

# What Racism Costs All Americans

Heather McGhee and Ezra Klein discuss the terrible price of drained-pool politics.

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[MUSIC PLAYING]

Ezra Klein

I'm Ezra Klein, and this is "The Ezra Klein Show."

I don't want to ruin too much of this show by summarizing it at the top. Heather McGhee, who is my guest and the author of the wonderful and really important new book, "The Sum of Us," explains all of it better than I can. So I'm going to let her do it. But I do want to share a connection this conversation made for me that I wish I'd made before I walked into it. And so maybe you'll get more out of it having this earlier than I did. A few years ago, I interviewed a psychologist named Lisa Feldman Barrett, and she had written this really great book about how the mind generates emotions. And her argument is that emotions are metaphors that apply to sensory data. Depending on which metaphors our society has given us, we will interpret the same sensory data in different ways. So if you believe yourself to be an anxious person or your society talks about anxiety a lot, you'll likely interpret a speedy heart rate, a bit of stomach churning as anxiety, a bad thing. I know I've done this quite a bit. But another person in another context might feel the same feelings as anticipation or excitement. She tells this funny story about being on a date and thinking it wasn't going well — that the conversation was lame, that the guy was lame. But at the same time, she was flushed and her heart rate was sped up and she felt these butterflies in her stomach, and so she thought, I must be wrong. There must be some real primal connection here. But it just turned out she had food poisoning. Her brain had a story, a metaphor. It knew how to apply to those sensory feelings. And so then it got what those feelings met wrong. Our brains are prediction machines, and sometimes they predict incorrectly. Something that I took from this conversation with Heather is that the same thing happens on a societal level. If we grow up in a society cut up by racism, told again and again that our relationships, our policies are zero-sum, that if those people over there are going to progress, it's going to come at our expense, that metaphor will lodge in us. We'll become used to interpreting

the data of this world in a zero-sum way. And so a society that needs to tell that zero-sum story again and again and again to justify racial hierarchy and oppression, to justify ill-gotten gains, will also become used to seeing the world through that lens. And so we will deprive ourselves — all of us — of so many opportunities to advance together, because we are so used to fearing that any other group's gain will mean our loss. But even outside that specific outcome, it's just worth thinking about this whole conversation in terms of the deep stories we tell ourselves and the way that trains our mind to think, the way that trains our mind to interpret. When we are useful looking at things one way, we will look at almost everything that way. We'll be quick to impose that story on the world around us. And if that's a bad story, a story of scarcity rather than abundance, of zero-sum rather than positive-sum interactions, then that is a world we'll get. In many cases, that is a world America has now. As always, my email is [ezrakleinshow@nytimes.com](mailto:ezrakleinshow@nytimes.com). I'm always interested to know who you'd like to see on the show next or what you think of the show. Just send me your suggestions, your feedback. Here's Heather McGhee.

So the metaphor at the center of the book is this idea of the drained public pool. But I want to start in the reality of the drained public pool. Tell me about that.

Heather McGhee

So in the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, America went on this building boom across the country of this novel thing which was the grand, resort-style, public pool. It was a tangible symbol of government largesse and commitment to the kind of high, leisure-filled quality of life that would become the American dream. It was a melting pot, almost literally. It was a part of the Americanization project of bringing white ethnic communities together to have shared recreation. There was a sense that the new America of the 20th century, the early 20th century, needed this kind of public investment to cohere a national identity and improve everyone's quality of life. And there were over 2,000 in the United States, and many of them were for whites only and segregated, as were most of the public benefits at the time. Then in the 1950s and '60s, civil rights advocates in Black communities started arguing that their tax dollars had funded these grand public pools, and therefore, they should be allowed to swim too. And that's when white towns got really creative. In order to avoid integrating the public pools, they sold them to private entities for \$1. They wouldn't provide them in a public way anymore. And then ultimately, in order to avoid integrating them, many of these towns drained their public swimming pools rather than let Black families swim too. So of course, the white families lost a public resource as well. The Black families never knew the glory days of the well-funded public pool. We started

seeing backyard pools crop up around the country and these private members-only swimming clubs — over 100 of them in the D.C. area alone after pool integration — these private clubs that you had to pay. And it was a tangible example, like of course, massive resistance to Brown in Virginia, where they closed dozens of public schools, where once the idea of the public included people of color, not only was the public no longer good, but white people didn't want public goods at all.

Ezra Klein

It's such a powerful visual. So you went to one of these pools, and they literally poured concrete in it.

Heather Mcghee

Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Ezra Klein

I mean, they destroyed something they loved.

Heather Mcghee

Yeah. I traveled to Montgomery, Alabama, where Oak Park is still there, but the pool that was the center of the park in the middle of Montgomery was filled in, seeded over with grass by the time the next summer came along, and you see this wide expanse rimmed with oak trees now. I actually collected a handful of the acorns from these oak trees just as a reminder of how recent this phenomenon was, and how it can regenerate if we're not careful — these seeds of this exclusion and dispossession. They closed in Montgomery the Parks and Recreation Department for a decade, from 1959 to 1969. So they sold off the animals to the zoo. They had no Parks and Recreation Department at all for a decade of the 1960s. And when they reopened the system, they never recreated the pool. They never rebuilt the pool.

Ezra Klein

So I want to hold here for a couple of minutes and talk about the psychology. I think it is easy to listen to something like this and say, well, that's in the before days.

Heather Mcghee

Yep.

Ezra Klein

But 1969 is not 6,000 years ago. My parents were alive. My brother would be born in a couple of years. That is in living memory. So I want to talk about the psychology that would lead white people to brick over their own public goods rather than share them. At that moment in 1959, when you have leaders in Montgomery, Alabama — white leaders closing their Park Department, telling their own children, there will be no pool for you to go to — how do they see themselves as doing the right thing for their children, for themselves? The book, both in this metaphor and in everything else we're going to talk about, is about this idea that this mindset leads to not just Black people getting less, but white people getting less. And it literalizes right here. So how are they the heroes of their own story?

