Race and Racism in America: Are We Now a Color Blind Society?

April 15, 2011, 12:00 – 2:00pm

Program and Panel

12:00 p.m. Welcome by Hudson Institute's William Schambra
12:10 Panel discussion
   Ron Christie, CEO of Christie Strategies and author
   Gail Christopher, Vice President of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation
   Sterling Speirn, President and CEO of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation
   Stephan Thernstrom, Winthrop Research Professor of History at Harvard University
1:10 Question-and-answer session
2:00 Adjournment

Further Information:
This transcript was edited by Kristen McIntyre. To request further information on this event or the Bradley Center, please visit our web site at http://pcr.hudson.org or send an e-mail to Kristen McIntyre at Kmcintyre@hudson.org.
WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Thank you all for coming. I’m Bill Schambra, Director of the Bradley Center for Philanthropy and Civic Renewal at the Hudson Institute here in town. Kristen McIntyre and I welcome you to today’s panel discussion entitled, “Race and Racism in America: Are We Now a Colorblind Society?”

But first a word about our series, since so many of you, I suspect, are first timers. The Bradley Center typically sponsors a panel once every month with the generous help of the Bradley Foundation and Atlantic Philanthropies. As most of you know, discourse in philanthropy tends to be very pleasant and innocuous and really, really boring. Because it carefully skirts issues that might generate controversy, and therefore might actually be interesting. Our panels, by contrast, are meant to be lively and provocative, bringing together a diversity of views and disciplines to examine issues of interest to the sector. If that is the sort of thing that you find appealing, please be sure that you’re on our mailing list.

Now, you may well say, if that’s so, why couldn’t we come up with a provocative issue for today’s panel? [LAUGHTER] Well, we did our best. And I think you have a treat in store for you as our four panelists tackle the topic, “Race and Racism in America: Are We Now a Colorblind Society?” One of our panelists, Sterling Speirn, along with two of his fellow foundation presidents, wrote an op-ed for the most recent issue of The Chronicle of Philanthropy entitled, “Foundations Must Conquer Myths in Order to Lead on Diversity.” And one of the myths, they argued, was that diversity is not just about skin color and head counts. Instead, they suggested, we need to dig deeper to improve justice, impartiality, and fairness in how society’s institutions operate and distribute resources. One year ago, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation launched a five year $75 million initiative entitled, “America Healing”, the point of which was precisely to tackle the systemic unfairness, the structural racism, imbedded in our society’s institutions.

We’re extremely fortunate to have with us today to discuss this bold new venture both the president of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Sterling Speirn, as well as the Kellogg Vice President for Program Strategy in charge of the America Healing Initiative, Dr. Gail Christopher. Coming at the issue from a slightly different point of view, we’re also pleased to have with us Dr. Stephan Thernstrom of Harvard University, who wrote an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal discussing this initiative, as well as Ron Christie, a political consultant and author of a very recent book, Acting White: The Curious History of a Racial Slur.

We’ll hear first from Mr. Speirn, followed by Professor Thernstrom, Dr. Christopher, and Mr. Christie. I will then try to stir things up. Assuming that we’ve had no differences among the panelists, I will try to introduce the notion of controversy. And then we’ll turn to the audience for Q&A.

STERLING SPIERN: Thank you Bill, and good afternoon everybody. I think this is a testimony to part of why we launched the American Healing project, which is that we think there is a great appetite in our country for people to come together and talk about issues of race. As we launched this initiative, I suppose I should be thankful to Professor Thernstrom for writing that op-ed piece in the Wall Street Journal. We know we are joining a dialogue that is not new to this country, and in fact, I would encourage you to look at the dialogue that Bill Schambra himself helped stimulate in an ongoing way in The Chronicle of Philanthropy in recent years.

I think a lot of people in our field have made out the case for the data on disparities, and I suspect, although I’ll wait to hear from my colleagues, that the people on this panel don’t disagree with the answer, are we a colorblind society? I suspect we would all acknowledge we are not. But I suppose we differ greatly on how it is we might achieve a colorblind society at some point. I also know that our America Healing Initiative is to encourage people to have courageous conversations about race, so that we can get on to the larger issues of solving the communities’ problems that our children face in health, in education, and in a wide variety of economic opportunity issues. So it is definitely a means to a larger end.
Let me also say that our founder, Will Keith Kellogg, who was born in 1860 just before the outbreak of the Civil War, was the son of abolitionists and grew up at a time when Sojourner Truth spent the last 25 years of her life in Battle Creek, Michigan. I also want to note, our foundation, at the corner of Michigan and Capital Avenues in downtown Battle Creek, is built on the site of the Underground Railroad, and we commissioned a large sculpture across the Battle Creek River to commemorate that event.

The other thing I say to people is, “may you be blessed with founders who are pure of heart, clear of intent, and whose hands are off.” Mr. Kellogg’s instructions to the founding board of trustees and staff in 1930 were to do whatever they pleased, as long as it promoted the health, happiness, and well-being of children. And we take that mandate very seriously. For throughout his life, he was a very hands-off founding donor. He did come quickly to believe in what we call the “education gospel”, which is that a good education is the greatest way to improve one generation over another.

His thoughts about society and social change, especially focusing on children, were largely shaped by his participation in the White House Conference on Children, which President Hoover at that time asked him to help stage and co-convene. A very interesting report emerged from that conference and I want to read a short blurb that Bruce Lesley and First Focus produced on children’s policy in the 20th Century. This is from a report on the 1929-30 White House Conference on the Standards of Child Welfare. It said, “This massive undertaking brought together experts across the country over a 16-month period, culminating in a November 1930 meeting. Four committees – focusing on medical, public health, education and training, and disability issues – issued a 643-page report to 3,000 attendees.”

Labor Secretary James Davis in that session called for special federal efforts to help those he described as “socially handicapped.” And how did he define children who were socially handicapped? He defined them as those who were in foster homes, in the juvenile justice system, and black and Indian children. I was struck by the reference, as early as 1930, that a child’s participation in certain systems or their particular ethnic or racial characteristics not would inherently cause them to be handicapped, but that the society around them might construct structures and systems that would cause them to be socially handicapped.

We have made great strides in the areas of racial equity in our society since the founding of this country, and we have a long way to go. With the mandate and the vision that all children in our country would thrive, our board of trustees and staff asked ourselves in recent years, ‘Who is a vulnerable child?’ Mr. Kellogg himself was a vulnerable kid. He dropped out of school in 5th grade, because his teachers had low expectations of him. He was considered dimwitted because, like me, he couldn’t see the blackboard without his eyeglasses. Unfortunately, like a lot of poor kids in our country today, he wasn’t diagnosed with his near-sightedness until he was 20 years old. So he dropped out and sold brooms for his family. And despite his success as a hard-working self-made man, ultimately, later in his life, he never forgot his connections to vulnerable children and forgotten children, whether they were kids in rural communities, whether they were kids with handicaps, whether they were kids who were poor, or whether they were kids who, because of the color of their skin, faced greater obstacles than others.

So when we launched the America Healing Initiative, we did this because of our historic commitment to promoting racial equity and undoing the disparities in health, in education, and in the communities where we work. This was, in a sense, a continuation of the work that had been going on at the foundation for several decades, but we felt it was critical that if we were going to help communities solve their problems and bring our notion of helping people help themselves through the practical application of knowledge, that we had to be able to convene people, to talk with people and to enable them to have courageous conversations about race, and historic, structural and current racism.
I was struck with reading Mr. Christie’s book, which I greatly valued. I saw, Ron (Christie), that you used an epigraph from Faulkner at the opening of the book. There’s another great saying by William Faulkner which says, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” The past is alive now. We don’t dwell in the past; we dwell on the impacts of the past that hold us back from fulfilling the great potential of our children in their communities today. And the America Healing Initiative, and I hope that Gail (Christopher) and I will be able to share some examples later on, is proof to us that when over 1,000 organizations from around the country responded to our request for proposal (RFP) over a year ago, from all kinds of organizations, we were surprised at the appetite in our communities for people to have courageous conversations.

We have gotten to know Governor Winter in Mississippi, given our work there, and we support the Winter Center for Racial Reconciliation. Governor Winter was the one who went to President Clinton and encouraged him to host a national conversation on race. However, we don’t find that opening the conversation to be about race is necessarily the only or most effective way to help communities deal with issues of racial inequality. But if they don’t have a language and the courage to talk about it, we don’t think we will get to the point where every 3rd grader is reading at grade level, every high school kid graduates from high school, and every child is born healthy and achieves their optimal outcomes.

