hardy, when the board adopted highly politicised standards in 2010. "There would be those who would say the reason for the Civil War was over slavery. No. It was over states' rights."

This intentionally and unapologetically ideological approach to curriculum development is akin to educational malpractice. By misinforming children, they are failing to prepare them for the very diverse world, not only that they will inherit, but in which they already live. They might as well tell them that the stork brings babies or that tooth fairies put dollars under their pillows.

In fact, the "states' rights" that Hardy holds so dear are the states' rights that defended segregation in the 1950s and 1960s, with complaints about "outside agitators," Freedom Riders and other young activists who registered voters, sat at lunch counters and integrated public facilities. To the degree that states' rights factored into causing the Civil War, it was the effort to preserve the right to continue slavery and the desire for western territories to enter the Union as states where slavery was legal. States' rights was aboutthe planters' prerogative to own other people rather than some highly principled constitutional debate.

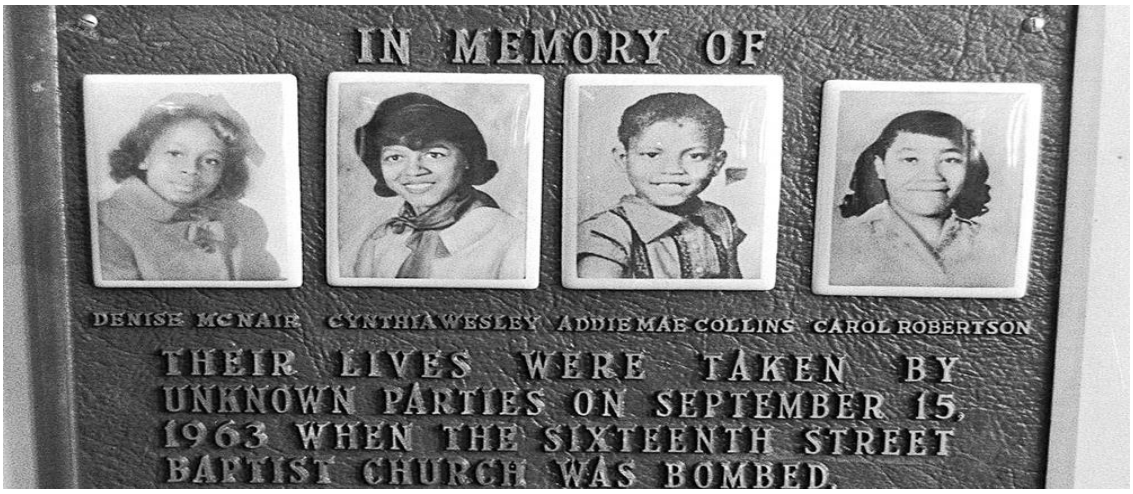
When those states seceded from the union, their reasons were quite precise. Mississippi's declaration of secession could not have been clearer, in fact: "Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery - the greatest material interest of the world ... a blow at slavery is a blow at commerce and civilisation."

Texas was equally as direct: " We hold as undeniable truths that the governments of the various States, and of the confederacy itself, were established exclusively by the white race, for themselves and their posterity; that the African race had no agency in their establishment; that they were rightfully held and regarded as an inferior and dependent race."

Among the popular slogans on t-shirts at Civil War battle re-enactments and Confederate flag rallies are "Know your history" and "If this shirt offends you, you need a history lesson".

Many of the people who agree with those sentiments will say that their ancestors were in the states' rights camp and that they didn't own enslaved people. In truth "more than half of the Confederate officers in 1861 owned slaves," writes historian Joseph Glatthaar, author of General Lee's Army: From Victory to Collapse. As young army recruits, only a few of the enlisted men personally owned anyone, but more than a third of them were members of slave-owning families. And as young white men in America, they all benefitted from membership in a society which prospered from the system of slavery.

A nation of contradictions



A memorial plaque at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, Addie Mae Collins and Carole Robertson were killed in a bombing at the church in 1963 [AP/File]

Because Dylan Roof displayed the Confederate Battle Flag and drew inspiration from fellow white supremacists as he planned his attack on Emanuel Church, many people have begun to re-examine their attachment to the flag. When they are honest, they must admit that the history of the Confederacy does not equal the history of the South. A flag that was resurrected in 1962 and unfurled at the University of Mississippi to oppose James Meredith's enrollment and that was beloved by members of the Klan and the White Citizens Council is fraught with dastardly symbolism. So when someone says it is about "heritage, not hate," it seems they have been duped or that they do not really know the actual heritage they profess to admire.