Heather Mcghee

The story that allows them to be heroes by cutting off their noses despite their face, for example, is a story in which Black people have a poverty that is contagious — that Black people are both physically unclean and dangerous, more prone to violence, and so would therefore be threatening to the little kids and the — heaven forbid — women in bathing suits. There's a sexualized stereotype around hypersexual Black masculinity, that we can't have our white women being anywhere near Black men. But there is also the idea, I think, on a deeper level that when generations of white people have been the beneficiaries of these invisible government benefits from the Homestead Act, the G.I. Bill, that have created an actual economic superiority over Black people, that idea reifies the idea that there's something innately superior about white people. And so the way I made sense of it was, if you've been taught for generations to disdain and distrust a group of people and exclude them from the circle of human belonging, from citizenship, from economic inclusion, from schools, from unions — the list goes on — neighborhoods, mortgage markets, and then suddenly the same government that was the purveyor of all of that, the government that wrote into its housing codes, do not sell to Black people or we will not give you money — that same government almost on a dime said, OK, now you have to swim with those people. You have to go to school with those people. It was a level of betrayal to the white consciousness that made white people want to disengage from a collective that was no longer trustworthy.

Ezra Klein

You and I grew up in a similar milieu in politics, in this policy analysts world in D.C. And you were at Demos, and I was at The American Prospect, which at a certain point merged together for a time. And something you talk about is a realization — as that work continued looking at table

after table showing how a tax plan or a student debt plan or a health plan would benefit different groups, that there was this myth at the core of policy analysis that what people are trying to do in politics is pursue their economic self-interest. And when you look at examples like this one — but so much that we'll talk about here, so much in the Trump era, so much in modern politics too, you just endlessly watch that disproven. You just endlessly watch that narrow distributional table way of measuring what is in somebody's self-interest fail. So when you look at these stories, how do you understand political self-interest?

Heather Mcghee

You're right that in many ways, I left the think tank world in order to set out on the three-year journey it took for me to write "The Sum of Us," because I felt like the way the progressive economic orthodoxy was understanding economic self-interest and what was driving people and how to make change — the idea that we could study the problem, put the numbers in front of decision makers, and of course, everybody would benefit — that all seemed very flawed to me, particularly after the election of Donald Trump. What I understand now is that much more than a material self-interest is a status self-interest — is a self-interest particularly in a society as hierarchical as ours, as brutally hierarchical as ours. Being in the middle or on the top of that hierarchy is more important than \$7 more an hour for you, is more important than \$10,000 off of your student loan bill, is more important than things like taking action to address climate change. All of these obvious self-interest issues have been filtered through a racialized zero-sum story — the idea that progress for people of color has to come at the expense of white people. That is, more than anything I discovered, the major stumbling block to progress in America.

Ezra Klein

So I want to look at some of the policy areas this plays out today, because I think it's important to say this really clearly — drained pools is by no means the most consequential example of drained pool politics. And so I actually want to begin with Medicaid expansion after the Affordable Care Act. You cite a study in the book which found that as the percent of the Black population increases, the likelihood of Medicaid adoption in a state decreases. Tell me about that.

Heather Mcghee

So I look at the racialized history of our unique-among-advanced-economies unwillingness to provide universal health care, and it's just overwhelming, the evidence. From the very beginning, Truman tried to have a national health insurance plan. The segregationist Dixiecrats in his party opposed it. And then, of course, to Obamacare and Medicaid expansion. I actually didn't realize

until I began researching the book that white Americans are pretty vehemently opposed to Obamacare and have been. Support for it has never reached over 50 percent. It's still an unpopular plan among white Americans, even though if you break down the individual policies, white Americans are supportive of it. But if you think about Medicaid expansion, which is still a fraught battle — we still have a dozen states that have refused to expand Medicaid. And as soon as, not incidentally, a states' rights theory was used to knock down the Medicaid expansion that should have been universal across 50 states, you had a new Mason-Dixon line of states mostly in the old Confederacy that refused to expand Medicaid. And I looked at a bunch of the research that really showed the racialization of health care opinion, and I go to Texas, which is the state with the highest uninsured in the population. It is the state with the highest number of rural hospital closings. And these are hospitals that are the lifeblood of these mostly rural, conservative, largely white towns, and they are closing. And a significant degree of the closure is because of unpaid bills by people who should be eligible for Medicaid. But the Texas political class — the overwhelmingly white, overwhelmingly male political class in Texas is absolutely opposed to expanding Medicaid. And the idea that I heard from the advocates on the ground was that the idea of Medicaid has become a dog whistle for Black people. Even the Latino community in Texas — there were many people who said, it's not something we want, because after 40 years of being told that public benefits are only for degraded poor people, you don't want any part of that. Admitting that you need Medicaid is admitting that you were on the bottom of this social hierarchy that you're going to work like hell to rise above.

Ezra Klein

So I remember covering this. I covered the Affordable Care Act closely. And there are two things about this that always stick in my mind. One is that the Medicaid expansion, even with the Supreme Court decision allowing states to opt out — it was built to be such an extraordinarily good deal for the states. The federal government paid 100 percent of the cost for the first three years, and then it was 90-10 after that. Medicaid is usually a much closer match between the federal government and state governments. The federal government was backing up dump trucks of health care money into these red states, and these red states are saying no. But then the consequences are deadly. So a 2019 study by the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities found that Medicaid expansion saved 19,000 lives from 2014 to 2017, and state decisions not to expand cost 15,600 premature deaths over the same period. And to state the unbelievably obvious, a lot of those are white people. This isn't just not being able to swim in a pool. This is your mother may die, your friend may die — it's shocking.