So we have found over and over in the communities where we work that people are hungry and eager for someone to bring the issue of race and the abilities to talk about it into the room in a way that helps people work toward solutions. And I appreciate, reading Dr. Thernstrom’s book, that we are past an era that might be stereotyped or characterized as one of black anger and white guilt. We find that people across the racial spectrum want to talk about race and don’t want to run to the corners of the room and say, ‘Let’s get this over and we’ll go back to business as usual.’ We need to start a new chapter in this country on how we talk positively about the past and the present, so that we can have success for all of our children.

So I’m looking forward to this dialogue, and again, I hope you all came here not to be under the bright lights of a real-time web streaming debate, or feeling like we are in a coliseum and the gladiators are up here. Because you have seen those kinds of discussions and that is not the kind of dialogue that we are trying to foster. I want to thank Bill Schambra for creating this space. And I think it’s not only a few opening salvos from people that get to sit on this panel, but the ideas and issues and inspirations that you have. For me, you represent a typical community that we might be working with in this country, whether people come to talk about their public schools or they come to talk about their healthcare system. As I said, Gail (Christopher) will probably share a lot of examples, and I can too, but it is people that want to get success for their vulnerable kids. And being able to talk about racial issues is one of the key tools that will help them get there. Thank you and I look forward to the dialogue.

STEPHAN THERNSTROM: It is a pleasure to be here, and as was mentioned in the introduction, I did write a quick little piece about what the Kellogg Foundation is doing in this area, and it was rather critical. I can’t pretend to be a real expert in what they’re doing, but I did respond rather negatively to the rationale for it. And I also have reservations about whether it will, in fact, move us in a positive direction. First of all, in answer to the question of whether or not we are now a colorblind society, there is probably broad agreement that we are not. Indeed, what people of my kind of ideological inclinations call for is colorblind public policy, with the belief that over time that that is most likely to lead us to a colorblind society.

But there is a question about the goal. I think some would say that a colorblind society would be one in which we are blind to every aspect of the strangers we encounter. Anything about their appearance, their accents, their gestures, their name, any cue as to their ethnic or racial background, we somehow shouldn’t recognize. And that is not my vision of a colorblind society. We are, after all, a multicultural, multiracial, multiethnic society, and we will continue, for a long time to come, to be such a society and to perceive
differences in others. I expect that a half a century from now there will still be black churches. I do not expect that all of our churches will have the same racial composition, and for some, that is what integration requires. Well, I think that is a false vision, and that instead, I can conceive of a future with black churches, black institutions of higher education, black social organizations of every kind, just as there are Jewish organizations of various kinds, just as there are Armenian American organizations of every kind.

So I think we would like the law and the public power to be race-blind. But in society, we will have many group differences. Some of those will involve frictions and negative feelings about others. One definition of an ethnic group is a collection of people united by a myth of common ancestry and a common dislike of their neighbors. Now, that may not be innate to ethnicity, but there will be group rivalries and negative feelings across groups, and we will never be able to obliterate them.

Now, I’m taking as my foil for my remarks an essay by Dr. Christopher, “Healing America: A Funder’s Commitment to Racial Equality”, which sketches the rationale for the Kellogg plan. I find it troubling in various ways. There are two central premises. One is that the great problem in our society today is white privilege. Now I’ve read this fairly carefully, and other works in this vein, and I can’t really find out exactly what white privilege is, and how you know when you’ve identified it. As it is presented in the literature that I’ve read, at least, it simply consists of a recitation of racial disparities. Blacks have higher unemployment rates, higher poverty rates, a lower rate of within-wedlock births. Whatever it is, ergo white privilege. And I find this pretty simplistic. My wife and I have written two books that deal at great length with various kinds of racial disparities and we find in almost all cases many other explanations that are more concrete, empirical, tangible, and that do not lead one to conclude we have a suffocating reign of white privilege.

Dr. Christopher also contends the other central premise is that today we have, “a blatant racial/social caste system in the United States.” Today, we have a caste system. Well, we did have a caste system in the southern United States, right down to the 1960’s, and it is unrecognizably different from our society today. Take a little glance at John Dollard’s classic, Caste and Class in a Southern Town. In that town, and throughout the south, blacks literally were an untouchable caste. Whites did not shake hands with them. They were supposed to enter the back door of a white house. They did not dine together or drink together. Well, is there anything like that today? It’s strange, the occupant of the White House is a member of the untouchable caste. We have powerful chairmen of congressional committees, CEO’s of Fortune 500 companies, and so on. That doesn’t square well with that notion.

But look at more fundamental indicators of racial interaction. For example, in the most recent survey of this kind, in 2005, 92 percent of African Americans said they had fairly close personal friends who were white. Seventy-nine percent of whites had close friends who were black. In 2005, 63 percent of blacks had a white family to dinner at their home and 49 percent of whites had entertained blacks in their home. Our schools, as part of their argument claims, are more segregated today than ever before. This, I think, is totally misguided, as is evidenced by a recent survey of graduating high school seniors. It reported that 79 percent of whites had a close friend who was black, 82 percent of blacks had close white friends.

Then, most important, at the very heart of the caste system, was sexual fear. Black men were lynched for even looking at a white woman in the wrong way. However, today, we have these figures. For example, as of 2006, the Washington Post Kaiser Foundation poll found that roughly 50 percent of African Americans had dated a white person and 25 percent of whites had dated a black person. This, in many cases, ultimately leads to marriage. The interracial marriage rate has gone from one tenth of 1 percent to 15 percent of blacks marrying today someone of another race, and among black males it is 22 percent. So I think, the idea this is anything remotely like a caste system is very misguided.
Then finally, the strategy and approach. I appreciated Mr. Speirn’s spirit in welcoming open and frank dialogue. I have to say that the Clinton national race dialogue did not generate, in my view, anything remotely like that. And many of the people who call for such dialogue don’t really want a dialogue, they want, in Dr. Christopher’s words, for blacks to explain, “the painful experiences and destructive impact associated with our national, individual, and group racial wounds.” And for whites to say, ‘Ah, at last I get it. I agree with you. What should we do about it?’

As a nice example of what has not been frank about that dialogue, occurred in Akron when then President Clinton took a question from a young man in the audience. The young man stood up and said, ‘Well, frankly, I’m very worried about walking down the street at night when I encounter black people. I’m worried about getting mugged.’ President Clinton’s response to that was to ask what movies or television programs that he had seen that had given him such a warped idea that blacks are any more likely to mug you than anyone else? And there, I would say, you don’t need to watch any movies or television, where in fact blacks are greatly underrepresented, as studies have shown. You need only look at the crime statistics. There are huge racial disparities in the rate at which crimes are committed. Young urban blacks are far more likely to be muggers than young urban whites. That is a frank statement that I would be happy to debate.

So in sum, I am somewhat doubtful that the effort being made here will in fact produce genuine racial dialogue. The final point I would make is that the best kind of dialogue across racial lines is not dialogue about race. It’s dialogue about whether the Nicks will beat the Celtics in the first round of the playoffs. It’s dialogue about what is going on in this weird war in Libya. It is dialogue not focused on race, because in fact, we are all people with many common interests to talk about, and a call for a dialogue on race sets us in opposing camps. ‘Oh, you are the spokesman for the white position and you are the spokesman for the black position.’ That, I don’t think, is likely to lead us to a better society.

GAIL CHRISTOPHER: Good afternoon.

ALL: Good afternoon.

GAIL CHRISTOPHER: It is both an honor, and I guess humbling to be the focus of the panel today. I didn’t quite anticipate the nature in which things might be framed, although I should have. Let me first clarify that the work that the Kellogg Foundation is doing is in response, in many ways, to the expressed interest and need by so many communities around this country. We recently brought together about 15 of the leaders who have been doing this work. We brought them together to hear from them about their progress, about their core principles, and about their values. What was impressive to us was that the focus is really not on race, but on our common humanity. How do we move from the legacy of those centuries of misguided, to use your word, Professor Thernstrom, of misguided perceptions about our collective humanity?

So it is clear that the people who are doing this work are not doing it to further divide, but rather to unite us within local communities. To suggest that there is not a need for this work, or that this work might not be effective, I think smacks of a certain amount of arrogance and assumption. But the good thing about America is that we get to do that. We get to have multiple points of view. So I respectfully hear your skepticism, and indeed your criticism, Professor Thernstrom.

