Speech: Taking Account of Race as a Philanthropic Imperative

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Foundations must take account of race in all of their work in order to get beyond racism, said Gara LaMarche, The Atlantic Philanthropies President and CEO, in this speech at the Waldemar Nielsen Issue Forums in Philanthropy, Georgetown Public Policy Institute in Washington.

You might ask a question, seeing me up here, and don't worry that it might hurt my feelings. What gives me the right to make a speech about race? Well, first off, I *have* a race. That might seem obvious, but we are so inured to whiteness as the default position, deeply internalized by virtually all white people and even many people of color, that race is something that only black and Latino and Asian and Native American people are thought to have. So yes, I am white, and more specifically a white male who by virtue of that carries with him a set of privileges of which finding it easier to hail a taxi going uptown or walk alone on a dimly-lit street at night without fear of being sexually assaulted are just the beginning. At least in the critical earlier stages of my career, whatever my individual merits, I got taken more seriously because I was a white man, certainly by the white men who had a virtual monopoly on selection and hiring, and I competed in admission and employment pools that were woefully lacking in the available talent of women and people of color. I didn't set it up this way, or even recognize it at the time, and the world has changed a bit – though hardly enough – since. But candor compels me to say that I wouldn't be standing here today, in all likelihood, with a hand on the tiller of nearly $4 billion in philanthropic resources, if I wasn't to some extent the beneficiary of a system of racial privilege and exclusion.

That is a hard truth, but don't worry – it's not my intent to stand here for the next half-hour or so and flagellate myself. One of the ways I try to keep myself honest in philanthropy, a field in which the power dynamic distorts and isolates, and in which it is much too easy to become a social engineer, losing sight of the real challenges of real people, is to remind myself and our staff that every issue we deal with is one we have to navigate *personally* as well as professionally. We devise strategies for employment and health care issues for older people, but also have to arrange home care for our ill and widowed mother. We support advocates working on No Child Left Behind, but also also worry about whether our third-grader's teacher is competent or fair. We press for comprehensive immigration reform, but still have to help our niece's Bulgarian fiancé get a green card.

And since our racial history and racial identities infuse every aspect of life in our communities and on this planet, no separation of the personal and professional is possible. If we pretend that isn't so, if we ghettoize race as a niche concern, we impoverish ourselves as people and citizens, and marginalize ourselves as philanthropists and non-profit leaders. So we must think about it, and talk about it. Nobody gets a free pass.

My racial history

In that spirit, let me say a few words at the outset about my own racial history. Both in these initial words and throughout this talk, I want to stress that I speak for myself, and can only sketch the surface of a huge topic. To suggest that I can make a comprehensive survey of

race would take more hubris than I possess. I grew up in a small town in Rhode Island – at least I always *thought* it was small, but since it is about twice as large as Wasilla, Alaska, I now realize it is a complex metropolis – where, to the best of my knowledge, the only African-American resident, or at least worker, was the man who drove the garbage truck. I don't think I ever exchanged a word with him, or any black or Latino person, until I went to college.

Perhaps because of the blinding whiteness of my town, despite the fact that I was born in the year of*Brown v. Board of Education*, and that my childhood coincided with Little Rock, The March on Washington, Selma, the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., culminating in Nixon's Southern Strategy as I was entering high school in 1968, I remember almost no talk of race. My parents never used racial epithets, and a crude uncle by marriage who did was thought of by all my other relatives as an ignorant embarrassment – though no one ever took him on over his racist insults. I remember that with great discomfort. Our politeness allowed him to indulge his bigotry with our complicity.

We were part of a French-Canadian clan so small in our town – where the dominant groups were Italian-American Catholics and old-line English-Scottish-Irish Protestants – that I never thought of myself as having an ethnicity. In the schoolyard at Immaculate Conception, we told jokes about Italians, still in the early 1960s striving to become, as the scholar Noel Ignatiev would put it, fully white.