Inseparable from the 'heritage' that reveres family member who fought on the losing side of the Civil War, is the evil of a system and an economy that relied on slave labour for two and a half centuries, then on codified inequality for another 100 years,

"I am proud of the culture, grace and elegance of the Old South, of our heritage of courage, honour, chivalry, respect for womanhood, patriotism, and of duty to God and country," a member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans rhapsodised several years ago in an essay. "I love the Confederate Flag and 'Dixie' as stirring symbols of that heritage."

Far be it from me to question another person's affection for his ancestors. But I can't help but note that all that "culture, grace and elegance" that occurred, no doubt, under fragrant magnolia blossoms, would not have been possible without the labour of those millions of unpaid people who worked not just from sun up to sun down, but through the night, to preserve that Disney-fied version of reality.

It would be easier to believe this symbol was unrelated to a desire for white supremacy if it weren't so frequently sported by people who also have swastika tattoos and wear Nazi paraphernalia. And if their social media comments comments didn't so closely correlate with hate group mentality. It would be easier to believe that this fealty for the Confederate flag was all about family pride if the provenance of its popularity were different.

Soon after General Lee surrendered, he took an oath to support the Constitution of the United States and advised his compatriots to do the same.

"Lee did not want such divisive symbols following him to the grave," wrote Jonathan Horn in the Daily Beast earlier this year. "At his funeral in 1870, flags were noticeably absent from the procession. Former Confederate soldiers marching did not don their old military uniforms, and neither did the body they buried. 'His Confederate uniform would have been 'treason' perhaps!' Lee's daughter wrote."

"Racial ignorance is a prison from which there is no escape because there are no doors," Toni Morrison said at Portland State in 1975 . "And there are old, old men and old, old women who need to believe in their racism...They are in prisons of their own construction. But you must know the truth. That you are free."

Fortunately, there also are young Americans who wish not to be associated with this ignorance. Earlier this year, before the murders in South Carolina, the University of Texas' student government passed a resolution demanding the removal of a statue of the Confederate States of America president, Jefferson Davis. It took the massacre at Emanuel Church to finally shame the South Carolina legislature into removing the Confederate Battle Flag from the statehouse grounds, but at least that has happened. In response, there have been more than 130 pro-flag rallies, but the demonstrators look more marginalised each time they gather.

Since the election of President Obama, those who resent him have taken to talking about "traditional Americans," by which they mean white Americans of European descent. This view reeks of old time white supremacy and a willful amnesia about the reality of American history.

Congress outlawed the importation of enslaved Africans in 1808, which means the majority of African Americans are descended from people who were here long before many European Americans - especially the large waves of Irish, German, Italian and Jewish immigrants who came between 1820 and 1920.

For all those many years, those people of African descent were planting rice, picking tobacco, baling cotton and building levees, but also starting businesses, founding churches, performing surgery and more. At the US Capitol, where they worked as carpenters, stone masons, plasterers, painters and labourers, their owners were compensated for their work though they were not. For as long as African Americans have been in America, they have played a role in its development. They are as "traditional" in their longevity and their worthiness as anyone else. In fact, America would not be America without them.

But when one segment of the population convinces itself that it has a more legitimate claim to being 'American,' it follows that they will think their lives are more valuable and more important. When they convince themselves that black and brown people are 'takers' rather than producers, they feel justified in disrespecting them, incarcerating them and disenfranchising them.

When public policy is based on lies and misconceptions, a mentality emerges that "those people" are undeserving. It allows the Darren Wilsons of the world to convince themselves that they are victims. And it follows that the Michael Browns of the world not only do not matter, but are the victimisers.

We are a nation of contradictions. We continue to fight the same battles over and over, decade after decade, generation after generation without facing reality. We put band aids on lacerations and hope the cancer of racial hatred won't recur.

