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Race & the American Presidency Panel: Why Should You Care?

I attended a panel last Friday that was part of the [Simpson–Mineta Leaders Series](#) hosted by The Washington Center at the Residential and Academic Facility. It peaked my interest (and trepidation) as the calendar event read, "Race & the American Presidency: From Lincoln to Trump" in bolded letters.

The speakers included notable names such as Dr. Greg Carr, the chair of the Department of Afro–American studies at Howard University; Douglas Blackmon, a Pulitzer Prize–winning author of the book *Slavery By Another Name*; and Senior Executive Producer at C–Span, Steve Scully (as the facilitator). It was primarily framed as a conversation that included polar opposite views concerning racism in America.



Courtesy of TWC

In retrospect, I can say that there really were no contrasting views that would cause any real tension or scandal. Rather, the panel was the equivalent of two experts talking over the intricacies of their fields, and I was simply watching it happen. Of course, overhearing any conversations in which the people involved are extremely knowledgeable is always an enlightening experience, but I found myself continually asking the question, "Who is this whole thing for? Who is the audience?"

I suppose I was specifically concerned for my international counterparts, for my Latinx and Asian counterparts. I kept wondering what they were thinking and feeling. I wondered if they were perplexed in how the phrase "Race in America" is easily relegated to a checkerboard conversation concerning only the black and white.

I felt that if we are bold enough to have this conversation, regardless of audience, we should have at least briefed them on what exactly they are getting into. This topic carries its own vocabulary ranging from "oppression" to "systematic racism" to various historical relevancies. This topic concerns the past as much as it references any sort of future where racial harmony may exist. If you come from a world in which "racial issues" don't seem to play a role in your life or your conversation, it all can seem like a conversation you were never meant to have— even more so when your nationality/race is never even mentioned.

I want to appeal to those of you, who may feel or felt that way during the panel. Complex conversations without the necessary context can seem less than necessary. The two men invited to speak have incredible knowledge on topics that hone in on what exactly it means to be an American—the history and bias that you immediately become a part of. However, if you are not American or your

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identity has not intersected with the major racial dichotomies mentioned, this knowledge may seem unnecessary to you. It's not, I promise you.

Whatever is happening domestically (here in the U.S.) is happening in a similar iteration elsewhere, and it is important (in wanting to be a knowledgeable human being) to further investigate those issues. Knowing my context here in America, I understand why the current German election should matter to me. I understand what that election communicates on the international stage. The past will always concern you, even though you may not be concerned with the past. I don't wish to end this post on an ominous note and I do intend to offer some sort of solution.

Currently, I am involved in a group called Social Justice Intergroup Dialogue here at TWC. I am aware that the phrase "social justice" has a connotation involving tumblr, snowflakes, or any version of political correctness. I am not concerned with those connotations, I simply wish to inform you, especially if you are a prospective student, to join the group once you have arrived. We meet on Tuesday every two weeks and unlike the panel, your questions/thoughts are the central priority. The topics concern themes like race, gender, the prison industrial complex, and immigration. This group will help you navigate conversations similar to the panel with more clarity so that you don't feel left in the dark or unable to contribute to these pivotal conversations.

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