My sense of racial and ethnic insularity was so strong that it led to an unusual reaction which looking back I admire in my younger self but am at a loss to explain. I was eager to put myself in the minority in college, and where I hoped to be accepted was Brandeis, a heavily Jewish institution which I figured would have some kind of affirmative action program for Catholics. But I didn't get in, and the only other top school that took me was Columbia, a place that served very well, as it turned out, for my burgeoning Semito-philia. I asked for a roommate of a different race and was paired with a Japanese-American from California. We didn't get along, and I learned my first valuable racial lesson – that people of other races can be nasty, boring and stupid, just like white people. While Columbia, along with many other elite schools, has become significantly more racially diverse in the thirty-some years since I studied there, I hardly remember any black or Latino students, and had only one African-American professor. I still lived in a racial bubble.

But soon, through a set of serendipitous events, I became at nineteen a substitute teacher at a nursery-school/day care center in Morningside Heights, in the Gardens apartment complex that I later learned was built in 1957 as the first racially-integrated housing development south of 125th Street in Manhattan, where Thurgood Marshall had lived. Eventually, while still a Columbia student, I was hired as a full-time teacher there, and it was my home in many ways for four years. Gardens was an unusual school in those days, like no place I had ever been before, and rarely since. There was a range of children from the mostly black and Latino working poor families from the Grant Houses across Amsterdam Avenue, their tuition subsidized by the city budget, to the full fee-paying kids of Columbia faculty and *New Yorker* cartoonists – and every economic range in between. There were many children of international students and faculty. No racial or ethnic group predominated, and there were a number of black and Latino teachers as well. While I don't pretend Gardens was a paradise, it was a bracing immersion in a multi-racial world, and I became friendly with a number of black and bi-racial families. I thrived on the richness of it, and came to feel that my heretofore monochromatic existence was woefully incomplete. The Gardens experience has framed my hope for the world since.

You didn't ask me here today for a personal memoir, and I will get to some meat-and-potatoes of issues and opinions before long, but let me continue. Through another series of flukes – my high school debate coach had moved to New York and had a minor staff job at the ACLU, where he engineered my appointment to a committee – I entered the social justice/human rights world, where I still dwell. In the ACLU of the 1970s, despite its good work on civil rights issues, there were but a handful of non-white people on the staff outside the secretarial ranks, and only a few as well on the eighty-member board. I soon became a kind of bright young thing and attracted the notice of higher-ups. When my friend Dorothy Samuels, just a few years older than me, became the Executive Director of the New York Civil Liberties Union in 1979 – the story of the sexism she encountered there, reverberating today in some of the coverage of Hillary Clinton's Presidential campaign, and the parallel universe of gender privilege and exclusion, is a topic for another day – she offered me, then 24 years old, a job as her deputy. There were only two black members of the 51-person NYCLU board then, and one of them -- who has since become a neoconservative crank, but that's also another story --challenged her routine personnel report by asking why, with an all-white, mostly male staff, the organization was hiring another white, lightly experienced man in a key position, without even bothering to do a search?

On the sidelines of this debate – which led not only to a months-long process, at the end of which I was hired, but also to a permanent change in the organization's hiring procedures – I was nervous, since I was eager and ambitious, but I also had to concede that the board critic was right. The way things had been done up to that point – the way that things are still done in too many places – perpetuated a racial advantage. The fact that I myself was not born to privilege – that I was, for instance, in the first generation in my family to go to college, and had worked to put myself through, paying back loans for ten years after I graduated – made it more emotionally complicated, perhaps, but did not alter that basic reality. The skirmish over my hiring was one of a number of events that ushered in a period of ten or fifteen years in which the ACLU grappled mightily with issues of racial equity and inclusion, a period in which I was an active participant at many levels. The ACLU did not always get this right, then or now. Among the key players have been some liberal whites who think their 1960s civil rights activism should suffice to insulate them from any claims of racial insensitivity; some blacks all too willing to exploit the guilt of liberal whites; some whites who privately saw the board's growing number of people of color as "single issue" members, no matter what their actual commitments, expertise and passions; some blacks who believed that the unique history of slavery trumped any other claim for justice or inclusion by Latinos or gay people or the disabled; and many others along the spectrum. These are the stresses and tensions of earnest efforts at equity and honesty.

