

Race in America

Senator Tim Scott

The odds are that three-word phrase made you feel an immediate, emotional response. For some, it may bring a sense of discomfort, for others anger and frustration, or perhaps even hope at the progress we have made. As 2020 has shown us, where we stand as a nation lies somewhere in between all of those feelings.

Police reform and criminal justice-related issues have been the most visible lens for racial issues for a number of years. And while they are extremely important, sometimes literally life or death, it is critical the American people do not see those matters as the only disparities we face. Education, health care, and access to capital are also three foundational areas where people of color are currently fighting an uphill battle.

Despite the challenges that remain, I am optimistic for our future. Since I was born in 1965, our nation has made some amazing progress. While we still have work to do, I believe in the heart and soul of America.

From Cotton to Congress

My belief in this nation comes from my own family's story. My grandfather was born in a little town called Salley, South Carolina, in 1921. As a child, he had to cross the street if a white person was walking toward him. To help provide for the family, he dropped out of elementary school to pick cotton.

Eight decades later, at the tender age of 91, my grandfather watched on television as I was sworn into the United States Senate. In just one lifetime, my family had gone from picking cotton in South Carolina to picking out a seat in Congress and later the United States Senate.

We have lived the promise of America. My grandfather grew up in the Jim Crow South, and my mother came of age during the civil rights movement. Despite these challenges, they never lost sight of what was truly possible for us.

My parents divorced when I was 7, leaving my mom to provide for my brother and me. She worked sixteen-hour days as a nurse's assistant to keep a roof over our heads and some food on the table. We even moved into my grandparent's small house for a time—the five of us sharing two bedrooms. My dreams revolved around football, and my academics slipped. I flunked my freshman year of high school and reached a fork in the road. My mother, and an amazing mentor named John Moniz, made sure I took the right path. They both believed that Tim Scott, just a poor black kid from North Charleston, South Carolina, had more potential than he could imagine. And they knew that in this country, if I pulled myself together, all things were possible.

Thanks to them, I got on track. I graduated from high school and college and eventually started my own small business. I got involved in local politics, running for Charleston County Council, and working to help build a better future not just for my own family, but for our community as a whole.

The truth is, there aren't many places in the world where my story is possible. And while America offers that opportunity, we still have to continue working to make sure every single person in this country believes a chance at success is available to them. I grew up with too many folks who lost the belief that the world held something larger in store for them. To restore that belief, we have to tackle longstanding issues. The tragic deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor this year gave us a window to find solutions and bring communities of color and law enforcement together to start rebuilding trust that has eroded over decades.

Rebuilding Trust

As a black man, I have had many encounters with police officers, both good and bad. Recently, I have seen the presentation of this binary choice: either you “back the blue” or you support “communities of color.” I personally support both sides, and I think that it is possible for others to do the same. A few bad apples should not spoil the perception of all law enforcement officers. Based on my experiences, most officers are good, character-driven people who truly care about the citizens they serve and have vowed to protect. On the other hand, I have experienced racial profiling from officers, and I do believe that this is a problem that others have experienced.

In 2016, I gave a three-part floor speech on some of my encounters with law enforcement officers. Over the last two decades, I have been stopped around eighteen times, and as a lawmaker, I was stopped seven times in one year—with some of those encounters at the United States Capitol.

As a United States senator, I was stopped while trying to enter the Capitol to vote while wearing my Senate lapel pin—which is only given to U.S. senators. On a different occasion, I was stopped for using my turn signal too late. And at the age of 21, I was pulled over for simply having an improper headlight, and yet the officer felt the need to place his hand on his weapon and call me “boy.” Even today, while I have the privilege of serving as a United States senator, I am not immune to being stopped while driving at home in South Carolina or even while walking onto the grounds of the Capitol.

Unfortunately, many (if not most) African-Americans in this country have had unpleasant encounters with police officers, with some even resulting in death. During the summer of 2020, after the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, I introduced the Just and Unifying Solutions to Invigorate Communities Everywhere (JUSTICE) Act, a bill to provide long-term solutions focused on police reform, accountability, and transparency while also promoting efforts to find solutions to systemic issues affecting people of color, such as education and health disparities. Unfortunately—due to politics—my bill did not receive enough votes to bring the legislation onto the floor of the United States Senate, but I am hopeful that we can pass legislation for American communities.

You don’t have to be black in America to realize that what happened to George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless others was wrong. Over the summer—and even now—I see people belonging to all races and backgrounds protesting because they acknowledge that racism still exists in this country. And as we address the original sin of this nation, I believe that more people need to continue to come together to have these painful conversations to address the issues that impact so many in our communities (and in the world). I have been a longtime advocate of pastors, community leaders, and heads of the police departments coming together to address issues in their communities. Having conversations in the community is the first step, and I’m proud to say that I have helped facilitate conversations like these in my home state.

