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## Point of View: Is Racism Dead? Only If We Act As If It Were, and Expect the Same From Others

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# *Is Racism Dead?*

*Only If We Act As If It Were, and Expect the Same From Others*

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By JOSEPH ATKINS

The two days, Jan. 19 and 20, 2009, were among the most memorable in my life.

On the morning of Jan. 19 I was the keynote speaker at the Martin Luther King Jr. Day breakfast in Waterville; the next morning I was on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., to share in the historic inauguration of America's first African-American president.

The title of my talk was "Inaugurating a New Era: If Racism Is Dead, Let's Bury It," and it addressed how Americans might celebrate the progress our nation has made relative to civil rights while accepting the challenges that lie ahead.

As a founder of the program Campus Conversations on Race at Colby, I'm privileged to work with many socially conscious students. This shapes my perspectives and keeps me future oriented.

One of Dr. King's popular quotes is, "If you can't fly, run. If you can't run, walk. If you can't walk, crawl. But by all means, keep moving." When I think about racism and its legacy in America, I do so in a way that honors history and also continues to move us forward. I remain cognizant that Rosa Parks's simple act of courage and defiance in refusing to give up her bus seat began what would be the end of institutionalized racism in the South. As has been said, Parks moved the nation by sitting. Much can be accomplished by even the simplest of gestures.

Racism was a fact of life for every American in my lifetime. It stood in the doorways of schools and universities and refused to admit students of color regardless of their talent and motivation. Rac-

ism made it possible in 1965 for the police in Selma, Alabama, to viciously assault a group of peaceful protestors on their way to Montgomery. These are events that many of my generation will never forget. But we must not let memories hold us hostage to the past.

Have we finally entered a post-racial period of the type Dr. King dared dream about, where "my four children will one

The reasons I'm willing to consider racism a thing of the past have to do with perspective and empowerment. What happens next is up to the new multiracial majority that I sense is taking hold in America. A hundred or so representatives of that post-racial majority were at the MLK Jr. breakfast and nearly two million were on the mall in Washington with me a day later. This majority is multiracial

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day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character?" In terms of many, if not most, Americans today, I think we have.

We have gone from a time when racism—and by that I mean white supremacist ideology—ruled the land to a time where most Americans are ready to embrace justice and equality. As I see it, the protests of Dr. King's era lowered the cost of dissent. At one time the cost was too high for most people to object to the status quo. But we have moved forward, and the status quo has changed. So whether or not racism is dead, I'm proposing we commence burying it.

not because of the lineage of individual members but because of its fundamental commitment to equal rights as a way of life. It's up to us to decide what happens next. It is fortunate that history does not require unanimous consent.

When talking to students I often say the battle against racism and oppression is like weeding a garden. No matter how well it is done, it will always be a work in progress. It is not possible to weed a garden so well that you can say, "I'll never have to do that again." The very nature of opposing prejudice, in any of its forms, requires the work to be ongoing. On the eve of this historic inauguration, I acknowledged it is time to pass the torch to a new



The scene from Joseph Atkins' vantage point on the National Mall during the inauguration of President Barack Obama. Atkins reports feeling an "uncompromising spirit" of community as thousands gathered for the historic event, a sense of community that the country hasn't felt before.

generation and let them move us forward, beyond racism, to implementing equality.

If racism was, but shall be no more, what shall we do with its remains? I think the new generation is empowered to say, "then please help us bury its stinking corpse." You can still smell it in housing discrimination, in unemployment, in health care, and in our legal system. Isn't it time to commence the funeral and relegate white supremacy to the same level of acceptance and credibility as the belief that Earth is flat? Some perspectives never die; progress just passes them by.

The youth of today have a different mission than we did, because they are citizens of a world many of us never thought

we'd live to see. I would prefer that my grandchildren have the opportunity to get to know the grandchildren of those Selma policemen from 1965 as individuals rather than feel animosity towards them. This was the uncompromising spirit that resonated on the Mall at the inauguration. In my line of sight thousands of people of all ages and backgrounds cried and rejoiced together in the realization of Dr. King's dream. I saw it in the faces of a church group that had come by bus from Atlanta and heard it in the shouts of five college students from Los Angeles on the roadtrip of a lifetime and in the voice of a recent college graduate who became a newfound friend that day. We all felt

compelled to be at Barack Obama's inauguration, but what we found when we got there was a sense of community America has missed all these years.

The recipe for dismantling racism is simple; whether you really believe it is dead or not, act as though it were. Do so in everything you say and everything you do. And expect the same of everyone else.

*A former computer programmer, Joseph Atkins started college full time at the age of 40, earning a community college degree, a bachelor's from Vassar, and a Ph.D. in brain and cognitive science from the University of Rochester. He is assistant professor of psychology and coordinator of multicultural programs at Colby.*