I wish I could say that the other liberal organizations for which I worked in the 1980s and '90s travelled the same challenging path, and arrived at least at a place of consciousness if not correction. But for the most part they did not. One lesson is that organizations with no constituency, either in the form of a membership and broad donor base or in the form of vital working relationships with community and national organizations that do have a base, are much less likely to feel accountable in their governance structures and program strategies. If the accountability chain is primarily upwards, to donors, then the responsibility of donors is great – hence the recent focus on foundations. And to whom are foundations accountable?

I want to say a final word in this personal introduction, as a white man concerned for many years with race as it plays out in the people and programs of the leading human rights organizations and progressive foundations, to note a few things I have observed along the

way. I have seen that too often the nod to "diversity" – a bland euphemism that more often obscures than illuminates the underlying issues -- means that a board or senior staff team or some critical meeting will have but one or two people of color, and the burden on those few to "represent the race" will be quite heavy, and quite unfair. Very often – and this is true for anyone who is isolated by their race or gender or sexual identity in a predominantly white, straight, male setting – it will cause that person to mute his or her voice for fear of being marginalized as a special-interest pleader. That will happen whether or not the person in question uses their seat at the senior staff or board table to press for attention to race and gender issues, expectations and stereotypes being as strong as they are.

I've had the opportunity to shape staffs where people of color are among many voices on a multiracial scale producing the exhilarating, if challenging sounds of debate and disagreement, there being no monolithic black or Latino point of view or experience any more than there is a monolithic white one. Organizations deprived of this spectrum of true diversity, where the table has room for many, and there is a genuine effort at real exchange and listening, are stronger organizations much better equipped to meet the challenges of our time.

The moment and the context

I asked to talk about race today, in this inaugural lecture of the Georgetown Nielsen series, because there are three powerful forces, societal and philanthropic, that make this an important moment to do so. First, race and its impact are more central than ever to the national discourse, because of Barack Obama's candidacy, in a way that it has not been for some time, and the Senator's own thoughtful, candid and eloquent engagement with it in his March 18 Philadelphia speech set a very high bar, assuming the intelligence of the American people in a way that is all too rare among politicians, and challenging us to talk about it more. Second, the Greenlining Institute's work on race and philanthropy, one impact of which was California Assembly Bill 624, to require reporting by larger foundations on the racial and ethnic composition of their staff, boards and grantees -- though ultimately withdrawn after the California foundations committed themselves to a big capacity-building initiative for communities of color -- has certainly gotten everyone's attention. The initially inadequate response of some of our California brethren shows that we all have a lot of work to do, and I'd like to offer some of my own thoughts on this particular approach to race and philanthropy. And finally, we are in a period in the foundation and non-profit sector where effectiveness is the mantra, metrics the path, good outcomes the holy grail. How, then, do we think of race in this environment?

Let us start with the moment. What might it mean, we are all asking – or, rather, often not asking, race being the elephant in the room in this historic Presidential election – for America to have a black President, for the most powerful and visible leader on the planet to be a man of African ancestry, a man whose parents' interracial marriage was a crime at the time of his birth in the state of Virginia, just across the bridge from here, where polls show him leading his opponent as of this afternoon?

We don't know, and it is exciting, no matter what your Presidential preference, to imagine the possibilities. But we do know it will not obliterate America's racial history, absolve us of our sins, or "put race behind us" once and for all. I don't want to seem like one of those people who don't like to be confused with the facts, or who tend to see just the cloud, not the lining. But Barack Obama's elevation to the Presidency would leave the Senate without a single black member, a situation that has remained constant for all but a few moments of American history, only two Latinos, and two Asian-Americans, both from Hawaii. On November 5, there will still be only two black Governors – the second and third in post-Reconstruction

U.S. history, only one Latino, and only one of Asian descent, and the percentage of people of color in the House of Representatives will remain at best half of their presence in the population as a whole – a percentage which, we all know, is growing to the point where many of us in this room will at some point in the coming decades live in a majority non-white country. The political world, like the financial world and most centers of power in America, is way out of line with the reality of the country.

