

# Equal Justice Initiative

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/eji-challenge-to-alabama-prison-book-banning-sparks-national-conversation/>

## Policy Issue Resources

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02.29.12

Last week, more than 50 media outlets across the country raised critical questions about Alabama prison officials recent decision to ban prisoners from reading the Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Slavery by Another Name*, because it contains embarrassing truths about American history.

[Leonard Pittss latest column](#) for the *Miami Herald* profiled [EJIs lawsuit against Kilby Prison officials](#) who last year banned Douglas Blackmons historical account of how the South instituted a form of de facto slavery by mass arresting Black men on nonsense charges and selling them to plantations, turpentine farms, and other places of back-breaking labor from the 1880s until the 1940s.

The book *Slavery by Another Name* by award-winning journalist Douglas Blackmon documents how African Americans in Alabama and throughout the South were re-enslaved in the years following the Civil War, due in part to laws specifically written to facilitate the arbitrary arrest of African Americans. Unable to pay the resulting fines, in addition to the costs for their own arrests, they were sold as forced labor to mines, railroads, farms, and quarries. It won the Pulitzer Prize for general non-fiction in 2009.

EJIs Bryan Stevenson explains that prison officials banned the book last year because they felt it was too provocative, they didnt like the title, they didnt like the idea that the title conveyed. They didnt read the book, but they were concerned about it and thought that it would be too dangerous to have in the prisons.

Pitts wrote that the lawsuit speaks with an eloquence to our complicated relationship with African-American history here in this 86th observance of what was once called Negro History Week.

Unlike countries like South Africa and Rwanda that undertook truth and reconciliation processes to recover from severe, widescale human rights violations, explained Mr. Stevenson, America struggles with denialism a refusal to face its grim past of racial crimes and human rights violations.

News outlets agreed, printing the nationally syndicated column with headlines such as Book Is Too Embarrassing for Ala. Prison and Banned Book Exposes Embarrassing Segregation Denialism.'

From the Salem, Oregon *Statesman Journal*, which observed, America never reconciled its racial history and Tacoma, Washingtons *News Tribune*, We cant come to terms with our sordid past if were in denial about it, to the *Omaha World-Herald*, Dont try to ignore history of Jim Crow horrors and *The Hutchinson News* (Kansas), Learn the truth and share it, to *The Tennessean*, Those embarrassed by our history try to suppress it and South Carolinas *Beaufort Gazette*, Facing truth of past only way to build better future, media across the country condemned Alabamas attempt to suppress its shameful history.

The era of racial violence, lynching, and convict leasing in the South following Reconstruction is a deeply disturbing part of our countrys racial history that is important and must be understood if we are to make progress overcoming the legacy of slavery and racial subordination, said Director Bryan Stevenson, who filed the civil rights suit. We cant cope with the racial history of this country by banning books or preventing people from reading about it even incarcerated people, who retain basic rights and protections that were violated in this case.

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Leonard Pitts: Black History and the Art of Denial

CNN In America

World.edu Blog

Montgomery Advertiser Op-Ed

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