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America's Ugly Characteristics

There are many defining characteristics of America. The power we hold as a nation (the military and police force), the freedom and democracy we cry out for, the ability to make something out of nothing, and the corporate strength of our economy. These characteristics are what come to my mind when I see the American flag waving in the breeze. These characteristics are, as beautiful as they may seem, marred to this day with hypocritical views held by our own citizens and government. In a country where racism and oppression run rampant, where the people put in place to protect us are the ones holding us down and keeping the rich and powerful happy; it can be difficult to find the beauty and reverence that people invoked to me growing up in the "greatest nation on Earth".

The tools of tyranny can be difficult to spot when they are built in to every system of our lives. Let us begin with the democracy we hold so near to our hearts. African-Americans received the right to vote in 1870, but many loopholes were put into place to make it difficult for their voices to be heard, this is called voter suppression. The idea behind voter suppression was that if minorities were not able to turn out in numbers, the laws keeping white people in power would continue. To this day voter suppression continues in many forms. More than 16 states in 2011 passed laws that increased voter suppression. Statistically it was found that African-Americans and Hispanics were more likely than whites to register to vote through early registration. The laws in 2011 reduced early voter registration. Eight states passed laws in 2008 requiring a government ID to vote. Approximately 1 in 4 African-American US citizens do not have a government issued ID. It was shown that two times as many African-Americans and Hispanics vote through voter registration drives than whites, and in 2008 a bill was enacted to reduce voting through voter registration drives. From these laws enacted in 2008 and 2011, it was determined that an estimated 5 million eligible voters could be kept from registering to vote or casting a ballot in 2012.

The next target of bias can be found in the opportunities that Americans have, to achieve the “American Dream”. One of our nation’s founding ideals is the equal opportunity all its citizens have, to make it rich. It has been shown that the easiest way to create capital for your family in America is to achieve a college degree and own a home. There is a startling trend that appears when looking at how underprivileged children (many of a minority background) are not afforded the same opportunities middle-class white families are. This trend appears as a vicious cycle. The cycle begins with redlining. Redlining was put into place in 1934 with the National Housing Act. Redlining was a process of segregating minorities into neighborhoods deemed not valuable. These neighborhoods became ghettos, and being born into a ghetto meant less opportunities for loans to start businesses or to purchase a home. Not only did redlining mean less opportunity to receive help from bank institutions and other large systems, who would deny citizens purely based on where they lived, it meant that funds for public schools in these districts were drastically lower. Many public schools receive their funding from the property taxes of the parents whose children attend these schools. Minorities who lived in a redlined district, many times only blocks away from white middle-class families, were forced to go to a public school whose funding was immensely lower than the other public schools in the area. The lack of funding, due to low funds from property taxes, low funds from property taxes due to redlining deeming an area not valuable, and an area unable to self-sufficiently make itself valuable when its schools and businesses are nearly inoperable is only part of the cycle. The next part of the cycle continues when minority students in poor-funded public schools have nearly none of the resources the other public schools do, resources necessary to make their students candidates for college acceptance. From 1991 to 2011 the share of African-American students attending a school that is 90% minority grew from 34% to 39%, as the racial segregation of public schools intensified due to neighborhood segregation intensifying. This system runs much deeper than just redlining and creates a divide between the opportunities of young African-Americans and whites which can continue for generations.

Looking to other disparities of opportunities for minorities, our eyes fall on job opportunities and the lack of “color” in our corporate giants. The corporations of America hold most the power within our government. They push forward legislation through funding and

sheer force due to the impact they have on our economy. Out of the Fortune 500 companies that influence all American lives, only 4 are African-American. Despite holding 12% of our entire US population African-Americans only make up 3.2% of senior leadership roles at large companies. Companies who push out diversity seminars like no other, and spend millions of dollars on corporate diversity efforts. In a study done by the Center for Talent Innovation, 65% of the African-American employees felt they had to work harder to advance in comparison to 16% of white employees. One of the main issues that African-Americans feel in moving up the corporate ladder is a lack of face time opportunity with company leaders. The lack of face to face contact meant an inability to build meaningful relationships with those giving the promotions. The struggle to see any progress at these jobs meant 33% of African-American employees planned to leave their company for another, when compared to the 27% of white employees. Taking a step back from promotions to the starting point of getting hired at a company; it was found, by the National Bureau of Economic Research, that applicants with white sounding names on their resumes had to send out 10 resumes to receive one call back. Applicants, with African-American sounding names, had to send out 15 resumes to receive one call back. The struggle for an African-American person to not only get promoted, but even be considered for hiring, is a loss for these companies who are missing out on qualified workers due to a bias our country has retained for much too long.

The final characteristic of America that will be addressed in this paper, is the one that has captured the attention of not only all our citizens but of the world. Police brutality, bias and corruption is no new issue. Since the start of slavery, which “coincidentally” coincides with the start of some major modern-day police departments, the police have been abusing their powers and harming US citizens as a byproduct of the authority they hold. The origination of the police force was dependent on many social, historic and legal conditions but two of the major ones were slavery and the control of minorities. In St. Louis, police were originally established to protect residents from the Native Americans, and in the south the Slave Patrols and Night Watches later became the modern-day police departments we look to protect our citizens. With a beginning such as this it can be easy to trace the path of the police, that leads to the flaws we see so prevalently today. Bias and racism in the police force is no myth, racial-

profiling and other tactics have led to the unnecessary deaths of innocent citizens' time and time again. New technologies may just make these issues worse. Recently there has been a push in data driven analytics to stop crimes and patrol the "best areas" for catching criminals. This technology may seem like a good thing, however when it is implemented into a system based on bias it can add to the over policing of minorities and continued belief that minorities commit more crimes. By using predictive police systems based on geographical data and past crimes, the police force is once again honing in on minorities. It has already been shown that predictive police technologies in Europe, increased arrest levels for racialized communities by 30%. The rising tensions in the US have fueled protests and cries for justice, as the police force in the US killed 1004 citizens in 2019. The rate of African-Americans killed by the police was much higher than any other race, standing at 30 fatal shootings per million. People who are white cannot hope to understand the feelings of pressure and fear that resonate within a human, whose skin is black, when the police are around. The officers we are supposed to look to for justice and protection are the ones who are singling out our fellow citizens, not at random, but at sight, at the sight of their color. Yet, these same white citizens who could never hope to understand the fear, or loss that comes with unnecessarily losing a loved one, are the ones who yell that the protests are wrong. That the anger and provoked reactions are wrong. The president who tells our police force, "when the looting starts, the shooting starts." How wrong he is when the shooting started long ago. Here in our own little city of San Luis Obispo, at a peaceful protest that I attended, we were met by squadrons of police officers donned in riot gear and holding tear gas canisters and shotguns filled with rubber bullets. The escalated tension felt by everyone, not because of the crowd full of students, hopeful for change and holding signs with messages that cannot be ignored any longer, but because of the police attack dogs and the weapons they felt necessary to bring to "keep the peace". There was no attempt at de-escalation, only three calls out for a peaceful crowd to disperse, there was no conversation with the leaders of the protest to find a simple solution to the tense meeting. No, these police officers instead filled the crowd with tear gas and fireworks sending young students scrambling, while some were picked off and lead away to police cars wrists bound in zip ties.

It has taken far too long for the brokenness of this system to be brought to the light. This paper is only filled with the tip of the atrocities that years of bias and racism has built in to our system. It is only my hope in the coming years we can begin to unmask and break down the ugly characteristics of America.

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