It is possible for two things to be true at once. One is that many white Americans will be moved, by admiration for Senator Obama and by their sense of the country's needs at this time, to cast a vote for him. At the same time, they may harbor generally racist attitudes, of the old-fashioned, not subtle variety, as the recent Associated Press poll jarringly reminded us, reporting that one-third of white Democrats view most African-Americans as "lazy" or "violent." It's the same contradictory impulse, human beings being complicated creatures, that has a white realtor Tivo'ing Oprah Winfrey while she steers black families away from certain neighborhoods, or a white cop cheering on Michael Jordan or Tiger Woods while he arrests black marijuana users at a rate many times that of whites.

Moreover, everything we know about elections for all of American history tells us that race has been omnipresent, long before there was any credible chance that a black man could be elected President. President Johnson's prediction that his support for black civil rights would deliver the South to the Republican Party for decades to come has proved true, despite some recent harbingers of change. While many of the devices used to keep blacks from voting, like poll taxes and literacy tests, have been struck down and abandoned, there continue to be numerous highly racialized barriers to electoral participation by those left out of the original democratic compact. The disenfranchisement of formerly imprisoned people has clear roots in America's history of racial subjugation, and to this day, despite some positive movement in the last few years, up to a third of African-American men are permanently barred from voting in several Southern states due to their having spent time in prison. If you think this is an academic issue, consider the unquestionable fact that if Florida had moved to restore voting rights for former prisoners before 2000, as Governor Charlie Crist has recently done – imperfectly, but it's progress – Al Gore, not George Bush, would have taken the oath of office as President nearly eight years ago. Exclusion has consequences.

In his recent *New York Review of Books* essay, "Obama: The Price of Being Black," Andrew Hacker cites an array of evidence that Barack Obama would need to rack up a big lead indeed in order to overcome not only racist tendencies in many white voters, but what is properly called structural racism in the voting process. For instance, Hacker writes:

"Requiring a driver's license to vote," as the Supreme Court this spring permitted the State of Indiana to do, "has a disparate racial impact …to apply for the state ID card that Indiana offers as an alternative…non-drivers must travel to a motor vehicles office, which for many would be a lengthy trip. While licenses do not record race, Justice David Souter cited …relevant studies …in his dissent. In one survey, made by the Department of Justice in 1994, black residents of Louisiana were found to be four to five times more likely not to have the official photograph needed for an identifying document (not to mention access to a car; recall how many couldn't leave as Katrina approached.)"

Hillary Clinton's candidacy caused much soul-searching about the sexist tinge in media coverage of her historic campaign. To some extent this discussion has taken place – though not nearly enough, yet – because Senator Clinton herself raised and encouraged it. Senator Obama and his allies in contrast have been extremely careful not to suggest that coverage of his candidacy has been racialized, and indeed, like racism generally, the signs of it are less

crude, more suggestive for the most part than explicit. This is not the place for an exhaustive treatment of them, and not every question raised about Senator Obama's experience or associations is a code for discomfort with his race. It would be a disservice to the candidate and to the many legitimate grounds for political support and opposition to suggest otherwise. Yet *some* of them are.

Just to provide an example of how a lack of racial context can be a serious impediment to understanding, let me cite the columns of Maureen Dowd, who, while certainly an equal opportunity skewerer, has time and again tweaked Barack Obama for being too "cool," "cerebral" and buttoned-down. She'd like him to show a little more fire, to be a little less starchy in his attire, to hurl a few bowling balls that manage to hit the pins. Leaving aside the possibility that in contrast to so many politicians, Obama may be acting in character – being himself, whether Dowd likes it or not – consider the implications of her critique. A black man in contemporary America, despite all the undeniable gains, does not have the luxury of public anger, whatever he is actually feeling. Certainly not one who is trying to be the first to cross a broad racial divide. Whatever the term is for an angry black man in the public sphere, it is not likely to be "Mr. President." And why are so many black professional men and women perfectly coiffed and cufflinked and collared, while many white folks can run around like every day is casual Friday? Could it possibly be because in the quest for respect and advancement they have little margin of error? Barack Obama should be no different than any other public figure in being a fair target for jokes and even ridicule. But not to understand the context of hot and cool in this Presidential race is to leave out an important part of the story, something no self-respecting journalist can afford to be lazy about.

