

The Reckoning

What's in it for me? A look at America's trauma.

In 2016, Donald Trump's stunning electoral victory took many by surprise – yet, the political and social upheaval of the following four years was even more shocking. Unfortunately, the tumultuous times are far from over. So, how did we get here, and – more importantly – where are we going? These blinks offer critical insight into the forces shaping contemporary America. This sharp analysis of US society ties together historical traumas, current events, and Trump family lore to present a thorough outline of the country's current struggles. Moreover, it gestures toward some ways we may improve our uncertain future. And just a quick disclaimer – blinks 1, 2, and 4 contain graphic descriptions of violence. In these blinks, you'll learn

who was excluded from the GI Bill; what happened to “Negro Wall Street”; and why we should have prosecuted Nixon.

Racism structured American society well after the Civil War concluded.

Luther and Mary Holbert are tied to a tree outside Doddsville, Mississippi. Around them is an angry mob of more than 600 men, women, and children. The crowd is whipped into a frenzy – over the next few hours they cheer as the couple are brutally tortured and eventually burned alive. This brutal scene isn't some artifact of antebellum life – it took place in 1904, decades after the end of the Civil War. And it wasn't an isolated incident. Between 1865 and 1950 more than 6000 Black people were killed by white lynch mobs. Such stories and statistics are horrific, yet, they're important to recall. They demonstrate the awful stain that racism and white supremacy have left in the United States – a stain that still remains today. The key message here is: Racism structured American society well after the Civil War concluded. When the Civil War finally ended in 1865, America was at a crossroads. Not only did the country have to rebuild physically, but it also had to reconfigure its social and economic structures. For more than two centuries, the nation built its wealth on the back of a cruel racial caste system. Now, more than four million formerly enslaved people had to be integrated into society. During this period, called Reconstruction, Northern politicians pushed through the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. In theory, these constitutional orders eliminated slavery and guaranteed freed people equal citizenship and the right to vote. But, in practice, these laws fell short. Many states, especially in the south, found ways to re-entrench white supremacy. Legislatures passed poll taxes and literacy tests to keep Black communities from voting. They also passed new, strict laws called Black Codes. These codes made vague acts like “loitering” criminal offenses. With these laws, many freed Black people were swept up by local police and punished with forced labor – effectively recreating slavery as a legal institution. By the time Reconstruction ended in 1867, much of the optimism and opportunity felt after the war had faded. Then, in 1896, the Supreme Court issued a decision in the case *Plessy v. Ferguson*. This ruling established the “separate but equal” doctrine which laid the legal groundwork for segregated institutions in the coming decades. So, even after the Civil War, Black Americans were subject to discriminatory and oppressive structures which kept them

from experiencing their full rights as citizens.

Disgraced American leaders often escape any form of accountability.

What is the legacy of confederate general Robert E. Lee? Well, if you believe the many monuments built in his honor, Lee was a masterful military tactician who heroically served the southern states during the American Civil War. But, actual history tells a different story. The real Lee was a slaveholding traitor who marshaled his battlefield prowess to fight for the right to enslave and torture other human beings. His actions were vile and treacherous, and they contributed to the deaths of nearly one million Americans. Yet, even today, this real history is obscured. His monuments still stand, Washington and Lee University still bears his name, and in 1975, Congress voted to posthumously restore his citizenship. In the end, Lee paid little for his crimes. The key message here is: Disgraced American leaders often escape any form of accountability. A central and ongoing flaw of the United States is the country's inability or unwillingness to engage with the darker aspects of its past. On one level, this is to be expected. It makes sense for a society to venerate the positive aspects of its leaders and its history while sidelining the less-than-appealing details. But, consistently appealing to revisionist histories allows a society to continue making the same mistakes. Unfortunately, the United States seems dedicated to this pattern. For instance, Thomas Jefferson is often celebrated for his accomplishments - he authored the Declaration of Independence and served as America's third president. Yet, we take less time to scrutinize his faults - he enslaved people and even had sexual relations with at least one enslaved woman, Sally Hemmings. Even modern presidents have escaped accountability. Back in 1973, President Nixon resigned in the face of overwhelming evidence that he had masterminded the Watergate break-in. Rather than make the disgraced politician face trial for his action, the new president Gerald Ford pardoned him. According to historian Douglas Brinkley, this set a dangerous precedent that presidents are above the rule of law. More recently, President Obama failed to investigate the outgoing Bush administration for its unlawful torture program. Again, this upheld the precedent that some people should not be held responsible for their actions. If we continue letting our leaders evade any accountability, they'll continue pushing the envelope - atrocities will keep happening and justice will never truly be served.