Heather Mcghee

It's shocking. It's very upsetting. I did talk to health care advocates who could easily recall people they knew who had died because of a lack of health care coverage. And these are the stakes. This is why I felt the need to write a book making this somewhat controversial argument that racism has a cost for everyone. Because when we continue to allow the zero-sum story, the idea that progress for one group comes at the expense of another, it's a lie that we are buying into, and it's a costly lie. I talk about health care in the book. I talk about the lives lost for our unwillingness to — in a way, it is swimming in the same pool, Ezra. It's the same risk pool. It's the same health insurance pool. Actually, insurers use the word pool.

Ezra Klein

The wonk is coming out with that pun. [LAUGHTER] Swimming in the same risk pool.

Heather Mcghee

That's right. But I mean, deep must that zero-sum story be to have white Americans, the majority of whom have voted against the party of the New Deal that largely built the white middle class since that party also expanded to become the party of civil rights too — they're cheering the gutting of public investments that they, in fact, would benefit from. And yet ever since integration, we have had white political majority that has cheered on the cutting of the social safety net, the ratcheting down of welfare to virtual meaninglessness, and the attacks on unions.

Ezra Klein

So one of the things I'm going to want to push on during this conversation is some questions of causality. And so one here is about whether or not this reflects a often counterproductive human belief in certain forms of zero-sum fairness or racism directly. So there are all kinds of studies and experiments in which if people feel somebody else is getting something that is unfair, they will make it so they and everyone else get less in order to keep it from that person getting more. My colleague, Sarah Kliff — we're both at The New York Times now, but back then, we were at Vox — she did this extraordinary reporting trip to Kentucky early in the Trump era. And she was going and looking at and talking to white people in Kentucky, poor white people who were benefiting from the Affordable Care Act but were supporting Donald Trump and supporting a Republican Party that wanted to repeal it. She got a bunch of explanations, but one thing she kept finding was anger and resentment that the slightly better-off working class white people had towards the slightly poorer white people, because they were paying premiums in the exchanges, and the slightly poorer white people were not paying premiums for Medicaid. They felt the

poorer white people were getting too much for nothing. So is this just a racialized phenomenon, or is this a deeper thing in which this idea that somebody else is getting more than we are when we're the ones who deserve more than they get just fouls up politics everywhere and always?

Heather Mcghee

The zero-sum story — I go back in the book to the beginning — where did we get the zero-sum story? It's not an obvious thing. It's not an obvious belief system. It's not a natural sense of group competition, and it's more widely held among white people than other people. And so I went back to the founding and the pre-founding of this country and showed how it was used to justify the first economic policies of this country, which were stolen people, stolen land, and stolen labor. That zero-sum racial hierarchy created the scaffolding. I do believe that since it's so aggressively marketed to white people through the lens of racial hierarchy, it's very clear to me that a white person can feel that way about other white people as well, that resentment and that desire to distinguish among the various small gradations on this ladder of human value. But it's that ladder of human value that was first mapped onto the American psyche as a racialized project. Though disdain and distrust that particularly white Americans have for people who are poor is a very racialized view — it's the idea that there's something inherently wrong with people who don't have enough money. It's also — of course, the whole thing is very rich. When you say that people are so resentful of people getting things in an unfair way, I mean, that's what the entirety of the white spoils system has been in this country. And those same people are not resentful of white privilege. Those same people are not resentful of the history, which frankly, many of them were taught not to know and worked very hard not to know of all of the litany of free stuff that was given by the government to create the white middle class. And so I do think it's related — the idea of resentment at some idea that somebody is getting something else and the way that we cling as Americans to whatever our rung is on this brutal hierarchical ladder.

Ezra Klein

So I want to try to draw out more this psychological model you're suggesting here. So human beings are born, and we're pretty malleable in the way we can understand society working. There have been lots of different ways society has been composed going way, way, way back through the ages, and lots of different ways they're composed around the world now. So it's obvious to me looking at some of these studies that we all have a tendency to be willing to either be altruistic and believe we should be helping each other, or to be pulled towards a selfish, zero-sum, angry, resentful — I have a toddler, and I will see this — just flipping every couple of hours depending on



mood. And so what you're saying is that in a society riven by racism, more of a story that gets people thinking in a zero-sum resentful way is told and told and retold and retold. And if I understand you, it falls within particular power. That's why people say, look at Black people. But it's a way you have structured your thinking so that it also becomes natural for you to think of other white people this way, people of other social classes this way, maybe people of other countries this way. That once this model of this is the right way to understand your competition with others takes hold in your brain, it's an easy metaphor to start applying everywhere. And so these things that maybe have a beginning in the need to construct and sustain this racial caste system begin to be applied more broadly over time. Is that true to how you think about it, or am I getting that story wrong?

Heather Mcghee

No, I think that is right. When you create this hierarchy of human value, and you feel that there are only so many rungs on that ladder, and if someone gets on your rung, that means you have nowhere to go but down — that can apply to immigrants, different kinds of immigrants over different time, that can apply to women coming into the workforce, et cetera. But I will say that for me, it was important to note that the zero-sum racial hierarchy is a story that has been relentlessly packaged and marketed and sold by people who benefit the most from the economic status quo. It is not something that is a predominant white working class idea on its own. Everything we believe comes from a story we've been told. And whether it's Rupert Murdoch and the desire for a billionaire to have a propaganda mechanism where the zero-sum story is really the core narrative that finds a new example every hour to the person with the biggest bull horn in the world for four years, to Donald Trump, and everything in between, the conservative orthodoxy around makers and takers and freeloaders and taxpayers and Reagan's shifting of the narrative of what was wrong with Black people from white oppression to cultures of Black poverty — all of that is a story that political and economic elites have sold for their own profit to a white majority that then continues to vote for their perceived racial interest instead of their class interest with Brown and Black Americans who are often struggling from the same economic challenges.

