



We Have Never Been More United

by [James Mulholland](#)

I am tired of white people complaining that our nation “has never been so divided.” This complaint is more evidence that white people are ignorant of our history and of their privilege. We are a nation that once fought a bloody civil war over whether we could enslave black people. What the insurrection at the Capitol revealed was not something new, but an ugly and racist division that has been sustained since our nation’s founding. When it comes to the work of creating a diverse and vibrant democracy, **we have never been more united.**

Consider this. In 1790, after the signing of the U.S. Constitution, only property owning or tax paying white men could vote. White was defined as people of Anglo-Saxon origin. Women of all races and backgrounds, Blacks (free and enslaved), Irish, Italians, Hispanics, Chinese, Native Americans and many more were disenfranchised. This meant 6% of the population held power over the other 94%. When it comes to who holds power, our nation was never less democratic than in 1790.

It would not be until 1828 that the last U.S state would eliminate property owning and tax paying requirements. For the first time, most white men could vote. Yet they still represented only about 35% of the US population. Sadly, this minority would enshrine their dominance across our culture, establishing white male supremacy as the guiding principle for church, government, family, and society. Those who disputed this inequity were ostracized, oppressed, imprisoned, and murdered. We were only a democracy if you were a white man.

That 80% of the insurrectionists at the Capitol were white men should not surprise us. Only white men could look at what has happened in our country over the past few decades and conclude we need a revolution. Only white men would see the presidency of Barack Obama as a threat. Only white men would celebrate the election of a white, narcissistic strongman. For many others, today’s society is the evolution we have dreamed of – a multicultural nation where no gender, sexual orientation, race, or ethnic background is legally privileged.

The American story is not one of reclaiming some past glory, but of gradual empowerment. Over the decades since our nation’s founding, the powerless have taken Jefferson’s words as truth and repeatedly challenged white male supremacy. In 1869, the 14th Amendment gave the vote to all black men. For a few short years, nearly 50% of our population was enfranchised. Black men served in our Senate and House and Representatives. For about eight years, racial equity looked like a possibility. Sadly, this [splendid failure](#) would be the high-water mark of our democracy for the next 100 years.

In the years after the Reconstruction, little progress was made, especially for people of color. In 1920, though all women received the vote, only white women were able to demand this right. Essentially, white women were invited into the all-male club with the unstated agreement that they continue to sustain white male supremacy. Together, this ugly alliance of white men and women fought the inclusion of everyone else.

It would not be until 1943 that people of Chinese descent were granted the vote. Until 1957, many states still denied the vote to Native Americans. Until the Voting Rights Act of 1965, most blacks could not access the voting booth. Even after that Act, white legislators in state after state did all in their power to obstruct minorities from voting.

If a democracy is a government of “all the people,” the United States is a young democracy. Only in the last few years has most of our adult population had access to the vote. Only in the last few years have white men and women realized their 250 years of national dominance is in danger. Only in the last few years have white men and women cared about the historic divisions in our nation – divisions that were previously to their advantage. Ironically, those who invaded our Capitol claimed to be patriots defending democracy. In actuality, they were insurrectionists trying to topple it.

Here is the good news of today.

For the first time in the history of our nation, the forces in opposition to white supremacy may finally be stronger and more united than those sustaining it. For the first time in US history, a president spoke out against white supremacy in his inaugural address. For the first in our checkered past, calls for unity are not simply calls for white solidarity.

It is this more inclusive unity which Donald Trump and his followers fear. His campaign thrived on heightening age-old divisions. His administration glorified a past America where less of our nation had voice. The failed insurrection of January 6th is both evidence of this lingering malignancy and of democratic resilience. That those who have sustained white supremacy for so long are now calling for reconciliation, healing and unity is encouraging. Those who cannot enforce their will must plead for such things.

If it is unity they desire, we must demand it be a unity grounded in our national aspirations, so long denied to so many, that all people are created equal and endowed with certain inalienable rights, namely life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Anything less is appeasement, a strategy that has failed again and again in the battle with white supremacy.

White supremacy must finally end.

In this, more and more of us are united.

James Mulholland



James Mulholland is a fifty-six year old privileged white man with a nine year old black daughter named Ella. He says that being Ella's father has forced him to confront the privilege and racism within himself, his family and society.

www.afsc.org › content › james-mulholland

[James Mulholland | American Friends Service Committee](#)