

Time for a wider racial dialogue

William C. Kashatus
is a writer and historian

In 1997, President Bill Clinton initiated a national dialogue on race, which he considered the "most pressing social issue in the nation." Unfortunately, the dialogue was sidetracked by the war on terrorism, and a presidential commission's recommendations were ignored by the Bush administration.

It's time not only to restart that dialogue, but also to broaden its scope to confront the reality of discrimination against all races. For too long, policymakers believed that the racial divide in this country was a "black and white" issue. It's not.

Hispanic Americans have been alienated by the ongoing problem of illegal immigration. Just two years ago, city ordinances prohibiting employment or renting to undocumented immigrants were passed in Hazleton, Pa.; Riverside, N.J.; Palm Bay, Fla.; and San Bernadino, Calif. Distinctions between legal and illegal aliens were not always made in executing the measures.

South Asian and Arab Americans, meanwhile, expe-

rienced a significant increase in hate violence in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Native Americans also suffer from the same social and economic challenges as other victims of long-term bias and discrimination. Challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and low education levels have made them separate and unequal members of society.

Nor can we ignore the issue of reverse discrimination if we are to have a truly candid dialogue on race. Affirmative action laws originally enacted in the 1960s, with the goal of preventing discrimination based on race, sex, religion or national origin, remain a contentious subject.

Whether in the workplace, education or business, affirmative action programs are just as discriminatory against deserving white candidates as institutional racism is against people of color. Affirmative action also patronizes minorities.

To be sure, African Americans continue to experience discrimination. But any effective national dialogue on race must be expanded to in-

clude everyone.

Clinton's dialogue on race took place only at the national level, which made it little more than an academic exercise. The new dialogue must begin at the local level, with task forces representing various racial backgrounds holding town meetings to discuss the racial issues that confront different communities.

Recommendations from the task forces could be implemented by municipal authorities, civic organizations and schools. Those that prove to be most successful could be put into effect at the state and national levels.

With the election of Barack Obama to the presidency, our country has a golden opportunity to create such a meaningful dialogue. His election to the presidency reflected the faith and trust of voters from many racial backgrounds.

But, as Obama reminded us in his inaugural address, he alone cannot effect change. We need to take action as a people to make a meaningful difference in our future.

E-mail William Kashatus at bill@historylive.net

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