Donald Trump's presidency was an unmitigated disaster for the country.

On January 20, 2017, Donald Trump stood on the steps of the Capitol to be sworn in as the 45th president of the United States. It was a grey and overcast day and a sparse crowd of supporters and curious onlookers watched the ceremony under a light drizzle. Yet, just mere hours later, Trump was telling a different story. According to the new president, the event was blanketed in auspicious sunshine and the crowd in attendance was the largest ever recorded. Of course, these were lies - petty and insignificant ones, but lies nonetheless. Unfortunately, these forecasted worse offenses to come. Soon, President Trump, along with a fully complicit Republican party, would drag the country through four years of lies, bullying, and policy failures. The key message here is: Donald

Trump's presidency was an unmitigated disaster for the country. From the very start, the Trump administration was a disaster. The President paired a gross ignorance on policy matters with a particular verve for divisive and hateful rhetoric. Once in office, Trump continued scapegoating immigrants and minorities for the nation's problems and dismissing any critical press as "fake news." Meanwhile, the Republican party used Trump's media circus as a distraction to push through a hard right-wing agenda. While in office, Trump presided over many seriously grievous policy changes. In early 2017, he issued a discriminatory executive order banning travel from numerous Muslim-majority countries. Then, later that same year, he helped the Republican congress pass a massive, unnecessary tax cut for America's wealthiest citizens and corporations. Finally, in 2018, he began the so-called "zero-tolerance policy," which separated immigrant children from their parents and placed them in dismal holding camps. During this time, Trump also undermined the functioning of the federal government by appointing many political allies to key positions regardless of their qualifications. For instance, he picked former Texas Governor Rick Perry to run the Department of Energy despite the fact Perry had previously campaigned on ending the department. For the Department of Education, he chose Betsy DeVos, a wealthy heiress seemingly committed to ending secular public education throughout the country. Still, the worst blunders were yet to come. In March 2020, the world stared down the oncoming COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than adhering to the Obama administration's carefully crafted pandemic playbook, Trump politicized the disaster - he downplayed the threat of the virus, second-guessed recommendations from the CDC, and ultimately let the disease take root, killing hundreds of thousands of Americans in the process.

The effects of past racial violence and discrimination are still felt today.

Back when the United States was founded, the country already had a broad degree of diversity. Yes, there were colonists from Europe's leading empires, but there were others, too. The continent was also home to hundreds of native communities and thousands of Black people unwillingly brought from Africa. Yet, in 1770, the young government passed the Naturalization Act. This discriminatory law restricted immigration and naturalization to "free white persons." The law stood until 1965 when the Immigration and Nationality Act removed restrictions on race, religion, and nationality. So, for nearly two centuries, the US was explicitly a country for white people only. Unfortunately, this law is just one example of the myriad of ways this country has excluded and oppressed whole communities on the basis of race. The key message here is: The effects of past racial violence and discrimination are still felt today. Despite being founded on the stated principle that all men are created equal, the United States has consistently fallen short of this ideal. In particular, its social structures and legal institutions have enforced a strict racial hierarchy. Under this system, those deemed "white" are given access to society's bounty and protection, while those deemed "other," including Black and Native American people, are excluded or forced to abandon their cultures. When Black communities have managed to succeed within this asymmetrical system, their achievement has been treated as a threat. For instance, Tulsa, Oklahoma once hosted a thriving Black community known as "Negro Wall Street." Yet, in 1921, a white mob stormed the neighborhood to lynch a Black teenager. The violence spilled out of control and the crowd, backed by National Guardsmen and police, burned the entire 35-block community to the ground. The state also buttressed racial divisions with its economic policies. After World War II, the GI Bill offered

returning vets stable jobs, low-interest mortgages, and free college education. But, Black vets were denied these same perks. So, while white communities accumulated wealth and ascended to the middle class, many Black families were left to struggle with poverty and housing insecurity. What is the long-term outcome of such disparities? Well, sociologist Joy DeGruy offers the phrase “post-traumatic slave syndrome.” This term describes the way past hardship and trauma are passed down across generations. Communities affected by atrocities and oppression still feel their effects long after the actual events have receded into history. So, America still has a long way to go in order to atone for its ugly past.