But I also hear the voices of the people who are in fact doing this work in a courageous way within their communities. So what do they tell us? They told us that, in addition to the principle of focusing on our
... oneness and our collective humanity, they provide safe spaces for sharing the stories of human experience. Is that a victim-oppressor frame? In some cases, the experiences have been experiences of horror, guided by misguided belief systems. In some cases, the stories are stories of reconciliation and heightened awareness.

There was one story that was extremely moving for me and I’d like to share it with you. I will respect the anonymity of the individual to the degree that I can. It is the story of a young man. He wasn’t young at the time, but he was telling a story that happened in his youth where he was involved in a protest around a labor movement. And unfortunately, that protest turned violent and members of a particular racist group decided that they would shoot and kill some of the protesters. So he had had the experience of cradling in his arms a dying friend, and literally trying to hold her head together, which had been shot. And years later, after he had grown tremendously as a person and had actually become a minister, he was called to the bedside of the individual that had perpetrated that crime, along with one of the descendents of the woman who had been killed. The person who had done this wanted to apologize. And he did that. But what he said was, “but I cannot forgive myself.” So here this African American man, who was now a minister, a man of the cloth, he had to say to this person, “God forgives you.” He didn’t really believe it when he said it, but after careful thought, when he was speaking to his congregation that Sunday, he did believe it. He understood the complexity and he understood what forgiveness is about. Was that a healing moment for him?

Was that a healing moment for us, when we heard that story? Yes it was. There are many, many, many stories that are being told around this country, and there is power in a story. What the neuroscience teaches us today, that we didn’t know in the 50s, 60s and the 70s, is the power of adverse experiences on brain development and on the health of people in society. We also didn’t understand the power of sharing and communicating as a vehicle for healing. But as we have a more nuanced appreciation of the molecular biology and how stress manifests in every cell and throughout the brain, we can perhaps see more value in a more grounded opportunity to share our experiences. Yes, the data would suggest that we’ve made dramatic progress as a nation. But the data would also suggest that we’re at risk, because so many of our children of color in this society are impoverished, in low income situations, and are not in schools that are causing them to get the educational background that they will need to succeed.

We believe that equipping our nation’s teachers, our nation’s doctors, our nation’s police officers, and our nation’s social workers with the skills to understand the impact of a racialized society will make them more effective in meeting the needs of those children. Race is a myth. Racism is a set of beliefs that helped to shape this nation. To suggest that centuries of institutionalizing those beliefs could suddenly be eradicated in less than 75 years is, I believe, simplistic and misguided, naïve at best. It took this nation centuries to imbue the mythology of racial difference into every institution and system that we have, from medical experimentation to criminal justice, cruelty and disparity, to less violent and destructive day to day exclusion and discrimination. Yes, you’re right, we had that system. To suggest that that system has suddenly gone away or that it will go away if we’re not intentional about making it go away, I believe, Professor Thernstrom, is indeed naïve. [APPLAUSE]

But my challenge today was to hear your criticisms, to listen to you and not go to an emotional place. I have failed that challenge, because I feel the danger in there being a major platform for that type of interpretation and denigration of this very important effort. All children deserve to be valued fully as human beings. We are not yet a society that fully values all of our children. Some surveys suggest that 98 percent of African Americans experience discrimination in their lives on a regular basis. Does that negate the fact that some marry interracially? Does that negate the fact that some of my best friends are white? But some of those same friends might unconsciously discriminate against me, or behave in a way that demonstrates discrimination because they don’t even realize they’re doing it. And what we’re learning today is that it is the unconscious response that is sometimes more automatic, and more common.
I walk into a restaurant and nine times out of ten the hostess will take me to a table in the back of the room, probably facing the kitchen. Sometimes I say to myself, ‘Do they teach them that in hostess school?’ That is a minor insult. But when our children are locked into communities of minimal opportunity, when they are more likely to be incarcerated than any other group, when disparities in health outcomes continue to increase, I think that we deserve a more thorough understanding and investigation of these dynamics.

About our initiative, I don’t want anyone in this room or you, Professor Thernstrom, to think that it is just about conversations around the country about race. And although President Clinton was a very brave president who responded to a very brave governor and tried to initiate a conversation, our work is really nothing like that.

One example is a community in California that knew they didn’t have access to healthy food. So whites, hispanics and blacks took it upon themselves to survey the community and to find out more about the availability of quality food. They found out about the differences by race in that community in terms of food locations. But much to their surprise, they actually found out that people were paid differently by race as well. Doing the same jobs, but receiving different pay. Now someone might say that that wasn’t a racial decision, but was an economic decision. It might have been both. However, the impact was less opportunity and access to quality food. The positive impact was that this community discovered that together, and they developed a strategy for dealing with it together.

And what we are really trying to do with communities around this country, those who are willing to do it, who have the courage, we’re supporting their efforts to identify their challenges and solve them together – to cross racial lines and address school issues, address criminal justice issues, and address foster care issues. Does that further divide us? Is that misguided and simplistic? Some may think it is, but the people that are doing it feel not only more hope, they feel and they see more progress. Now, we’re very, very early in this initiative. It is less than a year since we announced it. In fact, we’ll be bringing together 260 grantees, so they can share with one another and they can learn from one another.

Our initiative and our work, and I hate to call it an “initiative”, because I know the foundation is going to keep doing it long after I’m gone, but our first goal and objective is to see a system of accountability for real progress. We want to figure out, how do you measure and sustain progress? Our second goal was to build capacity within communities to do this difficult work, always in the name of children. Our third goal was to fund the research that will help to document and heighten our understanding of what is really happening in this country.

Twenty percent of African American children and 18 percent of Latino children live not only in communities and families that are impoverished, but they go to schools where most of the kids have free and reduced price lunch. When the numbers are 20 and 18 percent respectively for African American and Latino children, and they’re 1.4 percent for white children, something is wrong. But it would take someone to ask the question and to reanalyze the data through that lens to create that concept of double jeopardy. So we’re funding the world of Dolores Acevedo-Garcia, formerly of Harvard University. We’re funding the work of John Powell. We’re funding the work of David Williams. We’re funding the work of another colleague of yours from Harvard, who is able to frame these issues from a different perspective. Frame the data from a perspective that is sensitive to the challenges that we are facing as we go forward into the future.

Will tell more stories, but I want to make clear, and this phrase used to make me so upset, people would say to us, is this just another black and white topic? And I would just say, just, and I would, you know, react. But the answer to the question is, no. We’re concerned about many, many groups in our society –
Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, European Americans, and immigrant children. The groups that do this work, it’s defined by the community and by the context.

Let me just offer a little insight into this concept of white privilege. The mythology of race upon which we built the system and institutions of this nation suggested that the less pigmentation you had, the higher up you were on this hierarchy of race. And the more pigmentation you had, the lower you were in this hierarchy. Now yes, that was a mythology of the past, but the systems that evolved from that mythology are alive and well. That is what we mean by white privilege – that you are more likely to be able to buy a home and choose to live where you want to live if you are at the top of that hierarchy. You are less likely to be able to do that, even if you were a veteran of World War II, if you are at the bottom of that hierarchy. You are more likely to be hired if you are at the top of that hierarchy, then you are at the bottom.

Now, skills matter. Were you educated? Did you have access? All those things come into play. But this concept of racial mythology, and I say it is mythology because the science today tells us it is a mythology. We are all part of one human family. The genome has finally dispelled the racial mythology. But that was not mythology when it was part of our nation’s science. The cruel experiments that were disproportionately done were because it was justified, because it was believed to be science.

So what we are suggesting is that we need to take a look at that mythology, understand that it was just that, that it was mythology, and that in fact we did build systems that embraced that mythology and we need to accelerate a reversal of that. If you are at the higher end of that proposed hierarchy, you could live your whole life and never even know it and never even care about it. If you were at the bottom end of that proposed hierarchy, you live with it every day of your life.

I really don’t care who won the Nicks game. But I do care that all children in our society go into a classroom where the expectations are that they will succeed, and that that teacher understands the possible consequences of a racialized society and a racialized culture, the possible consequences that that has had on those children, and she knows how to mitigate that so that that child’s self esteem, self awareness, and belief in themselves is not damaged by the way that he or she relates to that child.

I wish, Professor Thernstrom, that you had a deeper understanding of what we are doing. But I understand, at this point, that you do not. However, I invite you to be a little less eager to negate it and to dismiss it, and like us, to watch and see what happens. Will we be better served if we don’t talk about racism? Will we be better served if we don’t search for innovative solutions to accelerate the progress of our children? I don’t think we will be better served. But my perspective is of that of an African American female. Yours is different. But that’s what we have to do. We have to hear the different perspectives, perhaps with less judgment, and see if we can’t do better on behalf of our nation’s children. Thank you.