The intersection of philanthropy and politics

Now to the second context in which this talk takes place, which is the growing pressure on philanthropy to show that it reflects the changing diversity of the country and that it directs appropriate levels of resources to low-income communities of color. Since AB 624 hit our California colleagues like a two-by-four – what John McCain might call a "game-changer" – you might say that we have arrived at the intersection of philanthropy and politics.

I don't think there is any question that we are entering a time in which governmental, and particularly legislative scrutiny of and pressure on philanthropy will intensify. When money is tight and times are tough, a sector which is insulated from the tax base because it is thought to serve a public purpose is an obvious target, particularly when social need is acute. Add to that the growing political empowerment of African-American and Latino lawmakers, whose mounting seniority in state houses and in Congress provides a powerful perch from which to raise questions about equity, and you have a kind of perfect storm.

The first thing to be said about this is that those of us in philanthropy should welcome the scrutiny, not run from it. We need more, and we certainly don't get it from our grantees and rarely from the press apart from the occasional scandal. And while, as my friend and former Ford Foundation President Susan Berresford and others eloquently argue, philanthropic pluralism and independence from government are significant and important values, we all know that the United States tax code did not come to us on tablets from Mount Sinai. It is a human creation that reflects, or should reflect, public values. There are legitimate debates about where lines should be drawn, but it is not wrong to raise the question of whether organizations enjoying a tax benefit that otherwise might be available for democratic allocation should be, at the very least, more transparent about which communities are reflected in the decision making about grants, and whether all are reflected as beneficiaries. Just a few things we know about the philanthropic landscape where race and numbers are concerned. Some months back, introducing a Hudson Institute panel on AB 624, alliteratively

and provocatively titled, "Mandating Multicultural Munifence?", Bill Schambra, who I am glad is among the respondents to my talk today, pointed out that only five years ago, when he accepted the James Joseph Award from the Association of Black Foundation Executives, Handy Lindsey of the Field Foundation in Chicago reminded his audience that in 1971 eight African-American leaders stood up at the annual meeting of the Council on Foundations to demand the inclusion of blacks on the slate of nominations. What a thrilling moment that must have been, and it's hard to recall such a pointed and powerful disruption in the ranks of organized philanthropy since. Thirty years later, Lindsey told ABFE, "despite three decades of deliberative effort…we see the inconvenient truth: our field does not look the way it should. However intended, our practices result in exclusion."

There has been much criticism about the methodology of the Greenlining Institute's work, partly, of course, because self-reporting on such matters in philanthropy is extremely spotty and inconsistent. But in the wake of the California experience, a group of New York non-profits came together to form the New York Committee for Fairness and Equity in Philanthropy, encouraging self-regulation, but failing that "greater government oversight and regulation," and their draft vision statement relies on a study by the Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors. While two-thirds of New Yorkers are people of color, RPA reports, based on Council on Foundations data, they are only fifteen percent of boards, under 6 percent of CEOs and little over a third of staff.

Staff and board diversity, where virtually all the attention in our sector is usually focused, is of course important since who is at the table has a great deal to do with how the pie is divided. But where the money goes, while connected to the people directing it, is a differement matter, and even more critical. According to the recent Foundation Center report, "Embracing Diversity," focused on California foundation giving benefitting communities of color, "by itself, the California Endowment accounted for more than half of all domestically focused grant dollars explicitly targeted to benefit populations of color in 2005." The argument was made by some California foundation leaders that the "benefit" question is more than a numbers game, and indeed it must be. It may be reductionist, for example, to look only at whether organizations are led by, or predominantly serve, people of color. Some minority-led organizations are ineffective and a waste of philanthropic dollars, and some white-dominated organizations do a very good job of strengthening education and jobs and health care in communities of color. Yet who is at the helm, either in terms of executive leadership or a genuine base, is at least a good place to start a discussion of whether grant money goes to communities that need it most.