Once again, we are at a pivotal moment. The pendulum is moving. It is as clear as it has ever been that what we know about our history shapes the way we think of ourselves, the way we think of our government and the way we treat our fellow Americans. What we know about history and what we know about current events shapes public policy. When we are misinformed, we make poor decisions.

We have come to this place because a generation of activists who lived through the Freedom Rides, the march on Selma and the traumas and triumphs of the Civil Rights Movement are determined that they will not have the gains they made trampled upon. When they gathered for the March on Washington anniversary on the Mall in August 2013, they wondered who the new foot soldiers would be. They know the battle has always been fought on so many fronts by lawyers and scholars, by journalists and ministers, by community organisers and teachers. But at the March on Washington Film Festival this summer, they were heartened that a generation of young activists had emerged. DeRay McKesson and Johnetta Elzie of We The Protestors. Bree Newsome who climbed the flagpole in Columbia, South Carolina. Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi who founded the Black Lives Matter movement. And many, many more.

Michael Brown's corpse on the scorching pavement on August 9, 2014 forced America to pay attention just as Emmett Till's bloated body grabbed the nation in the summer of 1955. The shootings at Emanuel Church felt much too much like the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist church in Birmingham in 1963. The tanks and armoured personnel carriers on Florissant Avenue reminded us of Bull Connor's hoses and attack dogs. Americans of good will could no longer retreat into their comfort zones and pretend that there were not consequences for us all.

Michael Brown and all the others who died before him and who have died since made it impossible for us to look away. And that has changed everything.

A'Lelia Bundles is a former network television news producer and executive. She is the author of On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C. J. Walker, a biography of her great-great-grandmother.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial policy.

This article first appeared in a special edition of the Al Jazeera Magazine exploring race in the US. Download it for iPads and iPhones here , and for Android devices here .

Source: Al Jazeera

Magazine: Black Panther cub on new era of civil action

[A look into America's NSM neo-Nazis]

ALJAZEERA

by

Eli Reed

American photojournalist Eli Reed has spent decades capturing the lives of African Americans on camera. Here, he shares the photographs that have most meaning for him and reveals the stories behind them.

A wedding

[Eli Reed/Magnum Photos]

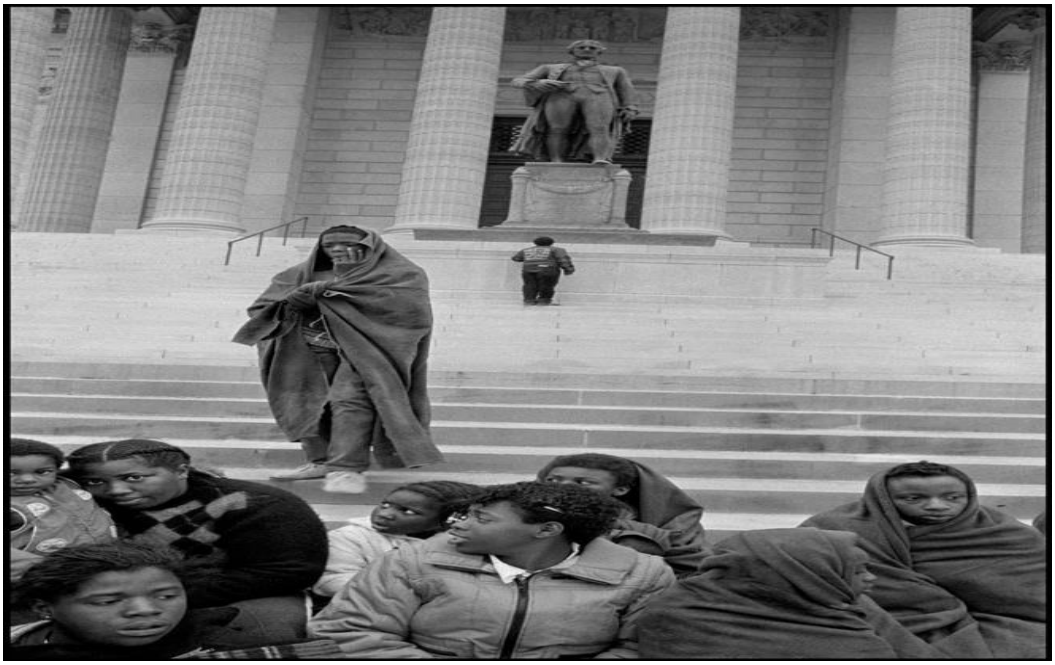
I made this photograph of the groom, Lenell Geter, and his ring bearer in South Carolina.