Having candid conversations allows us to understand others’ perspectives, which is fundamental for moving a nation forward. My good friend Congressman Trey Gowdy and I wanted to bring communities of color together with law enforcement in South Carolina after the Walter Scott shooting so we facilitated meetings to have productive conversations without cameras. It led to law enforcement officers and pastors doing ride-alongs and having raw conversations on issues that communities of color face.

A lot of the biases that exist within people go unrealized; meanwhile, they impact and affect entire groups of people. Many officers may not realize that they profile blacks and whites differently, which was highlighted through these conversations.

Although Congress has not yet passed legislation on police reform, I am optimistic that we can get something done for the advancement of our nation. And I believe that it is in the best interest of the people for us to pass a bill that has approximately 70 percent that we can agree on instead of passing nothing at all.

Opportunity for All

As I have mentioned a few times already, confronting the issue of race in America is bigger than just police reform. Our education and health care systems are full of disparities that leave people of color behind, and our financial system needs some targeted reforms to ensure more access for low-income families who are doing everything they can to succeed.

COVID-19 has shined a bright light on our health care and educational systems. Black Americans are dying at significantly higher rates, and much of that has to do with preexisting conditions that have plagued our community for years. We need to develop a comprehensive strategy for attacking higher rates of diabetes, hypertension, obesity, and other diseases that affect people of color. We also must encourage people of color to increase participation in clinical drug and vaccine trials to find the best treatments and preventative measures.

With the vast majority of our nation's students at home during the pandemic, low-income and rural families are bearing the brunt of these challenges. This comes on top of the reality that barely half of black students have access to the courses needed to prepare for college, and that black fourth graders score 26 points lower on reading assessments and black eighth graders score 32 points lower on math assessments than their white peers.¹

We are also seeing communities that lack widespread broadband internet access struggling to help their students keep up. But that lack of access was an issue before the pandemic, as well. Increasing broadband access will give students of color access to more educational opportunities, increase the availability of telehealth and preventative health measures, and provide for greater economic opportunity in general.

The third plank of this conversation revolves around economic opportunity. Through the enactment of my MOBILE Act, individuals in underbanked and underserved communities can easily open bank accounts and quickly connect to banking services. My Credit Score Competition Act and Credit Access and Inclusion Act allow individuals to use alternative means of showing “good credit”—including making rent and utility payments. Opportunity Zones, which I included in the 2017 tax reform package, allow for significant capital to be invested in entrepreneurs, small businesses, and other ventures in our nation's poorest communities, which are unfortunately overwhelmingly communities of color.

I know that inner-city Detroit or rural South Carolina has as much talent and vision as Silicon Valley. The issue is simply the opportunity to showcase those traits. By tackling some of these longstanding issues affecting people of color, we can ensure a brighter future for millions.

The Future Is Bright

There is no doubt 2020 has tested our nation in ways we have not seen for generations. The violence we have seen in the streets is completely unacceptable, and COVID-19 has led to a litany of unforeseen circumstances affecting every American family.

But we're still standing. We're still here. Through the darkness, there is light. In 2015, after the murder of Walter Scott in North Charleston, South Carolina, cries for justice were made but not heard by many. The same for Tamir Rice, Philando Castile, and so many others. Following the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, however, the outpouring of grief and support has come from across the racial and political spectrum. Our country is taking notice and saying enough is enough.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shed much needed light on health care disparities facing African-American communities. Virtual schooling has shown how critical broadband access is for low-income and rural communities. Businesses across the country are understanding a diverse workforce is a strong workforce.

We're headed in the right direction. We might have to take two steps back in order to take three steps forward, but that's okay. That means we're moving, and we are marching toward that perfect union we all would love to see. America remains the land of opportunity; let's make sure it stays that way for generations to come.

Senator Tim Scott was raised in a poor, single parent household in North Charleston, South Carolina, and grew accustomed to moving every few years, as well as the long hours his mom worked to keep a roof over their heads. After failing four classes his freshman year of high school, Senator Scott's path forward was murky at best. Through the belief of his mother, his mentor, and his own determination, Senator Scott got his grades back on track, graduated from Charleston Southern University, and eventually built his own successful small business. Through the lessons taught by his mentor, Senator Scott developed his mission statement: to positively affect the lives of a billion people. That led him to public service in South Carolina and later in Washington, D.C. Since joining the Senate in 2013, Senator Scott has been a national leader on efforts to bring opportunity to every American family. His signature legislation creating Opportunity Zones was passed as part of the 2017 tax reform package, and has the potential to bring billions of dollars of private investment into distressed communities across the country. As he continues to lead on the implementation of the Opportunity Zones initiative, Senator Scott also plays a critical role in issues regarding workforce development, education, and diversity. Whether it's tackling the skills gap, making sure children have access to the educational environment best suited for them, or working to bring everyone to the table to find solutions, Senator Scott will keep fighting for South Carolinians every single day he serves in the U.S. Senate.

¹ "2019 NAEP Report Card Analysis," Southern Education Foundation, accessed October 3, 2020, <https://www.southerneducation.org/resources/2019naep/>.