To suggest that any broad-based foundation initiative, say, to reverse climate change or promote the arts, by definition benefits people of color in a city or state, misses the mark, because this is a question of strategy. Many, if not most, racially-neutral programs don't reach all people equally, and well-targeted, culturally appropriate strategies are called for to ensure inclusion. Some initiatives that appear to be racially neutral in fact reflect in their design a set of exclusionary choices. Social Security is often touted as the leading example of a universal program that is successful precisely because people of all races and ethnicities, at all income levels, have a stake in its strength. Yet Franklin Roosevelt could not have passed the Social Security Act without concessions to racist Southern Democrats who insisted on the exclusion of domestic and agricultural workers. Consider the racial and ethnic composition of domestic and agricultural workers then and now and you will get a good sense of what is meant by structural racism – continuing barriers that long outlast the racist bargains that produced them.

The current financial crisis was foreshadowed by the subprime mortgage crisis, something usually discussed in race-neutral terms. But a Kirwan Institute report in August points out that subprime lenders targeted minority communities precisely because "traditional lenders were historically absent from low-income minority communities … [making] it increasingly likely that African-American and minority borrowers would suffer the earliest and the most from the crisis." This is another example of structural racism at work. If you add it all together – the denial of benefits like Social Security, unemployment insurance and welfare, the inability to access credit and build wealth because of redlining, the employment and housing patterns and schooling conditions that are the residue of slavery, Jim Crow and segregation –you don't need malicious intent, you don't need George Wallace or Bull Connor or Orval Faubus to see that the systems come together in a racist effect. That is what structural racism is, and finding a way to communicate that in a way that doesn't cause all of us caught up in the system to feel accused, and undo its tenacious and continuing impact, is one of the great challenges of our time.

This is not just about people of color. That the fates of whites and blacks and Latinos and Asians and others are bound together, in Dickens' phrase, as "fellow-travelers to the grave," is brought home most sharply by the financial crisis we are living through. As my friend Deepak Bhargava of the Center for Community Change has written, "poor people of color were the 'canary in the coal mines' for techniques that ultimately were used on a broader population through the subprime crisis and brought about the meltdown of balance sheets." Masters of the universe no more, when the tipping point comes for unsustainable inequality and exploitation, it threatens to engulf us all.

A final word about structural racism, which is too often caricatured, even by some of my friends. One of them, Bill Schambra, indulged in a neat but cheap little rhetorical trick in replying to the letters criticizing his sensationally-titled *Chronicle of Philanthropy* article, "Philanthropy's Jeremiah Wright Problem," a tough attack on the support by many of the leading U.S. foundations for organizations and initiatives which ground their work in a structural racism analysis. Why are you upset by my article, Bill wrote, I'm just echoing Senator Obama himself, who argued that Rev. Wright's views, "so similar to the structural-racism framework" – that's Bill's characterization, not Obama's --"denigrate both the greatness and the goodness of our nation." What Obama is saying, though, is something different. It is that the demonization of whites – whose racial anxieties he acknowledges with great sympathy – and the failure to acknowledge significant racial progress, is a dead-end road. But make no mistake that Obama's analysis of the continuing challenge is perfectly consistent with a structural racism approach, whether or not he calls it that. Consider this passage from his Philadelphia speech:

Legalized discrimination - where blacks were prevented, often through violence, from owning property, or loans were not granted to African-American business owners, or black homeowners could not access FHA mortgages, or blacks were excluded from unions, or the police force, or fire departments - meant that black families could not amass any meaningful wealth to bequeath to future generations. That history helps explain the wealth and income gap between black and white, and the concentrated pockets of poverty that persists in so many of today's urban and rural communities.