Geter had been accused of robbing a fast food restaurant, in spite of evidence proving he was in the middle of a meeting at his job in Houston, Texas. The local police basically decided that they could make it stick because he was black.

They tried but failed when stories from a national magazine and a national television news programme sprang the story, and he was released.

But I could see that the experience changed him. He had obviously, in my view, always followed the letter of the law and believed in a just society. But that ship had now sailed on ....

A walk



[Eli Reed/Magnum Photos]

A group of homeless people in Missouri walked from St. Louis to Jefferson City, led by the Reverend Larry Rice to publicise the plight of the homeless.

African Americans are usually the first in line to feel that particular sting of dislocation. But they were not the only group in trouble. There was even a man on the march who had previously been a NASA engineer, but had lost his job and been living on the streets for a while.

There were generous people in Missouri, who opened up their churches to allow the marchers a place to bed down for the night, and others who were not so generous.

I remember sharing park benches with marchers as we attempted to sleep and feeling the penetrating cold creeping up my back all through the night.

A makeshift jungle gym

[Eli Reed/Magnum Photos]

On some Mondays I would meet with my friend Budd Williams, who worked as a staff photographer for the *New York Daily News* newspaper.

He had grown up in Harlem, New York, and we would have breakfast at a restaurant Malcolm X used to frequent on 135th street, sitting at a table beside a plaque bearing his name.

After a breakfast of grits, scrambled eggs, biscuits, sausage or bacon, we would walk around Harlem as Budd talked about the area.

That was when I saw the playground of these children, who were looking after each other and using an abandoned car as their jungle gym. It was a normal scene with kids making do with what they had access to, but it still felt wrong knowing what could be delivered from the wealth of a city like New York.

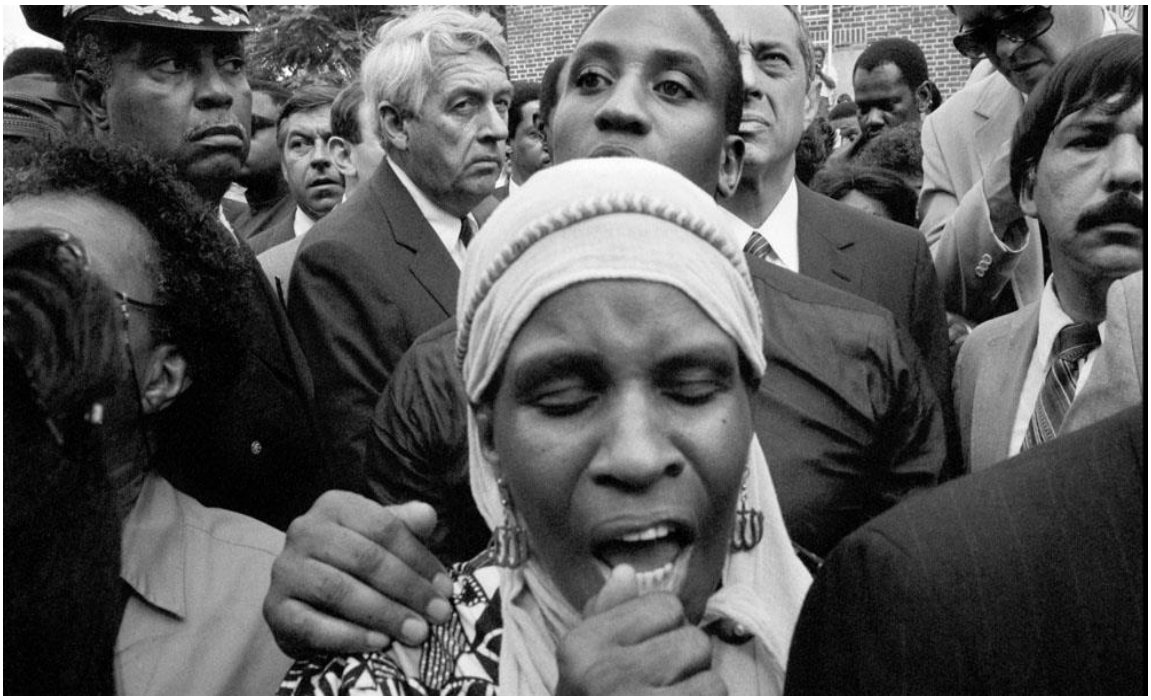
A lynching

[Eli Reed/Magnum Photos]