Ezra Klein

I always think of Donald Trump in this model, because Trump is somebody who I think you really see had a temperament oriented towards this kind of zero-sum thinking, and then applied it to everything despite being at the very top of the ladder. I mean, he's somebody who was racist, but also his understanding, as far as I could tell, of all relationships between America and other

countries was that we were either winning or losing the transaction. His understanding of all business deals was he was either winning the deal or he was losing the deal. His understanding of all human relations was he was either winning and dominating or losing and being made weak. And it always struck me in him and in its appeal to people that it is actually, sadly, much harder to make people think about the ways in which a world can be positive-sum, the ways in which a deal can benefit both sides simultaneously, than the ways in which it can be zero-sum. And so there's this real danger of people who have either felt this or seen this or oriented towards it, and then that becomes the only way they can think about life.

Heather Mcghee

Yeah. I mean, I do my best in the book to try to find examples time and time again that give lie to the idea of the zero-sum not only enumerating the costs of racism to white people, to widen the aperture that has completely unwittingly and not at all with anything but positive intent communicated a story in recent years of white privilege that suggests that racism is good for white people, so maybe they should actually keep it. If I'm told all the time that racism is to my benefit, the only thing I have to make me want to join with racial justice advocates to fight against racism is a sense of self-sacrifice. And at a time of widening insecurity, that's not enough. It's also not true. I mean, we hit on the formula in this country for making broadly-shared prosperity for the masses. And we walked away from it because of racism. That is more clear to me now than ever. And you get reports coming out every six months it seems from Citigroup this summer saying that we've lost nearly \$20 trillion in economic output because of the racial-economic divides over the past 20 years. Or the Federal Reserve Bank just this past week — a report saying we lost \$2 trillion in economic output in 2019 because of the economic gaps between white men and everybody else. It's no way to run a country. We're leaving some of our best players on the sidelines. [MUSIC PLAYING]

Ezra Klein

So you mentioned earlier that if you look at public opinion about the Affordable Care Act just among white people, it has never been popular. Though the Affordable Care Act is now above 50 percent in polling, it is not above 50 percent among white people. I mean, if you at, say, votes for Donald Trump, Donald Trump would have won if only white people voted. And one way of reading this that I see sometimes, it's just like, white people are conservative. But something that you draw out, and that you see, I think, if you look at Europe, is that that is a reaction to America's particular history with race and its racial divide. So there's obviously nothing genetic about white people that causes them to favor these politics, or else Canada would not have a

universal health care system, the UK wouldn't have it, Denmark wouldn't have it, Switzerland wouldn't have it. In other places, white people do not have the politics that white people in America have.

Heather Mcghee

Mm-hmm. That's exactly right. Everything we believe comes from a story we've been told, and the story that has been aggressively marketed to white Americans has been that there is something so wrong with Black and brown people that you don't want to be in collaboration with or in solidarity with them or else that reflects on you. There is a hierarchy of human value. You'd better fight like heck to maintain your position in that hierarchy. I think it's really important not to even inadvertently communicate that there's some sort of biological basis for these group-identity-related psychologies. I talk about it in terms of the slogan that's become very popular in some places on the left. Trust Black women. I'm a Black woman. I want you to trust me. I want to trust Stacey Abrams. I want you to trust Ayanna Pressley. I agree to a certain degree, but I was always a little bit wary of it, because it suggests there's something biologically amazing and magical about us. And in fact, it's not that. It's that there is a social hierarchy, that group identity does shape your experience of the world and how the systems shape your life, and so people who are at the intersectional bottom of that social hierarchy are the ones who have the clearest view of all of it — all who is harmed by it, and what you need to do to fix it for everyone.

Ezra Klein

I want to move to another example in the book, which is higher education. You connect the transition from publicly financed higher education, which we really did have through much of the 20th century — you really could go to college on the government's dime and not come out with tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars in loans — and you connect the racialization of this and the way that the politics of race deformed white attitudes towards public spending to the student debt crisis today. Can you talk through that story a bit?

Heather Mcghee

This was really important to me, because there actually has been a lot of reporting about poor and working class white people who reject welfare and means-tested Medicaid, because they're so silly. They cut off their noses despite their faces and tsk-tsk about them. But I want to talk about something that was a much more middle class issue, which is college. The somewhat novel idea of well-funded public colleges, at least one in every state, was one of the hallmarks of the

American whites-only social contract for the first half of the 20th century. All of that changed with a new post-civil rights movement anti-government ethos among the white voting majority which wanted tax cuts and not public spending, which wanted a sense of pulling up the ladder and divesting from these places that had become really fraught and contested spaces like public education of the K through 12 level. Public college became a place where integration was being threatened. And so it's not normally conceived of. First of all, most people don't know that we have so much student loan debt because of government cutbacks of states spending less per capita on public college despite a growing tax base and a federal shift from grants to loans. People don't know that it's government cutbacks that created the student debt problem. And they certainly typically don't map the issue of race and racism onto it. But the shift in the expectation of free college for a majority white college-going population to a debt for diploma system for a predominantly students of color population is one of the most dramatic examples of racism draining the pool. And if I can just add, it's so frustrating, because it's seen as a colorblind issue. Student debt — the rules that we changed in order to make student debt the new normal were not explicitly racist like redlining or all of that. But when you say suddenly to a generation, not only do you have to go to college to get a middle class job because of changes we've made in the labor market, but you will now have to fund that college out of your own family's wealth, knowing full well that family wealth is where history shows up in your wallet, where the amount of money you have in savings or CDs or home equity absolutely tracks to what side of the color line you were on when the government was handing out free wealth building opportunities, you get what you have now, which is a widening of the racial wealth gap, which is the fact that a Black family with a college degree has less wealth than a white family headed by a high school dropout. It's colorblind, but it's systemically racist, and it impacts not just the targeted community, but also the majority of white students who have to borrow now too.

