

## **Two Big Ways of Seeing Racism in America**

Writers, historians, and activists have long debated the role of racism in America. Although their views differ, they can be broadly categorized into two distinct perspectives. Both agree that racism has caused immense harm, but they tell the story of America in different ways.

### **1. Racism as the Core of America's Story**

Authors like Ibram X. Kendi, Robin DiAngelo, and Nikole Hannah-Jones argue that racism is not just a side issue — it has been central from the beginning. They see slavery, segregation, and racist policies as foundational to how America was built and how it still operates.

James Baldwin also warned about the depth of racism. But he added something more: the labels 'Black' and 'White' are traps. He believed the ultimate goal is to face the truth about racism and then move beyond these categories to see each person's unique humanity.

### **2. Racism as Part of the Story, But Not the Whole**

Historians like Sean Wilentz agree that racism has been powerful and destructive, but they emphasize that America's story is also about resistance. From the earliest days, people were pushing back against slavery and racial oppression.

- In 1619, the same year enslaved Africans were first brought to Virginia, some resisted, and rebellions continued throughout the colonies.
- In 1652, Rhode Island passed a law limiting slavery to 10 years; though not enforced, it showed early doubts about slavery.
- In 1688, four German Quakers in Pennsylvania issued the Germantown Petition, the first written protest against slavery, calling it un-Christian.
- In 1700, Puritan judge Samuel Sewall published "The Selling of Joseph," the first anti-slavery pamphlet in New England, declaring slavery unjust.
- In the 1770s, Prince Hall and Boston's free Black community petitioned for abolition, education, and rights, while also building strong institutions.

- Quaker meetings gradually began disciplining members who owned or traded enslaved people, creating one of the first organized abolitionist stands.
- In the 1770s, lawsuits in Massachusetts — including the famous Quock Walker cases — argued that the state's new constitution guaranteed liberty, helping to end slavery in Massachusetts by 1783.
- Groups of enslaved people in Massachusetts petitioned lawmakers, citing Revolutionary ideals: "We expect great things from men who have made such a noble stand."
- In 1739, the Stono Rebellion in South Carolina saw enslaved Africans rise up, kill slaveholders, and march toward Spanish Florida seeking freedom. Though suppressed, it showed the unrelenting will to resist bondage.

### **Where They Meet**

Despite their differences, both perspectives share some common ground:

- All agree racism is destructive.
- All see struggle as essential.
- All want us to tell the truth — though they emphasize different parts of the truth.

In short, one side says racism defines America. The other says the fight against it also defines America. Baldwin reminds us that the ultimate goal is to drop the labels and see each other as fully human.