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## **With Biden's win, America, thankfully, 'ain't what we was'**

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OP-ED

# With Biden's win, America, thankfully, 'ain't what we was' | COMMENTARY

By Michael Higginbotham

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Supporters of President-elect Joe Biden celebrate his victory on Nov. 7, 2020, in Atlanta. Biden became the first Democratic presidential candidate to win the state since 1992. (Meridith Kohut/The New York Times)

Martin Luther King Jr. used to tell the story of the slave preacher who in 1865, upon hearing the Emancipation Proclamation read for the first time, responded: “Lord, we ain’t what we ought to be; we ain’t what we want to be; we ain’t what we gonna be, but thank God, we ain’t what we was.”

After hearing the announcement of Joe Biden’s electoral victory over President Trump, I understand exactly how the preacher felt. The Emancipation Proclamation did not solve the issue of slavery, and Mr. Biden’s victory will not end systemic racism, but both developments represented long-awaited public rejections of prior racial oppression and presented opportunities to address widespread racial inequities.

Issuance of The Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 led to drastic legal changes including abolishing slavery and providing for equality. Mr. Biden’s victory presents a similar opportunity.

As the first Republican president, Lincoln’s election in 1860 suggested that slavery would, for the first time, face strong presidential resistance. Nonetheless, it would take several years before a public pronouncement initiating federal abolition efforts. Likewise, since the overwhelming but indirect repudiation of Mr. Trump’s racist rhetoric and policies in the 2018 congressional elections, many were counting the days before early voting started in 2020 and the opportunity to vote against the most racist president since Woodrow Wilson in the early 1900s.

Few Trump opponents can forget that he began his first presidential campaign with the slogan “make America great again.” For those familiar with America’s violent racial history, this caused flashbacks to earlier periods when racial minorities were separated in housing, discriminated against in employment, and lynched with impunity.

As Mr. Trump was sworn in on Jan. 20, 2017, most wondered what the slogan’s modern implementation would entail. For many Americans, watching George Floyd call for his mother and utter his last words, “I can’t breathe,” as a police officer held his knee on Mr. Floyd’s neck on May 25, 2020, vividly reminded us of the most frightening portrayals of racial violence from our country’s past.

Since the start of Mr. Trump’s 2016 candidacy, Americans have witnessed this political leader characterizing

Mexican immigrants as “rapists and criminals,” restricting Muslim immigration, dividing Latino families and incarcerating children seeking asylum at the Southern border, referencing COVID-19 as “the China virus,” retweeting videos of armed protesters and a supporter chanting “white power,” alerting white supremacist groups to “stand down and standby,” banning racial diversity and inclusion training for federal employees, and explaining that there are “good people on both sides” of the Confederate monument’s protests, including Neo Nazis. Candidly, many questioned whether Mr. Trump’s definition of greatness included equality of treatment for non-whites.

For Democrats, Trumpism represents a racial ugliness from our Jim Crow era past that seems to have reemerged over the last few years. With Mr. Trump’s electoral defeat, it is unclear whether his brand of politics with its racist overtones will continue to thrive within the Republican Party. What is clear though is both political parties must do a better job of addressing racial inequality’s stubborn persistence.

The attention on police/community relations brought about by George Floyd’s death is only one aspect of a much broader problem. In so many categories from housing and education to employment and health care, American society is separate and unequal.

There is much to be done to improve race relations, and passing legislation to address the health, wealth, education and housing disparities would be a good place to start. Yet, Mr. Trump’s many attempts to stoke racial division indicate an overall indifference, at best, and, in some cases, an outright hostility, to notions of equity embraced by both political parties prior to his leadership ascendancy. Moreover, the current strength of Mr. Trump’s support suggests that many of his supporters now know his views on race and fully embrace them.

Although Mr. Biden won the popular vote by more than 6 million votes (he received 79 million votes, the most votes ever cast for any presidential candidate) and won the Electoral College with 306 votes to Mr. Trump’s

232, the election results are not the mandate Democrats had hoped for. Democrats lost seats in the House of Representatives and control of the Senate is dependent upon two Georgia senatorial races to be decided on Jan. 5. Yet Mr. Biden's potential to make an impact should not be underestimated.

While a deeply divided electorate may not foreshadow drastic changes in the Republican Party's approach to key racial issues like criminal justice reform, voting rights protection and minority economic empowerment, I, like many Americans today, am thankful that the Trump presidency is over so that, as a nation, "we ain't what we was."

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