RON CHRISTIE:  Good afternoon.

ALL:  Good afternoon.

RON CHRISTIE:  All right, now wait a second. Now I know I am the fourth speaker. One of my dearest friends, Dr. Tevi Troy is in the back, a fellow avid Yankees fan, and of course Alex Rodriguez hits in the number four spot, in often very difficult circumstances. And given the remarks from our previous speakers, I think I am in a very interesting spot, where hopefully I will have the opportunity to advance the dialogue and maybe hit a single here, and to advance the debate. So I’ll say it one more time. Good afternoon!

ALL:  Good afternoon.
RON CHRISTIE: Thank you very, very much. It is a particular honor and a privilege to be able to have the opportunity to have a very frank, a very difficult, but a very honest conversation about race today. And I thank our friends from the Hudson Institute, in particular, for not only convening this forum, but for giving us the opportunity to exchange ideas, to politely agree to disagree, rather than being in so many functions that we see here in Washington D.C., where people have had the time to talk, but no one listens. I would only implore all of us that when we move out, that we try to constructively find a way to hear the lessons and hear the experiences and hear, frankly, the dialogue that took place here today. To find a way to advance the question that we were asked and tasked to discuss, which of course is, are we now a colorblind society?

My answer to that, like my previous colleagues, is no. And it is something that we’ve struggled with here in the United States since even before our founding. One of the founding fathers that many people have never heard of, and perhaps you would never look at unless you went to the history books, is a gentleman by the name of Charles Thompson. He was tasked by Benjamin Franklin and General Washington to come up with a motto for the United States. This motto is now very well known to all of us, *E Pluribus Unum*, “Out of many, one.” And it has been a struggle, because at our founding in 1789, what it meant to be an American was that you were of European descent. But the people of color who had arrived on our shores, who had been brought to America against their will, were not considered American citizens. So out of the many that were composed and brought forth to be one, African Americans at that time were not deemed to be Americans.

I think one of the most disgraceful, one of the most despicable, and one of the worst written Supreme Court cases that has ever been decided in this country was the 1857 *Dred Scott v. Sanford* case. Then Chief Justice of the United States Roger Taney ruled that African Americans who had been brought to this country were not deserving of American citizenship, American rights and American privileges. So again, there was a fallacy to the notion that we were one as Americans, because a group of individuals, based strictly and solely on the color of their skin, were not granted equal rights and equal opportunity. The Supreme Court continued, I think, in their disgraceful consideration of race in American society, to not look at people as individuals. They didn’t look at them as Americans, but they looked at them strictly based on the color of their skin. In the infamous 1896 case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the court held that Americans could be segregated in separate but equal accommodations, so long as these separate but equal accommodations were provided. That was in fact the law of the land, the color of the land of the United States. *E Pluribus Unum*, in that instance, once again, had failed.

And it would take more than 60 years, up until 1954 when we encountered the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, where the United States Supreme Court finally stood up and recognized that separate but equal accommodations were hardly that. They were separate and inherently unequal. Unequal and unaccommodating, treating people based merely on the color of their skin to be put in substandard, subhuman, and offensive circumstances.

From 1954, we arrived at the Kennedy Administration in the early 1960s. President Kennedy was the first American President who specifically not only issued an executive order dealing with the issue of affirmative action, but also looked to have the opportunity for people to have an affirmative access and opportunity to achieve the American Dream. However, the President also famously said, before he was assassinated in 1963, that color should have no place in American law and American life. Color should have no place in American law and American life.

This is certainly something that we have struggled with since the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement, the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. We took steps as a nation to
try to stamp out the badges of inequality that had plagued this country since even before our founding. We did this to try to strive for that better vision, that better essence of what it means to be an American. Recognizing from our various backgrounds and our various ethnicities, that we could come together and overcome the inequalities that we had faced in this country to form one nation, which was the United States of America.

I say that because if you look at our legacy and you look at so many of the things that we’ve overcome, as we have moved out of the black power era in the 1970s and moved into the 1980s, something from a societal aspect changed. We had a television show, which was the most highly rated show on American television in the 1980s, called The Cosby Show that looked at an American family with a doctor, a lawyer and well educated children. And these children were witty and they were good-looking. The parents were witty and they provided a very strong home atmosphere for a family that happened to be black.

And I think that the cultural shift that The Cosby Show brought about in America was one which paved the way for so many other athletes, authors, and individuals to achieve a bit more of that American dream. Because people could look past the color of their skin and look at the content of the individual, be it their skills as a musician or their skills as a thespian in the theater, and recognize that people had inalienable rights and inalienable talents, not based on the color of their skin, but because they were Americans.

Yet sadly, what we saw from the progress brought about by The Cosby Show in the 1980s was a reversal of so much of the progress that we had had when we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Brown v. Board of Education decision. At a speech held just blocks from here, Bill Cosby had been given the opportunity to share his remarks about the progress that we had made as a country. The people who were assembled there thought that they were going to hear a celebration of Brown v. Board of Education and the break down of the racial barriers. Instead, Mr. Cosby castigated many of those in the audience before him. He said, “You can’t land a plane with ‘why you ain’t…” We have moved from a society where we have stopped taking individual accountability for our actions, that we blame others, that we in fact foster a culture that denies the responsibility of individuals and instead seeks to blame society for many of the problems that people face. We start looking at our race and suggesting that people have done wrong by us in the past and therefore must be held to account for previous inequities. Bill Cosby was, frankly, astonished by the reception that he faced.

And frankly, what is this notion that you have uncovered of acting white? What does it mean for a black child to be acting white? I say that because I wrote an entire book on this subject and it is something that is very personal to me. It is something that is very upsetting to me, because the doors that had been opened, the barriers that had been destroyed and the chains that had been cut by Brown v. Board of Education were now being replaced and reassembled, not by a white society that was seeking to hold blacks down, but by blacks in many urban communities around this country who said, ‘If you work hard, if you study hard, if you dare to think out of the mainstream of what pretends to be black thought, then somehow you’re acting white. That you are inauthentically black.’

This is not a phenomenon that I came upon in the 1980s or the 1990s, but something that has unfortunately been a stain from our legacy here in the United States. We can see this when looking at two great 19th century black pioneers in the form of W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington. Booker T. Washington, in the Atlanta Exposition Speech in 1896 was a very comforting figure to many white Americans when he said that, “We can be as separate as the five fingers on a hand.” In other words, that we can assimilate together when it comes to working, but that we should remain segregated when it comes to being in a social setting. DuBois rejected that notion. He said that blacks would achieve full equality in this country with the power of an education, through true civil rights, the ability to vote, and to achieve the American Dream.
And that conflict would continue in the later part of the 1920s, and into the Harlem Renaissance, between DuBois and another individual, Marcus Garvey, who sought to return blacks to Africa and to the Caribbean. In fact, Garvey founded what was called the Black Star Line, in contrast to the White Star Line, which many of you would know because they built the Titanic. He wanted to return blacks to Africa. He wanted to return blacks and have a specific segregation that was put into place. And this dichotomy of acting white has been with us ever since.

I say that to you because we now are in a very difficult time in America where many of the barriers that had been removed that would truly allow us to move forward into a colorblind society again have reemerged. And this time, we find them in the presence of America’s first black president. I think the election of Barack Obama has changed our country in many ways that we will never know, for generations. But I’ll say one thing. He has certainly shattered a ceiling that I never thought would be shattered in my lifetime, which was the election of America’s first black President. The person who, frankly, was judged on his merits, based on his education, and based on his vision for this country. And Americans elected him because he was that transformative figure. But, I dare say, not because he was black. That was part of it.

So in the era of Obama, are we in truly a colorblind society? Has his election made us more colorblind? Has it made us more accepting of people of color? Perhaps. But in many ways, I think it shows that we are no longer headed in the right direction that our founders set forward in *E Pluribus Unum*, out of one, many. Why? Because I think that we’re self-segregating again. I think that we are turning back the clock on our own progress. I see so many things that Dr. Martin Luther King and many of the pioneers of the civil rights era would be appalled by. We hyphenate, and we stress our differences, rather than stressing our cultural sameness, and that is the fact that we are American citizens and we cherish our American citizenship regardless of the color of our skin.