The funeral hearse was for Yusef Hawkins, who was killed in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, because some local thugs thought he was going out with a young Italian girl in the neighbourhood. What he was actually doing was trying to buy a used car.

I was as upset and angry as the man holding onto the back door of the hearse. I was tired of African American men basically being lynched with guns, cars or sticks because they had black skin.

A funeral



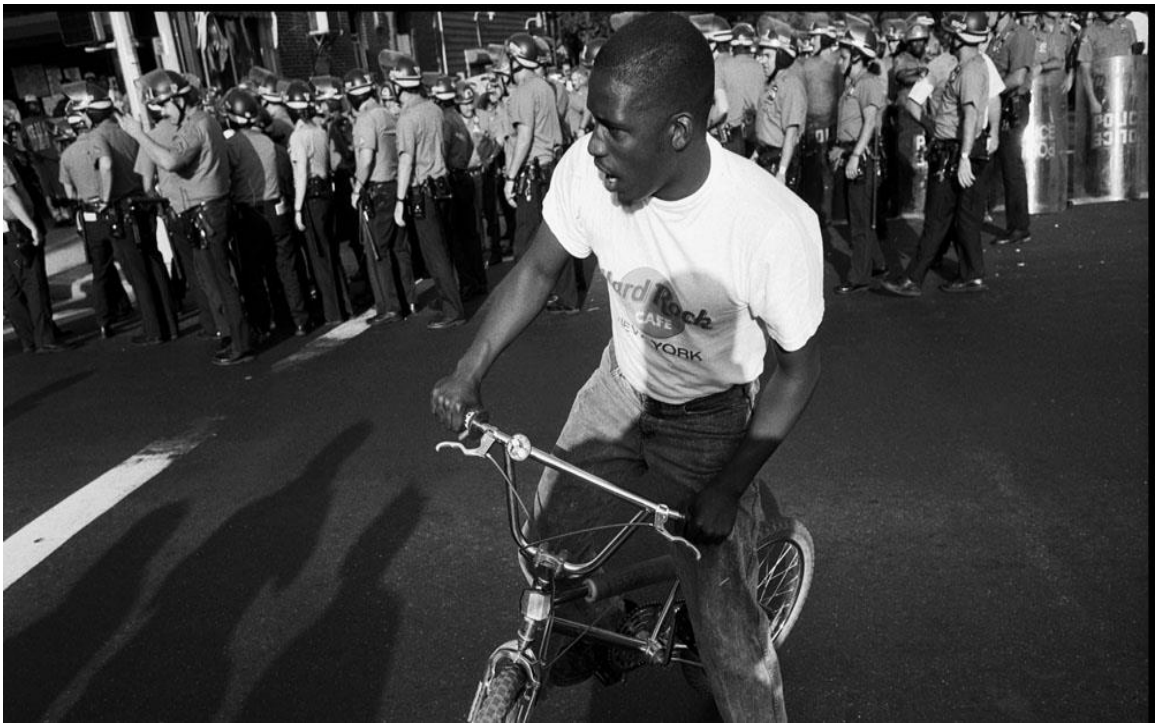
[Eli Reed/Magnum Photos]

I had moved along with the crowd toward the front door of the church where Yusef Hawkins' funeral was to take place when I realised that I'd had enough of it all. Too much of what was going to happen was grossly predictable.

The politicians would be there to represent and say how this was a terrible tragedy and something should be done about it. The various news outlets would use the event to basically add to their readership or viewing audiences. The family would be captured in the deep shadow of mourning for their loved one, asking why, and why, and why.

