

Declarations: Three Good Men Talk About Race

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ABSTRACT

Last year a policeman stopped him on his way into a congressional office building, wearing his Senate pin on the lapel of his suit. Show me your ID." Was the assumption he was "impersonating a member of Congress, or what?" That night he got a call from the officer's supervisor, apologizing.

FULL TEXT

The best question from a journalist for the man and woman running for president is this: In the area of race relations, why can't we get it right? All your life, Mr. Trump, all your life, Mrs. Clinton, we have been trying to solve what divides America. Why can't we?

Give them time to breathe, space to answer. Don't lean in with that reporter-face that signals, "You've got 18 seconds, and near the end I'll interrupt to show how probing and alert I am."

Don't do that. Give them time. In that time they will be forced to think aloud. If they change the subject, that will say worlds. If they don't have thoughts to share that will tell us a lot too.

Beyond that, even though everyone on media asks for a conversation about race, most of them don't really mean it. They don't want a conversation but a platform. They want to talk and for you to listen. And they want what's said to be circumscribed – they want narrow barriers put on acceptable limits of thought and experience.

So people turn away and everyone simmers.

But three good men this week were having a conversation, not with each other but with the country. And they said three big things:

You don't know what it is to be a black man.

You don't know what you're asking of the police.

And, I'm trying to process everything in my heart.

Tim Scott, 50, the first African-American U.S. senator from South Carolina, spoke on the floor of the Senate about what it is to be him, and black.

He was not looking to grind a political ax. He wanted to explain that what you hear about being treated differently because you're a black man is true. He has felt the "humiliation that comes with feeling like you're being targeted for nothing more than being just yourself." During one of his six years on Capitol Hill he was stopped by law-enforcement officers seven times. "Was I speeding sometimes? Sure. But the vast majority of the time, I was

pulled over for nothing more than driving a new car in the wrong neighborhood I do not know many African-American men who do not have a very similar story to tell -- no matter their profession, no matter their income, no matter their disposition in life."

Last year a policeman stopped him on his way into a congressional office building, wearing his Senate pin on the lapel of his suit. "The officer looked at me with a little attitude and said, 'The pin I know, you I don't. Show me your ID.'" Was the assumption he was "impersonating a member of Congress, or what?"

That night he got a call from the officer's supervisor, apologizing. Sen. Scott said it was the third such call he'd received since he entered the Senate in 2013.

He asked his fellow senators to "recognize that just because you do not feel the pain . . . does not mean it does not exist." Ignoring the struggles of others "does not make them disappear. It simply leaves you blind and the American family very vulnerable."

Thursday by phone I asked Mr. Scott what reaction he'd received. Colleagues were "very supportive." "Orrin Hatch came in and hugged me," he laughed. Public reaction was "very positive," though "a minor percentage" disapproved. "Some people asked me to leave the party. Some people feel, they're white and have been discriminated against as well. My point is, exactly! All discrimination is bad." Some blacks, he said, are offended that he is Republican.

"I wanted to uncover my own pain and become vulnerable in hopes that others, who may not have my microphone," will take heart. "I wanted to validate people and their concerns."

Much progress has been made, he emphasized: "I don't want us to be mired in the idea we're losing ground. We've made up so much ground in the past 50 years." But "there are dark corners that need a little light."

"The good Lord made me black, and he made me black on purpose," Mr. Scott said. The country "is at a crossroads We have a chance to listen and not just talk."

Another good man was at Parkland Memorial Hospital last week when victims of the Dallas shooter came in. Brian Williams, 47, was one of the trauma surgeons.

"This experience has been very personal for me and a turning point in my life," Dr. Williams, who is black, told the press. They're used to multiple gunshot victims at Parkland, "but the preceding days of more black men dying at the hands of police officers affected me. I think the reasons are obvious. I fit that demographic." He too has been stopped by police over the years, once thrown "spread eagle" on the hood of a cruiser.

"But I abhor what has been done to these officers," Dr. Williams said. He worked frantically to save them. Then he grieved.

At the end of that night, police officers lined up in the ambulance bay as the bodies of their colleagues were taken away. It was a line of honor. "I didn't know if I belonged with them," Dr. Williams said. He was a civilian, didn't face their challenges. "But I was grieving with them. . . . And I wanted to show my respects."

So he walked forward and joined the line.

"The killing," he said, "has to stop."

And then of course, the great man whose presence in Dallas has seemed providential: Police Chief David Brown, 55. In a press conference Monday he took all comers, admitted he was "running on fumes" and didn't know how he'd get through this week but would, "a testament to God's grace and his sweet, tender mercies."

Answering a question, he told a great and immediate truth: "We're asking cops to do too much in this country." They're paying the price for every societal failure. "Not enough mental health funding? 'Let the cop handle it.' Not enough drug addiction funding? 'Let's give it to the cops.' Here in Dallas we've got a loose dog problem. 'Let's have the cops chase loose dogs.' Schools fail, 'Give it to the cops.' Seventy percent of the African-American community is being raised by single women -- 'Let's give it to the cops to solve that is well.'" Society, Chief Brown said, has to step up.

He invited protesters to become part of the solution. "We're hiring," he said. "Get off that protest line and put an application in. We'll put you in your neighborhood and we'll help you resolve some of the problems you're protesting about."

David Brown has become an American folk hero. Who wasn't grateful he was there?

We have been going through a hard time in America. Once, 20 years ago, I wrote something I didn't fully understand, but it came with the force of intuition and I knew it was true: "Young black men will save our country."

I thought of it all this week.

These great men, 20 years ago, were young. I must have passed them on the street. All three this week helped save our country.

Credit: By Peggy Noonan

DETAILS

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