I hear now in the discourse – African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Asian-Americans. We’re Americans. If we self-segregate and if we elect to stress our racial and ethnic differences rather than stressing the culture, the citizenship and the historical aspects of what has brought us all together as American Citizens, I think we go in the wrong direction. There was a fascinating book that was written in 1992 by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. called, *The Disuniting of America*. He warned of a phenomenon that I fear is starting to spread across this country, which is the cult of ethnicity. It is a cult that stresses again one’s ethnic and racial identification, as opposed to one’s identification as being an American citizen.

So how do we move beyond this? For one, I think to truly become a colorblind society, we must stop stressing our differences, and we must welcome diversity of thought, rather than diversity of color. I would encourage you, if you think that I am somehow overstating the issue or not being serious, to google “Ron Christie” when you get back to your offices or your homes. You will find the term, Uncle Tom, sellout, Oreo. Ninety percent of the black population in this country voted for President Obama, and I think that that is as welcome a sign to get people to vote as it is disturbing. You don’t find 90 percent of whites voting for the white candidate because they’re white. Why would 90 percent of one ethnic group vote for one candidate? Is it because of the color of his skin? If the answer to that is yes, I believe that we are moving in the wrong direction.

Is it so wrong for me to be a conservative? To be a proud republican? To have served our country in the House of Representatives and in the White House working for President George W. Bush and Dick Cheney? Do I deserve to be called a sellout to my race? To be called an Uncle Tom? To be called a Clarence Thomas? Is that truly diversity in America? These insults, unfortunately, are not coming from whites. These insults are not coming from people who are of different racial ethnicities than mine. They are coming from those who look like me, who sound like me, who dare say, ‘How could you ever think that way because black people don’t think that way?’
And I challenge you and I close with this, what is black thought? What is a black agenda? I look at the role of the Congressional Black Caucus and their founding in the early 1970s, and I look to where they are now. Where they rallied behind Congressman Charlie Rangel and they rallied behind Congresswoman Maxine Waters. They say that the process in the House of Representatives is not a fair process and that it singles out blacks. And I always say to myself, is it a process that has singled out blacks, or is it individuals acting regardless of the color of their skin that have put them in the judgment of their peers?

Is there such thing as a black agenda? Don’t we all, as Americans, want our children to receive the best education? Don’t we all, as Americans, want to ensure that our borders are safe from those that seek to harm us, be it through terrorism, those who come across our borders illegally, dilute some of the jobs that are available for Americans? I dare say to you that in order to fully achieve the American dream, and to truly be and to truly uphold the motto of the United States of America, we need to stop looking at people based on the color of their skin. We need to stop judging people based on their ethnicity. We need to value and we need to cherish and we need to honor, and we also need to politely disagree with those that we disagree with, based not on the color of their skin, but the content of their character and the value of their ideas. Thank you all very much. I’m really honored to be with you today.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRAY: Thank you all very much. One point, and I want to be particularly clear about this, Dr. Christopher and Sterling (Spiern), we are really grateful to you for discussing this initiative, because foundations are typically extraordinarily powerful and extraordinarily likely to try to avoid challenges to their initiatives. They typically don’t want to hear any criticism and they don’t have to hear any. You all could have said, ‘We’ll take a pass on this and we’ll just go ahead and talk to our fellow foundation leaders, and everyone will say wonderful things about our initiative and we’ll feel really great about ourselves, and we’ll avoid any criticism.’ So I am very grateful to both of you for being willing to come and do this panel. Those of you who know foundations will understand.

This is very different approach to this. I think it does, as Sterling suggested, speak to the desire of the foundation to have a truly honest discussion about these matters. And Dr. Christopher, that means we all have the ability, I think, and the right, in that context, to become a bit emotional, because these are highly charged issues. Without that emotion, if we have a conversation and we leave unperturbed and feeling good about ourselves, then we didn’t really have a conversation about the matter. About this matter in particular.

Now let me, if I may, direct a question to a couple of the positions we’ve laid out here, and it is sort of different sides of the same question. Dr. Thernstrom, Mr. Christie laid out a very troubling history of American treatment of race, and of course Dr. Christopher did as well. Isn’t it likely that that history worked its way into our fundamental social, political, and economic institutions? That current attitudes aside, isn’t it likely in fact that there is a powerful residue of racism imbedded in the structures, as Dr. Christopher suggested, and if so, what can we do about that?

STEPHAN THERNSTROM: Well, could you say a little more about how and where they are imbedded? Let us say the structure of higher education or the structure of religious denominations. Pick an example where one could say, ‘Here is a clear residue of this legacy that we can identify and combat.’ I am sure the history always has carryover. None of us were born yesterday. There is no blank slate as of 1965 with the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, but if we’re going to combat something, we need to identify it with some precision.

If it is true that 98 percent of all blacks have felt discriminated against, what can we do about that? That is like some of these estimates that you see, such as the American Psychological Association has determined that 78 percent of all Americans are neurotic or have a mental illness. I mean, it’s such a big number and
it involves every aspect of private life. How could you possibly say, ‘We’ll set a goal that by 2020 or 2030, only 50 percent of blacks will say they have ever been discriminated against?’ We have an enormously powerful array of anti-discrimination laws, covering employment, public accommodations, and on and on. Can we have a vastly more powerful anti-discrimination law? I mean, I suppose Dr. Christopher could complain about these restaurants and get better treatment once they see her coming again. I mean, I’m trying to deal with, it’s a very good question.

GAIL CHRISTOPHER: I appreciate the question and I also appreciate the framing of the response in the need for specificity. So let me offer one example. When the Institute Of Medicine issued its report on racial discrimination and unequal treatment, it was clear that the patterns of unequal treatment for African Americans and other people of color within our nation’s medical system were pretty stark. People could go in with the same conditions and be treated differently. Dr. David Williams did some interesting research, where he looks at how pain medication was distributed for a fracture and how it differed by race, not only in California, but in a totally different clinic somewhere on the East Coast.

One of the more insidious dynamics of the racial mythology upon which our nation was built was the belief that there was a physically embodied difference. So the medical systems were really the harbingers of a lot of the mistreatment, maltreatment and the confusion. Now, of course, probably none of our physicians today consciously believe that. But because the representation of physicians of color is still so dismally low, many of the physicians that we go to see may in fact harbor some preconceived stereotypes that manifest in terms of how they treat people.

Do we need more laws against discrimination? Legal expertise is not my field. It’s my daughter’s field. However, our premise in this work, in terms of America Healing, is that you could change laws, but until you change hearts, you really aren’t going to change things.

So that is why we believe in providing opportunities for you and I to dialogue, not necessarily to make points in a debate in a newspaper, but to really talk to one another and hear one another. That is the beginning of the possibility of creating the change and creating the E Pluribus Unum that we all want to see. But there is a legacy that is very present in our society and as long as poverty continues to be so racialized, it is quite probable that those patterns will be perpetuated into other generations.

I am not saying anyone in America is a racist. Now don’t get me wrong, there are some, I shouldn’t say that. But I’m not suggesting that America is racist and I really want to disavow anyone of that. We are not saying that in this work. What we are saying is that our culture is racialized, and that our systems still reflect that, and that changing that, which is what we want to do, is going to take intention and it’s going to take effort. People have to be courageous enough to do that.

STERLING SPIERN: And, if could, too. Professor Thernstrom used the term, “the suffocating reign of white privilege” and that is not language we use. On the other hand, the paralyzing denial or unconsciousness of systemic advantage makes it hard for us to heal if people are in denial that they have a wound or a chronic disease.

I appreciated Mr. Christie’s comments. There is a delicate balance between overstressing our differences, but also in minimizing our differences. And I think, as a nation, as a community, we have to go through a process of people feeling they are respected, and that they bring their whole persons to their work and their life, not just the part of their person that fits into the dominant culture. I appreciate your (Ron Christie) and Professor Thernstrom’s books with his wife, Abigail. There are some wonderful books; one by Prudence Carter called Keepin’ It Real, which tracks kids of color in high schools and talks about how they buy into the culture of achievement. They don’t feel like they are acting white when they achieve, but they also bring their own culture, their own identities, and parts of the other cultures that they live in
and have grown up in. In the racialized mythology of this country, those parts get denied or crowded out, and therefore they cannot be their whole selves. And I worry that the E in *E Pluribus Unum* sometimes means European Union. Because people in the dominant culture don’t see that their notions of *Unum* happen to be their idea of *Unum*. If we had come to this country all voluntarily and all in equal portions, we’d have a different sense of what it meant to be multicultural. Not in a dumbing down of all of our cultures, but finding that our differences should make us great, and we should use those differences.

