

The Common Good

# Structural racism hides in plain sight

One summer day in 1966 George Harris, a Black former classmate from the Atlanta University School of Social Work, and I were driving an old school bus full of campers — Black and white, poor and middle class, girls and boys — from South Side Settlement in Columbus, Ohio, to Triple-S Camp in southern Ohio. Driving slowly down a narrow gravel rural road, George jammed on the brakes, leapt from the driver's seat, ran up to the porch of a ramshackle house and asked the elderly couple sitting there, "How much do you want for that? I want to buy it."

The "that" was a crockery caricature of a grinning Black youth eating a very large slice of watermelon. The sale was made. George returned and placed the pottery in front of the bus — and drove over it, smashing the caricature into bits. This led to some interesting discussions with the campers on the bus.

I was involved in the civil rights movement during the previous several years, picketing to challenge segregated

lunch counters and testing housing discrimination with the Congress on Racial Equality in Columbus, and demonstrating, picketing, registering voters, testing public

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**BILL WHITAKER**  
LA GRANDE

accommodations in theoretically desegregated Atlanta as one of three white students in my MSW cohort at the Atlanta University School of Social Work. For the first time in my life I had close Black friends. But until George acted that day I was not really conscious of how racism often hid in plain sight and subtly influenced my perceptions of Black people.

I began to think about how I had been affected by my beloved grandmother's Aunt Jemima cookie jar, by stereotypes promoted usually without intention by family and friends, by the commonplace blackface red-suited jockey hitching posts and other negative racial memorabilia that were simply part of how things were. I wonder if you have had similar experiences?

Across the country and here in Union and Wallowa counties, people have been demonstrating against systemic racism following the brutal murder by police of George Floyd and so many other people of color. One act of protestors in many locations has been to destroy statues of Confederate leaders from the Civil War and also especially statues of Christopher Columbus. Such statues together with Confederate flags represent structural racism too often simply taken for granted by many whites.

Columbus is commonly credited with beginning the European colonization of the Americas. He is less commonly credited with the two founding crimes of the United States — genocide of the Indigenous peoples and enslavement of Africans — crimes impacting tens of millions of people and generating never-ending racism against both populations.

It should be no surprise that Oregon is one of the least diverse states in the nation. As educator Walidah Imarishais makes clear, Oregon has roots deep in racism. Oregon's Black exclusionary laws demonstrate how Oregon was founded as a racist white Utopia "where white folks could come and build the perfect white society." In 1844 Black people could live in the Oregon territory no more than three years. Black people who stayed longer could receive 39 lashes every six months until they left. Five years later Black people not already resident were prevented from entering or residing in the territory.

When Oregon became a state in 1855, the Oregon Constitution continued these exclusions and prohibited Black people from owning property or making contracts. These laws were repealed nearly 100 years ago, but the racist language remained in the state's constitution until removed by ballot initiative in 2002. Eighteen years ago, 30% voted to keep the racist language in the constitution.

Structural racism results in people of color and Indigenous people being poorer, sicker, less likely to be employed, less likely to be able to purchase homes or afford to rent apartments, having less savings to fall back on and having shorter life spans than their white counterparts. These workers are less likely to have health insurance and more likely to work in jobs defined as essential that are highly exposed to COVID-19 infections. Consequently, the pandemic has been especially devastating to these households.

It's time to address structural racism and the racial disparities it generates by creating a just Oregon that works for everyone.

### About the Author

Bill Whitaker lives in La Grande. He is professor emeritus of social welfare at Boise State University. He taught community organizing, social policy and planning for 40 years while serving on national social work education boards and state legislative task forces.



*"Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble."*

- Rep. John Lewis  
1940-2020

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## Letters

### Great American Outdoors Act is important for conservation and public access

My name is Chelsea Cassens, and I am an Artemis ambassador for Eastern Oregon. Artemis is a community of sportswomen from across the country coming together to build relationships between hunters and anglers, support each other in the field and on the water, and learn more about conservation issues impacting our public lands, waters and wildlife.

Advocating for conservation and public access is a deep-rooted part of who I am and how I was raised — and how I am raising my kids. After becoming a mother, I realized the importance of protecting wild spaces for future generations. The next generation will not enjoy the privilege of our irreplaceable lands, waters and wildlife without our explicit engagement in all facets of the sporting conservation life.

Oregon U.S. Rep. Greg Walden has a chance July 22 to cast a vote on a bill that will expand hiking, hunting, fishing, camping and many other outdoor recreation activities in Oregon. The Great American Outdoors Act can play a giant role in helping our state recover physically, emotionally and economically from the COVID-19 pandemic.

In recent months our parks, hiking and biking trails and other public lands have been crowded with people seeking exercise and relief from the stresses of the pandemic. This bill will make sure those recreation opportunities are expanded since it will permanently fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund. That popular program has provided Oregon with more than \$335.6 million to support such places as the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area, the Hart Mountain Antelope Range and the John Day Fossil Beds. As someone who loves to hunt, fish and explore these public lands, I'm particularly grateful the bill ensures these opportunities will be available for future generations.

This legislation also will help economic recovery by creating jobs and boosting outdoor recreation. Outdoor recreation generates \$16.4 billion annually in consumer spending and supports more than 172,000 jobs across the state.

The Great American Outdoors Act has broad bipartisan support and is the right thing to do for our state and our country. I urge Rep. Walden to burnish his conservation legacy by voting for this very important bill.

Chelsea R. Cassens  
Imbler

### Croghan response to Herrmann column a 'confusing stew'

I'm a retired professor, taught at Eastern Oregon University for more than 30 years, and am a conservative. As such, I was in a distinct minority at the workplace and received a lot of good-natured political hassling from colleagues. As you might imagine, most were of a distinctly more liberal persuasion than was I. But we treated each other with respect.

Stuart Croghan (Observer, July 14, 2020, letter to editor) says he knew Ralph Badgley, Paul Stephas and David Gilbert. Okay, I knew them too. All three. And I taught for years with the latter two. They were my friends and fine colleagues. Unlike Mr. Croghan, I also taught with and know Dr. Tom Herrmann, now a retired physics professor.

I know my friend Tom Herrmann as a principled man of high ethical standards. Whereas I may or may not agree with him on all topics, I can respect his point of view, his careful, reasoned arguments (Observer, July 9, 2020, My Voice column). It's just like Tom to present the case for not rushing to a group think conclusion, to look at a broader context and to bolster his opinion with reference to an article in a preeminent scientific journal.

Unlike my friend Tom Herrmann, Mr. Croghan dumps a batch of stuff in his verbal vat — a palpable disdain for President Donald Trump, a helping of hydroxychloroquine hysteria and a judgmental simplification of modern Republican Party members — and his mental concoction ends up a confusing stew in which his assessment of others' ethics bubbles to the top in a layer of toxic intolerance.

I've got a year on Mr. Croghan — I'm 78. I can only hope that he, in the coming months, will mature and that some clarity will ensue. Perhaps a kinder, gentler man, albeit with two degrees, may evolve.

Lyle Schwarz  
La Grande

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