You all know by now that AB 624 was shelved after a group of the largest California foundations agreed to spend significant funds to "strengthen support for minority and low-income communities." The foundations acknowledged the "lack of capacity of many minority-led and community-based organizations to compete for funding," the "need for additional

investment in capacity-building and leadership development targeted at communities of color," and the "lack of access to larger foundations by many minority-led and other grassroots community-based non-profits."

This statement, and the commitment that will follow it, is welcome, whatever the circumstances of its birth. Yet as Mark Rosenman of the Union Institute wrote pointedly on California Endowment President Bob Ross's blog, how you see lack of capacity and access depends on where you sit. "The solution offered," Rosenman writes, "casts the problem in supply-side terms – yet another inadequacy on the part of low-income communities of color. The problem definition seemingly fails to address the demand side – the inability of too many funders to discover, recognize and know how to work with the strengths and assets of alternatives to conventional organizations and dominant patterns of leadership."

On his blog last July, Bob Ross himself wrote that one of the things that "bugged" him about AB 624 was that it "wags its legislative finger at the failings of organized philanthropy about matters that, in the final analysis, are about social inequity, lack of opportunity, and poverty." And our federal and state lawmakers have done precious little in recent years to close the equity gap." This is exactly right, and I join Bob's sentiments in the spirit in which they were offered – not to excuse the failings of philanthropy but to locate them in a larger public failing. Since that is true, it is imperative that philanthropy has more voices like Bob's, calling for aggressive advocacy to move government to action.

Structural racism and foundation effectiveness

Finally, I promised to talk about foundation effectiveness – as I put it earlier, the holy grail of much contemporary philanthropy. Is a racially conscious strategy an aid to foundation effectiveness, or an impediment?

First I should say that I have some misgivings about effectiveness as the organizing principle of philanthropy. Of course we should strive to be as effective as we can be in spending grant dollars. No one would argue otherwise. But effectiveness is a value-neutral term. You can fund a very effective campaign to undermine and defeat immigration reform or expand the death penalty, but that doesn't make it right. And in making arguments on effectiveness grounds, as many of the advocates we fund have become much more sophisticated about doing – torture doesn't work, incarceration is too costly – we must be careful never to cede the moral ground, which moves us to act on these issues in the first place.

Let me talk about effectiveness, as I began my remarks, by making it personal – that is, by staying close to home and using examples from the two foundations in which I have held leadership positions, the Open Society Institute and the Atlantic Philanthropies.

When we launched the U.S. programs at OSI a dozen years ago, we gave very little attention to race either in our internal deliberations or the public descriptions of our goals and strategies. Over time, we came to realize the failure to do so was a barrier to impact. OSI's early and groundbreaking work on drug policy reform was cast almost entirely in libertarian terms. This kind of argument, which I personally accept, is not a promising route to change. In fact it is often counterproductive, not only in communities of color who have borne the brunt of the drug war's ravages, but among almost all families of any color, few of whom have escaped the consequences of drug dependency and dysfunction. The campaign to change the country's benighted approach to drugs finally got traction – and we still have a long way to go – when communities of color and their advocates began to recognize and act on the harms that the war on drugs were causing in their streets and neighborhoods, depopulated of young men, and increasingly young women, as surely as from a more conventional war or epidemic. To try to change drug policy without taking account of these realities, without supporting the voices of those most affected, is to resign yourself to failure.

At Atlantic, we are partners with OSI, Carnegie and other foundations in the long hard battle to enact comprehensive immigration reform. The terrific advocates who are leading this campaign, though most are themselves people of color, were inclined before our crushing defeat last year to cast their efforts as a good-government measure. But this vital measure was undone, in the end, by racism – not that every argument against reform is racist, but that race played a key role. Not just on the part of nativist xenophobes, but in tensions among different generations of Asians and Latinos, and between some U.S.-born blacks and other communities of color. Anyone trying to pass an immigration bill who doesn't take into account the realities of white *and* black talk radio, the Greenwich country club and the Harlem barbershop, is not going to be very successful. We won't make the same mistake the next time. The fact that race is central to so many issues, from criminal justice to immigration, doesn't mean it always should lead the public framing of the issue – we've made much more progress against the death penalty highlighting innocence than racial disparities – but the racial dimensions must always be considered.