I just came from training with corporate leaders from several Midwestern companies, and when I see white leaders in corporate America come to the realization of systemic advantage without feeling guilty, but feeling responsible, it is the opening where my colleagues and I say, ‘Oh, now I can begin the work.’ But if I sit here, and Professor Thernstrom had polling statistics, but then there is the 98 percent that Gail brought up, it’s like, we can fight about statistics, but I love it when Chris Rock asks white people how much we’d have to pay them to be born a person of color in the United States. It was $50 million. I don’t know what statistic that is, but suddenly they seem to be aware of white privilege, even though they never talk about it.

So I just think that this is work that we need to do together. Statistics aside, it is clear. Ron (Christie) said President Kennedy’s great words that, “race has no place in American life or law.” But they do play a powerful role in American life right now. And our initiative, it is a biological healing metaphor. It is not one of rights and justice, although it is, indeed, that. We need to help our communities heal so we can get on to building a great nation, which, as Gail said, is at risk if we don’t figure out our way through this.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: That leads nicely to a question that I wanted to put to you and to Dr. Christopher, and that is getting from many to one. You can begin that process from a number of different places and the Kellogg Foundation has chosen to begin from the proposition that race is really, really divisive. As I say, this is the flip-side of the question that I just put to Dr. Thernstrom, that race is really, really deeply imbedded in our institutions. And one can’t look at that without saying, ‘Boy, that is a long way to go.’ As you say, it’s not a question of personal attitudes. We’re not talking about interpersonal relationships and whether they’re racist or not. We’re talking about viewing American institutions in a fundamentally different way. It’s difficult to think, for instance, that the founders’ commitment to equal rights has any meaning after that. I mean, surely that was just a hypocritical, nonsensical theoretical proposition. In other words, to come together as Dr. Christopher suggested, is this really the best place to start? Is this really the best theoretical framework to bring to the issue?

GAIL CHRISTOPHER: It is important to understand that when the Founding Fathers said, “We are all created equal”, they did not include women or people of color. This mythology that I described earlier was so imbedded at that time that they could say, “all men are created equal”, and everybody knew they didn’t mean anything but white men. Now, the good news is, they said, “All are created equal.” And others came behind them and tried to make that real. Ignorance once told us the world was flat, and so people didn’t navigate beyond their perception of what the world was. Ignorance dominated in our country for far longer than it hasn’t.

I am just suggesting that we can do better; that we are capable, as a nation. Other nations are trying. In Sweden, I don’t know if there is a more homogeneous society than Sweden, but they have a special commission that looks at discrimination based on gender, based on disability, based on sexual orientation. Their public health community understands that discrimination causes harm, and they are very organized in trying to figure out how to mitigate it. Now, I agree we did some of that work here, and we do have laws that prevent discrimination. However, careful analysis of those would suggest that we don’t enforce those fully. But enforcement is not the answer to getting us beyond this mythology.
As a little girl, when I heard stories about slavery and I saw evidence of discrimination, I used to ask myself a very naïve question. I would say, ‘why?’ What could make people behave that way? What gave people permission to lynch and do all these things that they did? What was going on in them? And it wasn’t until I became an adult that I understood that it really was a belief system and an ideology that gave that permission. We have dealt with the impact of that. We fought a civil war. We had a civil rights movement. We have laws. But I don’t think we’ve ever fundamentally looked at that belief system and acknowledged the fallacy of that belief system.

Denial has many levels. There is denial of fact. There is denial of consequences. There is denial of implications, and then ultimately denial of feelings. And my suggestion is that we are just getting past that first level of denial in this country. So what we are hoping will come from this work is that we will accelerate movement past that denial of the absurdity of that set of beliefs. It’s not about tolerance. We like to say as a country that we are going to tolerate our differences. We really just have to dig in and unearth the absurdity. This country had it wrong, and they built a country on that fallacy of race. And we are all part of it. We all experience it, every single person. So I just say, if we’re not intentional about changing that, it won’t ever change. It’ll just be perpetuated.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRÄ: Now, are there any questions out there relating to this? Please state your name and affiliation, and this is Robert Woodson of the Center for Neighborhood Enterprise.

ROBERT WOODSON: Rob Woodson, Center for Neighborhood Enterprise. I do have a question. The premise of your program states that you intertwined your experience in a restaurant with the underperformance of children in schools. You went from there. And the question is, if racism were the problem in America, then how do you explain black-on-black dysfunction. Washington D.C. leads the nation in 21 separate categories in poverty expenditures. We have the highest disparity of black income and black enterprises. We have the highest performing blacks coexisting with the highest mortality rate for our children, living in the same city. If racism were the issue, why are not all blacks suffering equally?

Second point is that we have 3,000 blacks every six months dying at the hands of other blacks from violence. That is like a 9/11 every six months. And they are failing in school systems run by their own people. We have five social service systems in some form of court-ordered receivership incompetently served by people of color. They’re being sentenced to jail by black prosecutors and judges, and so the question is, how would looking at these problems through the prism of race address that? If the perpetrators of the evil are people of color, explain how institutional racism addresses that.

GAIL CHRISTOPHER: I appreciate your question. I think perhaps there is an oversimplification of the concept of racism. Racism as a construct was a belief system of hierarchy does not preclude the internalization of those beliefs. So I think that if we understand the complexity of the system over centuries and the barriers that were put in place in terms of skill acquisition, we get a slightly different understanding of progress. But I would love to hear your interpretation of the data that you gave. Why do you think that there is crime or failure when institutions are run by people of color, just as they are when they’re run by others? Do you think it is individual? What is your answer to your own question?

ROBERT WOODSON: I would like to hear your answer to the question.

GAIL CHRISTOPHER: Okay. I would be happy to answer. But I think we could have a conversation about violence and what begets violence. We could have a conversation about many social dislocations and what happens, personally, to put one at greater risk to do that. The prism of the context of poverty, the context of lack of opportunity contributes to that. We are not saying that racism is the only problem. So again, some people want to walk away thinking we’re saying that. There are many, many challenges to improving outcomes in all our communities. We think that the legacy of racism is a factor to be
considered. Most of what happens in our society today to solve social problems does not include that factor. So we are bringing that factor to the array of dynamics to be considered.

ROBERT WOODSON: My point was that evil will have to wear a white face before they start to talk about it. Geraldo Rivera did a two-hour special on the rape and exploitation of black men in the prisons. They were being raped by black men, and no one discussed it because evil has to wear a white face before it attracts any attention. And I’m saying, by concentrating on white racism at the exclusion of these other kinds of issues in these troubled neighborhoods where I spend a lot of time, it provides an exemption from personal responsibility on a lot of people in those neighborhoods, because they are told by people like you that their problem is race, and therefore they have no responsibility for themselves.

GAIL CHRISTOPHER: Well, and Sterling, and I’ll just quickly say, that is not what I say, and that is certainly not what we say.

STERLING SPEIRN: I think it was Abraham Maslow that said if you have a hammer then every problem is a nail. We get stereotyped. ‘Oh, you are talking about race. You must believe what Bob Woodson is saying.’ That is not what we believe. There are many issues we work on. Our American Healing project is one project at the foundation. So it does put another tool into our toolkit, but we don’t go out there with one tool.

And how people will solve all the key problems you raised, Bob, they had nothing to do with our project. We wouldn’t claim this project will solve all those problems and there is certainly not one cause of any of these problems. But in a racialized world, you need to be able to talk about it and have courageous conversations. There also need to be courageous conversations about other kinds of issues, and we would absolutely support and encourage that. But we are one foundation. There are a lot of other foundations working on racial issues and other issues of inequity. We want to just bring this tool into our toolkit.

