

Tenacity of Prejudice
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An American research group did an interesting experiment. They produced a resume that clicked off all the requirements of many national companies and sent it to them, changing only the name of the applicant. The names were Greg, Lucy, and two names identifiable as African-American men and women.

They found that at least 50% of companies never opened the African-American applicants and a number of them also rejected Lucy! Prejudice against Blacks and women still exist.

It was good to know that most of our top corporations, the "big boys," performed better. The point is, however, that prejudice still is alive in our midst. However, compared with our past, I see great progress. We are a much better and fairer country today, by and large, than we ever were before.

Our history can show us the trajectory of improvement. Despite systemic racism, Black lives today are greatly improved. An educated Black person may be a Princeton professor or head the Ford Foundation, may be TV actors who proliferate in commercials as mates in mixed-race marriages.

They can live in leafy elite neighborhoods if they are professionals, famous, or monied, and even talented poor children can go to private schools and Ivy League Universities. (My favorite astrophysicist, Neil DeGrasse Tyson, was one of those black children who was mentored and educated and he has returned the favor by educating us all about space and astronomy issues.)

However, even elite Blacks still get stopped more often than white drivers by the police and get suspicious looks in some department stores. These are holdovers from the past.

Our first president, George Washington, set the tone of what America should be when he visited the first Jewish synagogue in Newport and told them that they were welcome to this country and had shown themselves to be very good citizens.

Washington also freed his slaves in his will. But not all Americans had his character, not even his best friends and colleagues. Abigail Adams, wife of future president John Adams, wrote to her husband as the Constitution was being created: "Remember the ladies." He and his fellow founders did not remember the ladies. That took more than another century to even give women the vote.

Almost every group of immigrants, if they came in large numbers, faced bigotry. The Irish were told: "No Irish need apply" for jobs other than railway labor and housemaids. It took decades before that ended.

Italians were called "Wops" (without papers) and a criminal cartel of Italians, the Mafia, intimidated and protected Italians and then extorted protection money from them. Qualified Italians running for office, until recently, faced Mafia questions from reluctant voters. Now being Italian and Catholic is an advantage, not an impediment.

Jewish immigration was in waves. The first were fleeing the Spanish Inquisition, and were welcomed to New Amsterdam (now New York), despite the prejudice of their governor, with orders from the home country. Holland rewarded Jewish pirates for capturing the Spanish Armada and towing all the gold and silver to Amsterdam. Religions freedom was their reward.

The flood of Jewish immigrants fleeing the Russian Empire were initially not welcomed. Out of this penniless and uneducated rabble, thanks to the American school system and earlier-arrived German Jewish benefactors, Jews rose to great heights in American society in just one generation.

Jews who managed to escape Germany before war broke out enriched Hollywood movies, concert halls, and academe. Consider what we owe Albert Einstein.

Some immigrants came from countries with terrible cultural experiences (class and caste systems) and first-generation arrivals often replicated what they knew from their homelands. However, their children usually adopt the American model of good citizenship.

When the mid-century women's liberation movement began, women moved beyond teacher, secretary, or nurse into the full range of corporate and other jobs. Some were unqualified, which gave misogynists ammunition. Today, women are now mayors, governors, and even our Vice President. Someday a woman may actually become president.

We Americans are doing better. We are probing our unconscious biases and identifying our historic ones. Acknowledging the tenacity of prejudice is a good start.

684 words

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