Decisive action is needed to keep the country on the right track.

America has encountered crossroads in the past – and unfortunately, it hasn’t always taken the right turn. During the Reconstruction era, the country could have seriously reformed its social and political systems. They could have treated the Confederate leaders like the traitors they were and made a real effort to distribute land and other resources to formerly enslaved people. But, we didn’t. Similarly, after World War II, we could have rapidly overturned Jim Crow laws and extended the benefits of the GI Bill to every American, regardless of race. But, once again, we didn’t. Now, the country is once again at a turning point. The new Biden administration has the chance to roll back Trump’s worst offenses and hold the former President accountable for his crimes. The key message here is: Decisive action is needed to keep the country on the right track. When Joe Biden delivered his inaugural address on January 20, 2021, America was a country in crisis. The nation was already reeling from Trump’s turbulent four years in power, but in the weeks after the election, things got even more chaotic. Once again, Trump and the complicit Republican party tested the durability of America’s democracy – yet only time will tell if they’ll pay any price for it. All serious observers agree that Biden handily won the presidency. Even Trump’s own Department of Homeland Security attested that the election was the most secure in American history. Yet, Trump denied the results and opted for a “Big Lie,” claiming the contest was rife with voter fraud. Worse still, Republican leaders like Mitch McConnell and Ted Cruz stood by and let this lie go unchallenged. Finally, Trump’s baseless fear-mongering reached a boiling point. On January 6, thousands of Trump supporters stormed the nation’s Capitol building. Decked out in Trump memorabilia and a smattering of Confederate symbols, the crowd attempted to disrupt congress and stall the democratic process. In the aftermath, Trump was impeached for his part in the riot, but feckless Republicans declined to convict. Now, the nation must decide how to move forward. Trump remains extremely popular – polls show that 53 percent of Republicans view him more favorably than Abraham Lincoln. To protect the nation, Democratic leaders must buttress our democratic institutions – they must pass stronger voting rights laws and prosecute the right-wing extremists behind the January 6 riot. If they fail, the nation could once again take the darker path.

The racist policies of the past continue to hurt Black communities in the present.

Twenty percent – that’s how many Americans support the idea of reparations. Reparations is a controversial policy that could come in many forms. But, at its most basic, a reparations program would compel the state to pay the descendants of enslaved people, or Black people in general, a fixed amount to atone for historical injustices. So, why are reparations so unpopular? Well, there’s a pervasive opinion that slavery and racial discrimination are problems of the past. That is, people think these issues no longer shape the contours and everyday functioning of American society. Yet, this couldn’t be further from the truth. Racism is still alive and well. Moreover, the impacts of past racist policies are still with us today in a million small and subtle ways. The key message here is: The racist policies of the past continue to hurt Black communities in the present. It’s difficult to quantify all the ways racist prejudices and policies have shaped American society. But, one way to start is by looking at the wealth disparity between Black and white communities. A 2021 report from the Federal Reserve shows that, on average, the net worth of white families is 700 times higher than the net worth of Black families. This gap is the result of centuries of systemic racism in everything from education to housing policy. The criminal justice system is one area where racism is still very obvious. Consider the uneven impacts of the War on Drugs. Since its inception in the 70s, the campaign against narcotics has disproportionately punished Black communities. Data shows that from 1980 to 2007, Black people were approximately five times more likely to be arrested for drug possession than white people, despite the fact both communities have similar usage rates. Racism is even built into the fabric of our cities. Beginning in the 1950s, municipalities across America from New York to Detroit tore down whole Black neighborhoods to build urban highway systems. Today, Black families are more likely to live alongside freeways and other high-traffic corridors. As a result, these communities suffer higher rates of respiratory diseases and other afflictions caused by air pollution. These are just two examples of the countless ways racism still penetrates many aspects of American life. Oftentimes, white people are blind to how these systems may stifle the success of their Black compatriots. But, if we want to truly heal the rifts emerging within our society, we must confront these difficult problems and discover ways to rectify their ongoing impacts.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: The United States is a country founded on lofty ideals, yet, our history reveals that we often fall short of attaining them. Centuries of systematic racism and racist violence still shape contemporary life in America. The Trump presidency and the chaotic 2020 election show that these forces remain powerful players in American politics. To avoid a darker future, political leaders and everyday people must resolve to face these ugly truths and hold bad actors accountable.