GAIL CHRISTOPHER: That is very important to understand. We have been working on food issues and we’ve been working on criminal justice issues to a lesser degree. But we’re not saying that the only problem is racism. Let me be clear, we’re not just saying it is white racism. If you frame this construct the way that it was framed for our culture, we all became part of it. It isn’t just one dimensional. We all experience it and are part of it. Do we need to honor that and to understand it and ask ourselves, is that at play? My answer to that is yes. Yours may be no. But again, that is the goodness about our country. We all get to think and believe what we believe.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Yes, Mr. Christie, I know that you’ve got to get in here because you’re ducking out --

RON CHRISTIE: I’m on a 2:00 train.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: He’s in the for-profit sector, so he has to get back to New York City to deal with a client. He’s not of the leisure class like us nonprofit and foundation types. [LAUGHTER]

RON CHRISTIE: Let me just say this, and I’ll give my two-second answer to Bob’s (Woodson) question, because I think it is a very important one. What I was trying to say in my speech is that we need to hold all individuals accountable for their actions. If you look, and Professor Thernstrom has written about this, if you look at the most recent NAPE scores, if you look at African American achievement levels for math and reading, they are abysmal. And it’s not just in urban communities. It is in communities around the country.
I strongly believe that the sole civil rights issue in the 21st century is the power of an education. If our kids don’t receive the value of education, it’s only going to perpetuate a cycle that has continued for 40 some-odd years. I would also contend that the programs of the Great Society have failed us, rather than brought us together to more racial equality. We need to finally stand up and say, ‘What has gone on for the last 40 to 50 years has not worked.’ How do we know it hasn’t worked? Because we’re testing and we’re measuring for success, and these students aren’t equipped with the skills that they need to compete in the world. That is a paradigm and a shift that has to be broken.

If there are any of you who have a question that you want to email me, it’s CEO@christiestrategies.com. I apologize for having to duck out, but yes, the for-profit sector that keeps me and my wife gainfully housed is calling me to the train station. Thank you all very much. [APPLAUSE]

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Thank you very much Ron. More questions? Yes, please, right in the back.

CHRISTINE REEVES: Hi, my name is Christine Reeves, and my organization, the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy just published a report on foundation investment in health advocacy. One of our findings is that the average black family has only an eighth the net worth or assets of the average white family. That difference is not explained by other factors like education, earning rates, or savings rates, but rather a lack of opportunity over generations, many of which through laws of our country.

As we are listening to the discussion today, a lot of very good thought provoking and common sense information has been shared. A lot of it has been very normative, though. Talking about how we should just stress the diversity of thought over ethnicity, the importance of what we should value in the American Dream, and how we should focus on what we have in common and on personal responsibility. If that statistic I shared was not true, I can see how we could do all those things. But since it is true, how can we reconcile the normative with the facts that we’re given over generations?

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Remaining panelists? Anyone have anything to say?

GAIL CHRISTOPHER: I appreciate what you said and I’ll just use it to wax a little bit on the issue of personal responsibility. One of the dynamics of our education system is that we tend to live in silos. So the sociologists don’t talk to the psychologists, and the psychologists don’t talk to the molecular biologists. We kind of have these different ways of viewing the world, and we say, ‘All right, you are responsible. Get your life together. It’s your problem. That’s your responsibility.’ We are learning more about human motivation and the impacts of stress and exposure to adverse experiences. The ACE study that looked at middle-class whites and the adverse impact of childhood experiences in their lives, and almost to the point where they could predict chronic disease based on those experiences. Then they started to peel back and we’re starting to learn more about what happens when you have certain experiences in life. How does it affect your motivation and how does it affect your drive? And once you understand those things, how do you mitigate those effects and how do you change behaviors?

So it is complicated to understand all the dynamics that lead to what I call, “the ability to respond.” We have to get better at putting the conditions in place that motivate. I’m a single mom of two very successful children and I told them they didn’t have the luxury of excuses. We just had to do what was necessary in order to succeed against the odds. And I’m not suggesting that we don’t have to do that. But while we do that, while we mitigate the effects of the broader structure of our society, we’re learning more about what motivates human behavior. So I think the responsibility conversation needs to be more nuanced, and it needs to have more of an understanding of how life affects us.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Mr. Thernstrom, please.
GAIL CHRISTOPHER: That may be too soft.

STEPHAN THERNSTROM: I would comment briefly on this. That figure, I’m not sure what study you are referring to, but that figure sounds high to me. If it is true, I certainly am dubious of your suggestion, or perhaps I misunderstood, implication that whites are better off materially these days, because they all inherited wealth from their fathers and grandfathers, back to the old plantation in the 1850s. That is certainly very dubious. A high proportion of our population is made up of immigrants, the children of immigrants, the grandchildren of immigrants. Many of whom have not been here forever letting the family wealth pile up.

You’re then comparing it with a population in which such a large proportion of households are single parent, female-headed, one earner, or very often, no-earner families. When 70 percent of black children are born out of wedlock, when a minority of black children grows up with a father in the household, the opportunities for wealth accumulation are definitely constrained. The other thing that might play into this, I’m not sure how carefully it’s been studied, but there could be with families that do have income that could be saved and invested, there could be cultural differences here in which on the average, black parents spend more on consumption goods. Other families put more away in savings. Jesus saves, Moses invests kind of point.

STERLIN SPEIRN: Certainly in more recent history, the FHA redlining regulations and laws post-World War II deprived a whole generation of the upward mobility of homeownership and asset development. You don’t have to reach back centuries, Professor Thernstrom, but you just have to reach back a generation to see the disaccumulation of wealth that was thrust upon people that couldn’t take advantage of things, such as the GI Bill afterwards and homeownership. That has been outlawed now, but it doesn’t erase a generation of disaccumulation that impacted those families.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Okay, this young lady is interested in asking a question, and we’ll have the microphone over here in two seconds.

NORMA LOPEZ: Hi, thank you for the opportunity. My name is Norma Flores Lopez, and I am the director of the Children in the Fields Campaign at the Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs. What we do is we advocate on behalf of farmworkers’ children, which are one of the most vulnerable and underserved populations. So I actually wrote down my comments. It’s directed more towards Dr. Thernstrom. My challenge today was to be able to hear your point of view and to ignore the color of your skin. You know, but I too failed. It’s hard to be able to ignore the fact that you are a white male, and the same way it is hard for you to be able to ignore the fact that I am a Latino woman. So it’s difficult for you to be able to understand what it is like for me today to be treated differently because of the color of my skin.

Just when I start to feel like I’m like any other American, somebody comes and reminds me that my color of skin is different. My citizenship has been questioned for no reason. I have been denied service at restaurants without any explanation. I have been asked and questioned if I can really afford what I want to buy because of the color of my skin. And it is hard to say that it’s not, because more than likely you probably haven’t had those experiences. So even using your example about the White House, the fact that we do have a black President, how many other Presidents had their citizenship questioned the way that this President has, to this day?

Racism and our laws have not been completely eliminated. People are just getting a lot smarter and creative about how they can be able to put it in. For example, look at the Arizona laws that are not really affecting you, but affecting other people that have a different color of skin than you. The child labor laws, for example, which is something that we work on. In this country, they allow for children, very young
children, as young as the age of 12, to be able to work in agriculture, one of the most dangerous industries, with very, very few protections. And they happen to affect a specific group of kids, Latino kids, not anybody else and it’s disproportionately affecting them negatively.

So then my question to you is, how can we be able to uncover these examples of systemic racist structures in our country if we continue to be in denial and to not really talk about it? If we look at the structure set after 9/11 and the conversation around immigration, it is difficult to be able to deny the importance of these types of conversations. I am looking to you on suggestions on how we could be able to fix these types of problems without having these types of conversations?

STEPHAN THERNSTROM: It is a bit of a barrier to a conversation to being told, ‘Well you’re a white male, so of course you don’t understand.’ That’s a bit of a problem. Your personal experiences of discrimination and treatment on the basis of the color of your skin, I don’t know what those experiences were. I certainly deplore them if you encountered people with racist attitudes who mistreated you. I mean, there are plenty of group prejudices in this country to go around, and the only careful study that has looked at Asian, Latino, black, and white racial stereotypes about each other has shown that whites have slightly fewer negative racial stereotypes about other groups than these groups have about each other.

So even if whites disappeared tomorrow. Latino, black, Asian conflict and negative stereotyping would still be here. Now, I don’t think you’ve cited what I would consider evidence of structurally imbedded racism. You say you’ve been questioned about your citizenship. Well, I don’t know the context, again, but I think it is really too simple to ignore the fact that there are roughly 12 million illegal immigrants in this country, and most of them are adults who are employed. There are many Americans who feel they’re taking jobs we could have had, and they would have had to pay us more to take them. They are concerned that some of these people are turning up and voting illegally at elections.

There are a range of concerns that I would think a fair-minded person would have to say that there is a real concern there. There certainly are circumstances where someone might legitimately wonder about whether you are legally present in the United States. Now, I know many Latino groups favor, essentially, open borders, amnesty for all, but that’s not a general American position. In the supposedly more advanced social democratic welfare states of Europe, you do not find a great tolerance for illegal workers either. It is a huge issue now, including in Sweden, which you referred to.