Ezra Klein

This, I think, is such an important point. I want to hold on it for a minute, because something I was thinking about reading the book is a little bit subtle here. So if you think about the way a lot of American public policy has changed over the decades you're tracking, basically, it moves from the government does things that you just get, like public college, to you have to pay out of pocket for it. And so that's really a move from something that builds wealth in the future to takes income in the present. And so then, what looks like a fair race to people — I mean, everybody's getting this chance to go to college and get a Pell Grant — but in fact, as you say here, is reflecting that if you got in when the getting was good, you have the assets to then pay for the thing you need now and just have it then continue to build wealth. And that's where it seems we get into some of this

widening wealth gap stuff. And I'd like to talk about the mechanisms of that a little bit, because I think it's really important, wherein if you have family who can pay for your higher education, and so then you go to college and you get a really good job, then you just start rebuilding wealth. But if you have family who couldn't pay for your higher education costs, and so you go to college and you get a good job, but you're paying off hundreds of thousands of dollars in student debt, and you're also helping other members of your family who maybe don't have as much as you do, then you don't build wealth. It helps your income some, but it doesn't translate into your wealth, and so the gap just keeps widening. I really feel like the dynamics of wealth creation are understudied and under-emphasized in politics, where we tend to talk about income. But in many ways, they seem to me to be more important.

Heather Mcghee

In my time at Demos, we really focused on these issues of wealth and debt, because it is so much more compounding in terms of opportunity and disadvantage than an income. You could get a great job today or tomorrow. You could get a great contract. You could have enough money in a given paycheck to pay your bills. But the question of what happens when that paycheck stops or is paused or you feel sick and can't go in is life determining. And that is where, basically, we're all paying compound interest on decisions made long before we were born — racially explicit decisions. There's a section in the book where I lay out the list of free stuff that was given to white Americans to help build wealth. And it's so important to recognize that the divides that everyday people observe today — what's going on with that Black neighborhood? Why does it feel like it doesn't have as many small businesses? Why does it seem like the schools in Black neighborhoods are underfunded? Well, they're linked to property values, which are a result of generations of explicit laws forbidding Black people from owning homes and selling them. And so we have this now somewhat colorblind story of economic disparity today that we try with the American mythology of individual effort and bootstraps and just overall individualism to justify by saying, well, Black people just don't try that hard. But in fact, it's not that Black people don't try that hard. It's in fact that decisions were made long before many Black people and white people were born, and when we ended the era of explicit racial wealth stripping policies — I'm going to put a caveat in that around the subprime mortgage crisis, which we may come back to — we didn't take that into account. And that's why there's such a vocal call now for reparations, because no amount of education or income that Black families do is going to make up for generations of racism in our wealth building markets.

Ezra Klein

So Senator Cory Booker and Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley have this idea for baby bonds, which is a wealth generating proposal. And they calculate that it would close about a half to two-thirds of the racial wealth gap, at least if you're measuring that from the median, not the mean. And for a long time in the Democratic Party, there was this idea that because the politics of race are so difficult, because framing things for race creates these drain the pool mentalities. So what you want to do is you want to have racially progressive policies that you sell in a colorblind way. And in recent years, there's been an almost reversal, I think, having to do with the dynamics inside the Democratic Party, where policies that are literally colorblind, like this baby bonds policy, are being sold in a very race-conscious way, as a way of, say, closing the racial wealth gap. Given the research you've done here, and so the grappling you've done with the politics that happen when you frame things around race, where do you come down on that?

Heather Mcghee

So what that's reflecting is the hard fact that the majority of white Americans have not voted for Democrats since the civil rights movement. And so when we were growing up and there was this fear of the white center all the time in politics, it was a cold calculation. The new calculation is that what the Democrats are riding to victory is a new, multiracial, anti-racist coalition, the backbone of which is Black people, and then the white people who join are progressives who don't mind sitting in a meeting with and swimming in a pool with Black people. They came for Obama, they stayed to fight against Trump. Now they like it. So that is, I think, what explains that shift. I think the idea is we've got to deal with these racial disparities. I think it is a genuine desire to see this country prosper by making sure that all families have what they need and that we don't keep holding back millions of American families because of bad public policy decisions. But I think the politics of it are, yes, we can actually talk about the race impacts of this, because there's a clamoring for racial justice. And the white Democrats who are with us are basically there because of their racial attitudes.

Ezra Klein

But in a world where you have to sell that beyond the Democratic Party, is that a bad strategy?

Heather Mcghee

I wrote this book because I think it's important to talk about the benefits of moving beyond drained pool politics for all people, including white people. We have reached the economic and moral limits of the zero-sum world view that was handed to us at the founding of this nation. And