I turned from the damned door and was given permission to not go into the church by what was behind me. The grieving woman right in front was surrounded - by a young black man behind her, a high police official on her right, district attorney Charles Hynes next to him, Governor Cuomo directly behind him, and, to the governor's left, a *New York Daily News* columnist

A riot



[Eli Reed/Magnum Photos]

The Crown Heights riots happened after a Hasidic Jewish driver had an accident that resulted in him hitting two young African American children, killing one and injuring the other, and then leaving the scene immediately without stopping to offer help.

The racial situation in the neighbourhood was already tense and everything exploded after this. African American youth were upset and this young man was courting trouble but probably felt that trouble was already there.

It was an intense time for Mayor Dinkins, who reached out to black community leaders to help calm the situation.

A movie

[Eli Reed/Magnum Photos]

I was working on director John Singleton's second movie, *Poetic Justice*, in Los Angeles when the verdict in the trial of the police who had beaten up Rodney King came in: innocent.

The movie company had come to Semi Valley for two nights of shooting when the Los Angeles riots broke out in response. I had expected it and I was not alone in that expectation. It seemed that no one paid attention unless you started burning up the neighbourhood.

There were people in the Hood who had worked to bring up their businesses to a certain level of success and, when the riots came, they lost it all. Events like this are never going to be fair. When enough people feel as if they have nothing to lose, all bets are off. Logic goes out the window because the tipping point was raised to fall long ago and the time to drown within the tatters of everyday life has arrived.

The men in the nice suits were the security for Singleton, hired by the studio.

I offered the idea to Singleton to give me a video camera so that I could cover the riot for footage that could go inside the movie. It was like he didn't hear me, because as a black director (with his second feature) he was obligated to stay on point in order to keep the movie on schedule.

He directed Janet Jackson all through the night. As soon as we wrapped production in the morning, Singleton and I left individually. But we ended up at the same place, checking out what had happened during the riot. He arrived with his cousin, who was in the National Guard, and his security and I in a pickup truck with a friend.

A march

[Eli Reed/Magnum Photos]

I went to the Million Man March to cover it because it was an amazing idea that the non-African Americans I met did not understand at all.

Minister Louis Farrakhan brought a million black men to Washington, DC, to take a stand - to say loudly that we will look into our hearts and our community and work to create positive changes that would serve the community.

I shot the march for *Life Magazine*.

There was a small group meeting, with concern expressed by some editorial staff that there was going to be a bloodbath in DC. I loudly disagreed and explained what I had witnessed as the prep work continued for the march.

I do not think that anyone who was there will ever forget the power of that gathering. It was not a time to make a lot of noise. It was a time to come, listen and contemplate the possible futures. It was a marathon intended to absorb into the system, not a sprint meant to bleed out quickly into dust or concrete streets.

Life Magazine, under the direction of David Friend, did a fantastic job of presenting the photographs made by me and David Burnett of the march.

A crossroads

[Eli Reed/Magnum Photos]

Laurence (Larry) Fishburne, Ice Cube and John Singleton were at a crossroads.

Larry, who had been just 14 years old when he appeared in the movie *Apocalypse Now*, was no longer Larry; he had the stature of an icon - and deserved the respect due to him as a result of his talent and presence.

Ice Cube was just starting to get into movie producing.

People in the movie business were saying that John Singleton needed a hit, and he got one in the movie *Higher Learning*.

A president

[Eli Reed/Magnum Photos]

I made this image of President Obama coming into the White House rose garden.

I am fond of the photograph for a number of reasons.

When he came into view it was like watching Gary Cooper, John Wayne and John Shaft all together in one man. He has accomplished so much when people were wanting and expecting the impossible.

Americans have passed a litmus test of sorts, twice, by electing him and he has achieved amazing things in spite of a ferocious racism - the likes of which has never before been seen in the White House.

Perhaps that is the telling point: he has been able to accomplish all that he has in spite of all that.

About the photographer: Eli Reed was accepted into the Magnum collective by the member photographers as a nominee in 1983, an associate in 1985, and was voted in as a full member in 1988. He is the author of several books, including Black in America, and has covered wars in Central America, the civil war in Lebanon, US military action in Panama and the lives of African Americans, among other things. Eli Reed: A Long Walk Home, a retrospective about what it means to be human, featuring 261 photographs taken over 45 years and prefaced by Paul Theroux, was published in May.

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