At Atlantic in the last year we have added a significant component to our aging work focused on communities of color because we came to realize that the paradigm we and our grantees are trying to advance – the tremendous asset represented by older adults, who increasingly have the longevity, commitment, time and financial security to make social contributions long after what has been considered "normal" retirement age – is grounded in a white middle-class worldview that doesn't work for everyone. Not, for example, for an African-American seamstress in Cleveland who takes care of two grandchildren while giving twenty hours a week to church or a Puerto Rican maintenance worker in the Bronx who can't afford to retire. Sometimes these connections are present in our work but it takes a while, or an outsider's perspective, to see them clearly. We had a gathering of expert advisors last week in New York to review our U.S.-focused human rights work, which, in addition to immigration and the death penalty, includes a large campaign, with OSI as our principal partners, to reverse the terrible civil liberties abuses carried out in the name of national security during the last seven years. We invited Inez McCormack, a labor, peace and human rights activist from Belfast and one of the wisest people I know, and she knitted these three apparently disparate programs together with the observation that each was about fear and control – look, she encouraged us, at the way immigration, the death penalty, and national security are used to divide and marginalize by those in power, and which communities bear the brunt.

Inez's view from across the Atlantic leads me to close this part with a few observations drawn from Atlantic's work in other countries. Both Bermuda, where our key corporate operations are, and where we do some philanthropy, and South Africa, where we have significant programs on health and human rights, are countries, like the United States, which have emerged from systems of explicit racial subjugation. Bermuda with 64,000 people is something like a small town, and it has arrived at this place with little of the upheaval that accompanied transformation in the U.S. and South Africa. But submerging racial honesty does not erase underlying inequities and stresses – reflected, for example, in a school system much like that in the U.S., where all whites and better-off blacks go to private academies, and the public system is one of last resort for the poor -- and the small island nation is only recently starting to grapple with them.

In South Africa, despite black majority rule, I have been fascinated and sometimes troubled to find echoes of U.S. racial attitudes. In an essay in *Racial Redress and Citizenship in South Africa*, Steven Friedman and Zimitri Erasmus cite studies that show many white South Africans believe that racism is just a concept promoted by political ideologues, with "raw" or

"serious" racism a rare exception. The 2001 World Values survey found that "white South Africans are inclined to attribute poverty to laziness." Yet 80 percent of black South Africans tell pollsters they believe that whites feel they can go on living as they did in the past, and strongly endorse affirmative action measures. Another study, by Kalati and Manor, reported that most whites do not feel personally responsible for apartheid and don't see their privilege as connected to poverty. They see racial redress as "damaging to race relations." All this sounds sadly familiar to American ears.

While I don't agree with them, I can understand why it is difficult for many U.S. whites to see why redress is necessary for events and practices that took place long before they were born. But I was astounded to find similar attitudes in white South Africans, when the past was only yesterday. The impulse by those who have enjoyed racial privilege to "put the past behind them" is enormously powerful, and apparently universal.

But it must be overcome. In upholding an affirmative action program, the late Justice Harry Blackmun once wrote: "In order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race. There is no other way."

The context was university admissions, but it could as well have been any sector. There is no other way for philanthropy, either, whatever a donor's stated mission. No other way to make sure all children are equipped for work, civic participation and lifelong learning. No other way to perfect our democracy. No other way to improve public health. No other way to bring about safer communities. No other way to make sure our elders can live lives of dignity and purpose.

The paths to justice and effectiveness run on parallel lines. We have it in our grasp to fuse them. In the words of the Spanish poet Antonio Machado, which became an anthem for the U.S. civil rights movement and all who work for a more fair and humane world, we must make that road by walking it – together.