I do believe that today's inequality insecurity dysfunction has as its unifying core this majority-white belief in a zero-sum racial hierarchy. And so I'm trying to make this an invitation to white Americans to join in, to release this really false and illusory idea that they're so different from people of color and so much better than people of color that they don't want to be in fellowship with people of color, get a sense of patriotism about who we are as Americans, all of us, and move forward together. Joe Biden, in his first speech on race as president, was issuing a bunch of racial equity executive orders. And he actually said, for too long, we've allowed a narrow, cramped view of the promise of this nation to fester. We've bought the world view that America is a zero-sum game in many cases. If you succeed, I fail. If you get ahead, I fall behind. If you get the job, I lose mine. Maybe worst of all, if I hold you down, I lift myself up. But racism is corrosive, it's destructive, and it's costly. It costs every American, not just those who have felt the sting of racial injustice. So that, for me, was a big win. The idea that this man who — in many ways, Joe Biden is an avatar of the white moderate who's had a huge journey himself on these issues, who's always wanted to have his heart in the right place. God, he even was a lifeguard in a Black pool. It doesn't get any more apt than this. He followed the white moralizing logic into the Crime Bill of the 1990s. He was opposed to busing for school integration. And yet, then he became Barack Obama's best friend, and also, I think, did what good politicians do, which is read the moment and recognize that his constant moral compass now demanded something much bolder in terms of confronting the persistence of racial inequality and systemic racism. And yet, because he's still got his finger on the pulse of the Scranton white American politics, he needed to call out the scapegoating. He needed to say, hey, I'm nostalgic for that time too, when a white guy could go into a factory and come out with being set for life. But it wasn't the Black folks and the immigrants who took that factory job away. And in fact, this divided politics is propping up a party and an economic worldview that is stripping opportunity from your family and your neighborhoods and your communities. I was really proud, obviously, as you can imagine, to see that moment happen, and to see him try to speak to white Americans to say that it doesn't have to be a zero-sum game.

Ezra Klein

One thing that touches on is that I think in politics for a long time, it's been believed there are two ways of approaching this. One is to deal directly with racism and the fact that you're trying to close racial economic divides, and the other is to ignore it, to pretend you don't know anything about racial economic divides, and you've just got this economic policy. But you've been involved with Ian Haney López in some research that has this other idea, which is to say that in fact, the human mind does have a us-versus-them tendency. It is a powerful thing to harness in politics.

This is how I read it. I don't think this is how Ian or you would frame it. And that the most powerful messaging is to say that there are powerful economic interests that are using racial division to enrich themselves and keep everyone else down. And so there's actually a different synthesis here that is more effective, but it's not one that ignores division. It is one that recasts division. I'm curious to hear you talk a little bit about that.

Heather Mcghee

That's exactly right. This idea that racism has a cost for everyone animated a massive public opinion and political messaging project that Ian Haney López, who was my law professor at Berkeley, and Anat Shenker-Osorio, who's a linguist and political message strategist, led to try to square the circle of the divide in progressive messaging. So you have the race left, which is talking about racial disparities and racial injustice, and which definitely galvanizes many people of color, though not all, and many white people who've made it part of their identity to be anti-racist, and then you have the class left that often says, you know what, that's divisive. Let's talk about economic populism, and let's talk about the plutocrats and the 99 percent. There's no difference among the 99 percent. It's the 1 percent versus everybody else. And what we found was that given how overwhelmingly powerful the megaphone is for the zero-sum scapegoating story, it wasn't effective even with persuadable, slightly progressive voters, to ignore that zero-sum story and just say, hey, no, it's about the 1 percent and the 99 percent. Ignore those divides. Ignore the stereotypes that are deeply ingrained in your brain about immigrants and poor Black people. Ignore what Donald Trump is saying and what Fox News is saying and what your neighbor is saying. You have to actually give people a new way to think about that dominant narrative, because it's not like they can ignore the dominant narrative. They need to recast the dominant narrative as a tool of the plutocrats, as a tool that stops us from joining together across lines of race to do what we can only do together and what we can't do alone — things like adequately fund our infrastructure and our schools, things like tackle climate change, things like rewrite our trade laws to make sure that every American who wants one has a decent job. And it's really important to not ignore just how profoundly racialized the story of the American economy and government is and has been for all of our history. So if you try to bring colorblind tools to convince people about their economic self-interest while ignoring just how profoundly racialized the economic story is, you just won't succeed. [MUSIC PLAYING]

Ezra Klein

I spent a lot of time grappling while thinking about the book with the way in which policies that



begin with racist roots get out of control. They slip their reins, and they become broadly applied, hurting a lot of people of all different races, and also in a funny way, non-racist in their modern intent, but still terrible. So you have a discussion in the book of single-family zoning. And single-family zoning is a policy with extraordinarily racist roots, and particularly so in California, where I live. And in San Francisco, where I live, single-family zoning has made it unbelievably unaffordable for basically anybody to live here — Black people, brown people, but also white people. I know tons of white people who have had to leave or have not been able to raise a family here because of single-family zoning. And one of the stories about this that began to take shape in my head is that there's obviously the case of policies that are directly racialized even now, like Medicaid, that the racialization of them ends up draining the pool. A lot of white people benefit from Medicaid, but they're voting against it on race grounds. But then there's something like single-family vote zoning where I was talking to somebody doing survey research on this, and they were saying that in fact, single-family zoning is popular among everybody when you ask about it, voters of all races, but it's making things unaffordable for everybody. You built zoning policy on the zero-sum racial idea, and now you have zero-sum zoning policy which only works to the advantage, if it works to anybody's advantage, of either the rich or the people who already live there, the incumbents. And that as a way of thinking about policy generally, that strikes me as very powerful that if you are engaged in zero-sum policy construction or zero-sum policy framing, that no matter whether or not you think now that you've cut the division well, you have no idea, eventually, which side of that you are going to be caught on — that zero-sum logic — it grows.

