

White Americans owe a huge debt to blacks

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Despite decades of civil rights legislation, African Americans remain far worse off than whites

I spent the last day of Barack Obama's first election campaign in a noisy Santa Monica campaign office, ringing voters in swing states to get out the vote. I was one of thousands of volunteers, and, while waiting for the call sheets for Virginia, I asked the elderly white man opposite if he did this often.

He'd never come before. Why today? I asked. He paused. He'd been at Harvard in the summer of Mississippi Burning in 1964, he said, when civil rights volunteers tried to register the state's dispossessed blacks to vote. Mississippi whites had reacted with fury and violence.

Volunteer cars containing whites and blacks would be stopped at night on remote roads by menacing Mississippi policemen. I was always expecting to be shot, he said. That summer three civil rights workers were killed by the Ku Klux Klan in collusion with the police, and three blacks were murdered for supporting the campaign.

He had gone there hoping to show blacks that not all whites were like the KKK. But scarred by his experience, he avoided politics for more than 40 years. His eyes filled with tears. He had volunteered today because, if Obama won, he could let go of a lifetime's guilt at being white.

If only the problem of race in America had been so easily solved. Black America is in uproar over the deaths of three black men, killed by white policemen in contentious circumstances, with not a single officer being charged. Thousands of people marched in protest in cities this weekend. They want justice and equality.

Much of white America eyes them unsympathetically. What's wrong with these people? They complain about slavery, or discrimination, but that's all so long ago. They bring problems on themselves. Why were the victims selling unlicensed cigarettes, or shoplifting cigarillos? Individuals are responsible for their own destinies. Why don't black men get proper jobs, pay their mortgages, marry the mothers of their children, live the American dream?

The vast majority of Americans have no idea how comprehensively handicapped African Americans have been by the policies of the last four hundred years. Slavery is not just an unfortunate historical incident. It is the foundation stone of white America's prosperity.

Three quarters of emigrants to the New World from 1780 to 1820 were slaves, though so many died that they were only a third of the population by 1825. In 1860 the total market value of slaves, at \$3 billion, was greater than the railroads and all productive industry combined. It was free black labour, in fields, in houses and as craftsmen, that made white society rich. The families they tried to create were destroyed by owners selling on wives or husbands or children.

Once slavery was outlawed, discrimination kept blacks poor. The south banned them from white schools, shops, and most professional jobs. In the north, segregated schools and housing condemned them to the worst schools, jobs and neighbourhoods.

The government backed discrimination. Roosevelt's New Deal excluded agriculture and domestic service, sectors which were largely black, from the minimum wage or social security. Postwar

policies created huge house-building programmes with cheap mortgages insured by the federal government. Blacks were excluded. Whites became homeowners in vast numbers, creating family wealth that has cascaded down.

Aspiring black home owners were forced to buy houses at high interest and on terms that meant that if they missed a single payment in 20 years the house reverted to the speculator. Thousands lost them in a moment of misfortune.

The game is still rigged against blacks as they struggle to create capital or security. Job applicants with black names get half as many interviews as whites with the same CVs. Blacks with master's degrees are less likely to be employed than whites with a bachelor's. Black areas were targeted for subprime loans — values there have plummeted.

Recession and recovery have exacerbated inequality. The average white household had eight times the wealth of a black one in 2010; now it is 13 times richer. Black wealth is down by a third. An average black family has just \$13,000 in housing, savings and pensions. They live a sliver away from penury.

It is no wonder that African Americans are angry. Deliberate injustice has helped to create real social problems, criminal subcultures, despair. These can't be solved by black willpower alone. White America must not evade its guilt. It should fund better jobs, schools and loans. It owes black America a debt that it refuses to recognise and doesn't want to repay.