I wouldn’t be quick to say, ‘Oh, that’s all racist.’ I don’t think it is racist for Arizona to say that employers must employ someone whose legal presence here has been certified by this computerized search system that verifies social security numbers. I don’t think that it is a racist position to say that if you’re employed here, you should have a legal right to work here.

NORMA LOPEZ: The racist law in Arizona that I was referring to is not questioning whether they can work here or not. It is the fact that they get pulled over because of the color of their skin. That is the part that I’m talking about that is racist. You wouldn’t get pulled over, but when I was in Arizona, I had to have my boss drive, because I didn’t want to get pulled over and be questioned about my citizenship and have to carry around my birth certificate.

STEPHAN THERNSTROM: Wait a minute. You were pulled over because of the color of your skin? How do you know that?

NORMA LOPEZ: I wasn’t pulled over. I was trying to avoid to be pulled over, because I don’t want to be questioned about my citizenship. My parents were born here and I was born here in the US as well.
WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Well, we need to move on to other questions. We’re running short on time, and we’re running short on panelists. I, you know, if further, they’re going to disappear, and it’s going to be you and me pretty soon. I can’t quite explain this. Yes, this, right here. Yeah, that’s great.

INDRA KLEIN: Hi, Indra Klein with the Total Family Care Coalition in Ward Six. We actually work with the underserved, and there are different degrees of racism within the black community and the Hispanic community. I actually want to come to you from the voice of nonprofits that are working in the field. So much of the data, progress and best practices are siloed. How can we, as a community, resist from not sharing, so that we can really make more positive changes with regard to racism and also promoting whatever the issues that we serve?

GAIL CHRISTOPHER: We are really trying to promote more sharing, which is part of why we are convening over 200 grantees and why we want to use our social medium more proactively. It is important that we accelerate the exchange of knowledge, insights, tools and resources. In philanthropy, we have to get over this tendency that we have to compete with one another for funding. I think as the social challenges become more severe, we are becoming a little more effective in how we think about it and how we work together. As we actually diversify the field of philanthropy, I think that helps too.

There is much more of a collaborative spirit in the world of philanthropy. The food issue now has a convergence that involves many, many different foundations. We think the acceleration in the understanding of the food system challenge we face is a result, largely, of this effort to work together more creatively. So I think you’re right, and we’re trying to do that better and we will continue to try to do it better.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: This gentleman right here in the middle of the room. And I should add, since we’re running short of time, let’s try to keep the questions as brief as possible. I know there’s always a temptation when a foundation president is on the panel to state the case for your own nonprofit and bemoan the fact that it’s underfunded, but – [LAUGHTER]

STERLING SPEIRN: I have a lot of program officers here who could take these questions.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Oh, that’s good.

PHIL JOHNSON: Phil Johnson, CEO of G-Tech Energy Corporation. Fundamental to the problem here in this country is beginning to be not so much about race as it is about economics. Society and the country were built on the hierarchy of race, with the economic benefits going to the majority.

GAIL CHRISTOPHER: Exactly.

PHIL JOHNSON: And that’s where we started out. The classic example of what we are talking about in terms of institutionalized racism built into a system of economics is the housing crisis that we see across the United States of America. It is a classic example of what we are discussing here.

If you look across the US to see where the disparities are in relationship to the whole economic crisis that nearly sunk this nation, it was around housing. I have been a real estate developer for 30 years, and I saw the housing crisis coming years ago with the bubble, as we called it. When we looked out at the housing policies, the mortgage products, and the whole process of how housing was being sold in America from the beginning of the 2000s onward, we saw a distinct pattern. If you go back and look at where discrimination started in relationship to the Federal Housing Administration, coming out of World War II, it was in those areas where people were redlined. Now if we go back and look at 2009, ’10 and ’11, and
look at the places where all the foreclosures are occurring, they’re mostly in the places where the
redlining occurred 25, 30 years ago.

My last point is that economics is driving the problem of race in this country. We have got most people in
America, white, black, whoever they are, who don’t have homes, who have been foreclosed on, who don’t
have jobs, who are being discriminated against, are now in this little barrel fighting each other. All the
ethnic and other kinds of considerations that we are about as a country are now coming home to all of us
because there is a scramble among the majority of people for a small amount of the pie. And that is
exacerbating what we are about as a nation. It is economics at its root. A hierarchy of race was created to
benefit the few. That same system now has 3 or 4 million people in America with all the money, and
everybody else scrambling. And the scrambling that’s going on in our society has brought out the worst in
all of us, in relationship to what we see in the society today.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Thank you. Responses?

GAIL CHRISTOPHER: You said it eloquently, and there are many researchers who have tried to peel
back the racial dynamics of the mortgage crisis. But when you hear the popular discourse about the
mortgage crisis, you don't hear that history. So every system in our country, the criminal justice system,
the mortgage system, the education system, the medical system, every system has a unique, nuanced
history that also brings the racial dynamics of that history. Without an awareness of that, we don’t have a
complete picture of where we are today. We don’t have really comprehensive solutions to where we are
today. But again, that story doesn’t get told. Those unique stories don’t get told because we just sort of
brush them under the rug.

The story of child labor in this country – all of these stories have with them a nuanced history that is a
reflection of the dominant mythology that guided our country. You’re absolutely right, economics, it’s all
intertwined. I don’t talk about it as racism as much as I talk about the racialization of our country in terms
of these dynamics. But we all should know, at least, the unique histories of the systems that we are
dealing with if we’re going to understand how to improve them and how to make them more effective.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Dr. Thernstrom, that strikes me as being a good example, the one that was just
given, of what you were looking for earlier. Namely, a specific manifestation of --

STEPHAN THERNSTROM: Yes, while it is specific, I don’t think it works at all. First of all, it seems to
me very strange to say that the areas which have foreclosures now were basically the areas that were
redlined back when the Federal Housing Authority began. That seems absurd, because the areas that were
redlined in the 30s and 40s were mainly in the large cities, not in the suburbs. The foreclosures today are
overwhelmingly concentrated, more than half, I believe, are in California, Florida, or Nevada. Large parts
of Florida and Nevada, and parts of California that are now affected were farmland at the time the Federal
Housing Authority was doing its redlining.

Second, it seems to me there is a fundamental contradiction in the arguments that I hear about this. For a
long time, we heard that black people who wanted to buy a home didn’t get a fair opportunity to borrow
money because they were discriminated against. Although, the careful studies show they discriminate on
the basis of poor credit histories. But leave that aside. Then suddenly there is a totally reverse argument
applying to our most recent housing bubble and bust period, where those racists lent money to blacks and
Hispanics that they knew couldn’t afford the homes. So they’re throwing money at them and they’re
going to somehow make money that way? It’s a little hard to put together, those two analyses.

GAIL CHRISTOPHER: The data isn’t so much exclusively geographically based as to the
disproportionate distribution of exploitive loans, as it is racially based in the sense that when you look at
the work of John Paul and others, it is not necessarily that it was in the same neighborhoods, as there is a
definite racial disproportion in terms of who received the most expensive loans. But again, it doesn’t get
us to where we need to get if we assume that one is right and one is wrong. There is probably some truth
somewhere in the middle of that conversation.

Our job, if we are going to move us beyond traditional divides, is to have those explorations and those
conversations, and to not assume that they are not warranted just because they mention race. In fact, there
is some definite, well-documented, disproportionate distribution of those risky loans. Blame is usually
placed on the people who took out the loans and there is some responsibility to be borne there. However,
it is a system which is well documented to have been fueled by our beliefs in terms of the racial beliefs.
So to be continued, you know, but certainly to open up the opportunity for a meaningful conversation.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Sterling, did you want to have any last thoughts?

STERLING SPEIRN: No, I’m guessing there are a lot more questions and thoughts on the minds of the
people in this room or the people watching this on the World Wide Web. Again, I think it is important
that these kinds of conversations in small and large venues continue to happen. And frankly, as we’ve
said, there are good ways to solve community problems, and there are less effective ways. We are excited
about the people in the America Healing Project that are taking on every kind of issue, from Boys and
Girls Club to 4H clubs, to communities working across racial lines to solve their communities’ problems
around education and health, principally, and these in other areas. So we want to thank Bill (Schambra)
and the Bradley Center at the Hudson Institute for convening us. I would hope this would stimulate a lot
more dialogue rather than any of us think we have given definitive answers to any of these issues.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: And thank you all for being here today. [APPLAUSE]

[END]