Heather Mcghee

Yeah, that's actually a really good way of thinking about it. I totally agree that the crisis of affordable housing is a great example of racism costing everyone. And I also, in my mind, when I think about the zero-sum logic growing out of control and leaping off the rails, as you said — I think about the financial crisis. I think about a totally racialized mortgage market where, for generations, the idea that Black and brown people were risky — so risky that the government drew lines around Black and brown neighborhoods and said, we will not guarantee a backstop — the mortgages, as we were doing for the entire mortgage market, of any mortgages sold in these neighborhoods, because it's just too risky. Never substantiated. Never substantiated, this idea, but it was just a common sense that Black people are going to be risky. That then was replaced very quickly by a lightly regulated mortgage market in the 1990s that, at the end of redlining, which happened in the late 1970s, you had about 10 years of fits and starts of Black people emerging into the mainstream mortgage market. And then you have the advent of the subprime

mortgage, which was totally justified. It was pretty zero-sum. It was like, these lenders can make double what they were making by increasing the interest rates on these loans. And it will cost handsomely the borrower. But it's OK, because what's happening is these lenders are pricing for risk. And so you had the advent of these high-cost loans. The idea was, they were supposed to be marketed and sold to people with lower credit scores. But in fact, the majority of subprime loans before the crash went to people with credit scores that would have allowed them to get prime loans. It was just, the limit was what you could get away with selling people. And this mechanism was first test it out in Black neighborhoods of existing homeowners. I mean, it's the thing that I actually get the most emotional about in terms of this book and all of these ideas. It's these communities that had just been excluded out of the American dream for so long that finally got their piece of it, and then there was a knock on the door, and brokers came in and said, you could really consolidate your debt. We could get you a better interest rate. And they just lied and they cheated and they swindled — and cascading losses in Black and brown neighborhoods that then once the mortgage market saw how much money was being made and how much the government was not going to stop them — and in fact, the federal government took actions only to make it easier for lenders to avoid consumer protections in the early 2000s — then the wheels were off. And then it was an open season on the wider and whiter mortgage market. And if I do anything with my book, I want people to jettison this narrative that we actually heard from Mayor Bloomberg — that it was the financial crisis, which cost us so much as a country and as a globe, was the fault of the victims of redlining, was the fault of Black and brown people who got in over their heads, who shouldn't have been in those houses in the first place, who were financially illiterate, when in fact, what happened was just a quintessentially American mix of racism and greed that was enabled by structural racism and institutional racism and that then, of course, most direly impacted the finances of Black families who have still not recovered. The home ownership rate is back to what it was before the Fair Housing Act. It's just devastating. And yet it also costs millions of American jobs of white people and foreclosures in white neighborhoods as well.

Ezra Klein

One thing this book is doing is providing a different deep story of American politics and policy making — a different understanding of what's been going on under the hood in the way we think and then the outcomes that kind of thinking has. And one of your suggestions in the final chapter of the book relates very directly to how we might change that story, which is this idea of a truth, racial healing, and transformation commission. And I think about this a lot. I've talked to people

who are more expert in this area than I am. And I go back and forth on it, because I always wonder, how do you make sure, given what we see, let's just say, with the insurrection on the Capitol — given how hard it is to get Americans to agree on any kind of truth now, how could you do something like this that would result in more healing rather than more division? But you've thought about this. So when you imagine something like that, how would it look? What makes you confident that would help?

Heather Mcghee

Well, first, it wouldn't be a blue ribbon commission in Washington like the Kerner Commission or the Clinton commission on race. It would be a ground-up effort at the community level, which I think is really important. This is not about experts picking up history books and learning what they should already know. This is about communities coming together, people who really already have a stake in the well-being of their community. I talked to folks in Dallas who have created this truth, racial healing, and transformation hub which invites stakeholders from the cops to racial justice advocates, from librarians and schoolteachers to business leaders, to come together and do a few key things to rewrite the racial history of their community to create what's known as a community history. And the people who did this in Dallas said 90 plus percent the people we talked to just didn't know — white, Black, or brown. There's just so much we don't know. There's so, so much in so many ways, like the lost cause profoundly won in terms of our historical imagination. I was talking to someone earlier today who's from St. Louis, which is the city where there was the huge fairground pool riot that I talk about in the book, where the largest public pool that we can find record of was closed after a bunch of racial riots and integration. And she had no memory of it. She wasn't able to find lots of people in her community who had memory of it. And this is a Black woman. We've just erased so much of the knowledge. And so we're left to puzzle out — why is it we can't — I open the book saying, why is it we can't seem to have nice things? Why are we not addressing climate change? Why are we not having universal health care? Why is it so hard for working families to make ends meet? Why does it feel like we keep falling behind and falling apart? And so when you give people the truth — sometimes people talk about putting a racial equity lens on an issue. I think it's taking blinders off — just allow people to know the full story of our community's history, the beauty and the struggle. Then you get people on the same page, and then you can turn it. I do think it needs to be the federal government to adopt this as a national effort, but it needs to be implemented at the local level. I tried for almost 20 years to give rational, economic, self-interest arguments to decision makers and to white people who are listening to me talk on “Meet the Press” and whatever, to say, what let's do something about the struggling middle class, which is a diverse middle class now. And it wasn't working. We

still have this racialized politics. We still have the majority of white people voting for Donald Trump. And I think I became hopeful at the end of writing this book, because there is a yearning, I think, in all of us for human connection. The bullhorn that is the loudest is the zero-sum, but it's also true that the largest social movement in American history is Black Lives Matter in 2020, that you now have millions more white people who want a way out of the moral and economic quandary that is American racism. There are these moments where the brutal ugliness of the American lie causes a groundswell and an opening and a pivot. All of this is our history. It's the struggle and the beauty at all times. And I think the more we can see these kinds of conversations where people really connect on a human level and at the local level — I hate to sound like a Federalist here, but I do think it's really important for people to experience this with people they have relationships with in communities where they really have real bonds, to see what it's like to have a shared story of American struggle and American progress.

Ezra Klein

Is Donald Trump himself an apotheosis of drain the pool politics? And I mean this in two ways. One is that he follows Barack Obama, so there's, for the first time, an African-American president. And then white people, largely — I mean not exclusively, but overwhelmingly are the ones who make Donald Trump his successor. And Trump is a pretty manifestly unqualified, incompetent, erratic guy. We get a lot of death and destruction as a result with coronavirus. But then at the end, when Trump loses reelection, and you have the storming of the Capitol, it's such a perfectly literal if we can't have this country, no one can — this political system that did pretty damn well for white people, actually. I mean, you can actually make a somewhat different argument for non-white people until much more recently, but did pretty damn well for white people. America has gotten pretty rich. And it's like, enough of it. Enough. We'll pave it over. We'll fill the pool. There's a lot of policy in the book, but I actually thought there was this amazing literalization of it into politics — it must have been right while you were finishing, or probably after you had finished, actually — that you really see the power of this. Because for a political party that has so wrapped itself in the flag and patriotism for so long to so literally give up — like to attack cops and storm the Capitol, it becomes very hard to deny that this is the tendency, this is the reaction.

Heather Mcghee

It's a book about the economy, but I do include a chapter on democracy, because on the list of nice things that we can't seem to have because of racism, a functioning representative democracy

is pretty high up on the list. And so I traced the history of all of the ways that, from our founding, elites attacked the bedrock of what is a pretty bold and beautiful idea, which is self governance and representative democracy, in order to keep room for racism and slavery and racial subjugation. I have an extremely long section of notes in this book that is kind of a joke with my publisher. But one of the longest notes — I think actually the longest note is what I put in the notes instead of going into long detail about Colfax, Louisiana, which is a story of one of the many but one of the most deadly anti-democracy racial mob violence stories in American history. I did finish the book long before January 6th, but Colfax, Louisiana, is in the book. And Colfax, Louisiana, is the story of a white mob storming the courthouse where an election result was going to be certified for a Reconstruction era governor who won office with a multiracial voting population. And they attacked the courthouse. Black people tried to defend the courthouse. They slaughtered 100 Black neighbors, and then burned the courthouse. This white, racist mob was willing to burn down the edifice of their own government rather than submit to a multiracial democracy.

Ezra Klein

I think that is a good place to come to a close. So the final section of the podcast is around book recommendations. And I want to start here. What's, in your view, the best novel or movie for understanding race in America?

Heather Mcghee

I don't think it's been written yet. I don't think it's been shot yet, to be honest. We're just now starting to tell stories that include Black people as more than supporting characters or immigrants as villains. But I grew up as a sci-fi and fantasy nerd, and so "Parable of the Sower" continues to be just profoundly prescient and a beautiful must-read for everyone.

Ezra Klein

What's the one book you would give Joe Biden to read if he asked for a recommendation?

Heather Mcghee

I would love for Joe Biden to read a book called "The Color of Law" Richard Rothstein, which really helps explain the way that government segregated America. He's got a big commitment to racial equity at the center of his administration, and he's got to see all the different ways that it's government policy — many of those policies that are still on the books — that are segregating us and keeping us apart.

Ezra Klein

One of my favorite Heather McGhee facts is that you really wanted to be a television writer. So what's your favorite TV series?

Heather McGhee

I wanted to be a TV writer when I was growing up, because I wanted to be the Black Norman Lear. I felt that television had this amazing power to tell Americans who other Americans were, and therefore cohere a national story of our relative goodness or merit. And so Norman Lear — I mean, he did “Sanford and Son,” he did “Good Times,” “The Jeffersons,” “All in the Family,” “Maude” — all of these real, working, middle-class, totemic reflections of who we were and who we were becoming that really grappled with the issues of the day. I don't know. I don't that we've done much better than that in terms of TV shows that people are actually really watching.

Ezra Klein

But so what is one of those you'd recommend if people don't know their history?

Heather McGhee

I think “Good Times” is amazing.

Ezra Klein

That's a good recommendation. And finally, you and I both have two-year-olds. What's your favorite children's book or your favorite book to read to your child?

Heather McGhee

So we are really into “The Word Collector” these days. Do you know this book?

Ezra Klein

I have not. No. I've heard of it, but I have not read.

Heather McGhee

It's about a boy named Jerome — it's a little Black boy — who collects words. Some people collect stamps and coins and rocks. Jerome collects words. And my son collects words. He pauses on words he's never heard. He ruminates on them, and then he loves to throw them back out at us. And it's a really beautiful story of a little Black boy who collects words that he hears and comes

across. And then at the end — hate to give away the ending — it's only like 10 pages long — he spills all of his bag of words off a mountaintop to give them to other children. And he has no words to describe how happy that makes them.

Ezra Klein

Oh, I love that.

Heather Mcghee

It's so nice.

Ezra Klein

That's wonderful. The reason I now ask that one in every episode, because I've just decided children's books are both nicer and more affecting somehow. They tuck a lot of emotion into a contained space.

Heather Mcghee

Yeah, they're all we need, really. Let's write a children's book, Ezra. What's your favorite these days?

Ezra Klein

Ooh, I have a couple that I love. But I've become — the two that I love most are — there's an illustrated book around the song "What a Wonderful World" —

the one sung by Louis Armstrong. And it is — it'll bring tears to your eyes. It is beautiful. I don't remember the illustrator offhand, but I just love it. I sing it to my son every night. And then I really love a book called "The Quiet Book." It's a book about how there are many kinds of quiet, but it's very true in a strange way about all these different moments and different kinds of quiet. And it's a little bit unusual for a kids book in — maybe it's not that unusual, but it has a lot of somewhat sad and intense forms of quiet, like others telling secrets quiet or last one picked up from school quiet. And also happy ones, like tucking in Teddy quiet. And I just find it very affecting. I really like "The Quiet Book." And your book, of course, is "The Sum of Us," and everybody, including Joe Biden should read it. It's really fantastic. Congratulations on writing it and publishing it. Thank you very much.

Heather Mcghee

Thank you very much, Ezra. [MUSIC PLAYING]

Ezra Klein

“The Ezra Klein Show” is a production of New York Times Opinion. It is produced by Roge Karma and Jeff Geld, fact-checked by Michelle Harris. Original music by Isaac Jones and mixing by Jeff Geld.