



The Race Card: How Bluffing about Bias Makes Race Relations Worse

Richard Thompson Ford

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What do Katrina victims waiting for federal disaster relief, millionaire rappers buying vintage champagne, Ivy League professors waiting for taxis, and ghetto hustlers trying to find steady work have in common? All have claimed to be victims of racism. These days almost no one openly expresses racist beliefs or defends bigoted motives. So lots of people are victims of bigotry, but no one's a bigot? What gives? Either a lot of people are lying about their true beliefs and motivations, or a lot of people are jumping to unwarranted conclusions — or just playing the race card. As the label of "prejudice" is applied to more and more situations, it loses a clear and agreed-upon meaning. This makes it easy for self-serving individuals and political hacks to use accusations of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other types of "bias" to advance their own ends. Richard Thompson Ford, a Stanford Law School professor, brings sophisticated legal analysis, lively and eye-popping anecdotes, and plain old common sense to this heated topic. He offers ways to separate valid claims from bellyaching. Daring, entertaining, and incisive, *The Race Card* is a call for us to treat racism as a social problem that must be objectively understood and honestly evaluated.

The Race Card: How Bluffing about Bias Makes Race Relations Worse Details

Date : Published January 22nd 2008 by Farrar Straus Giroux

ISBN : 9780374245757

Author : Richard Thompson Ford

Format : Hardcover 388 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Race, Politics



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Louise Brock says

The author is a law school professor at Stanford. His insights are profound and, in my opinion, absolutely right on! He reviews a host of current events and issues to support his conclusions. Prepare for some high-brow reading (you'll feel like you're back in college), but there is also wit and humor. If you want to talk about it after you read it, call me!

Lynne says

I just cannot get myself to read this book - it's too dry and the set up takes too long. This is too bad, because Ford's scholarship on residential segregation, political fragmentation, and race is among the best.

Even without reading the book, I see major cracks in Ford's attempts to get folks to pay more attention to what some call "structural racism," the way that historical discrimination and present-day policies interact to marginalize African Americans, Asians, Latinos, Native Americans, and other pan-ethnic groups of color. While Ford makes some important factual points about "bluffing about bias," I think he misses the root problem, which is a deeply flawed, deeply confused public understanding and discussion of what race is, means, and how it functions and changes as different groups wrestle to define American values and culture.

While not his intention, Ford's analysis appears to put the onus of that flawed discussion on people of color, and in particular, African Americans. And for those who do not work closely with issues of race and politics (read most folks), his nuanced analysis will be lost and reinforce popular and misguided perceptions about the meaning of race in American history and society.

Johnathan says

A fairly interesting and thought-provoking book. While I disagree with some of Ford's conclusions, ultimately I found myself swayed by the central premise: that we, as a society, lack a sufficient vocabulary to discuss the complicated manner in which race, racial stereotypes, and racism play out in our modern society.

Phil says

This book is awesome. Whether you're a liberal, independent, or conservative, you will find this intelligent and timely. I'm glad I finished reading this before the Obama/Wright controversy and today's NYC police acquittal--it helped put race relations into perspective and helped me learn not to jump on the race card bandwagon.

David says

Steers clear of either extreme (there is no more racism; racism is pandemic and far too little discussed) and adds some good legal perspective on a few cases (e.g., differentiating unfair treatment from legally defined sex discrimination in a case in which women sleeping with the boss were promoted and others not).

On the whole, though, a tedious book. There's a good 8-page magazine article struggling to get out of this 350-page document. Maybe it's just that I already agree with most of his conclusions and don't need persuading, but some incidents/lessons (the Tawana Brawley case seemed credible at first because of the racial politics involved; Clarence Thomas hearings gained emotional heat because of stereotypes about Black men; airline asking obese people to pay for two seats is not exactly the same as Jim Crow; Oprah not being allowed to enter the Hermes store in Paris after closing time is not necessarily because of her race.....) just didn't seem to require the lengthy examinations received here.

Kimberly says

But the race card is an impediment to dealing with these problems. It distracts attention from larger social injustices. It encourages vindictiveness and provokes defensiveness when open-mindedness and sympathy are needed. It leads to an adversarial, tit-for-tat mindset when a cooperative spirit of dialogue is required.
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outlawing any and all consideration of race in order to stop racism is a bit like outlawing umbrellas because you don't like rain.

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This is not about racism, it's about discrimination. Racism is wrong, discrimination is not... Trouble comes in all shapes and sizes, and when you're on your own, you have to be discriminating for the sake of your own well being.

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Ernest says

"The Race Card" is the fairest, most nuanced, and most sensible description of--and prescription for--current race relations in America. Written by Stanford Law Professor and civil rights expert Richard Thompson Ford (yes, he's black), this book examines recent, often headline-making, claims of racial bias and discrimination from a pragmatic legal perspective not beholden to any rigid ideological posturing.

Kelly says

I really wanted to read this book. I attended a talk about it at Foothill College through the Author Series, and that is how I came to know of the book. I found the book very dense, but I found that I finally understood the author's points at the end, so I would say that the conclusion was very well done. It is hard to walk the line between anecdotes that make the book readable and losing the overall message, so I was glad that the conclusion was clear (at least to me). I think that this is a very important book, and I learned a lot from it. I would recommend it to anyone who wants to know more about the current state of race in America.

Elizabeth says

As seen in the March 10 2008 issue of the New Yorker.

Racism clearly exists (as evidenced by African-Americans' overwhelming overrepresentation in prisons and in poverty), yet neither I nor anyone else I know wakes up each day thinking, "How can I discriminate against African-Americans today?" I'm interesting in learning the sources of this unintentional racism, and ultimately what we can do about it.

Nancy says

Without going into too long a book report (ha), I thought this was a book that every American should read. Ford (who happens to be black), really captured, what I (now) feel are the problems of race (black vs. white, to be specific) in the U.S. and included real solutions with how to fix them without being too optimistic or cynical. It changed my options on a few subjects regarding race and it's the fist account of Katrina that I thought was comprehensive and fair to all "sides."

I found Ford's language compelling, clever and clear of a lot of potential legalese (not bad for a Stanford law professor!). His thoughts on racial anecdotes, which range from Oprah (the Hermes incident) and Jay-Z (the champagne incident) to the more iconic Rodney King and Rosa Parks episdoes to the horrific O.J. Simpson case, made for great reads even on their own.

Here's a NYT review: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/06/boo...>

Linda says

Explores the differences between effects of discrimination based on race vs other factors, such as disability.

Dan says

The basic argument of the book is that although our society has moved beyond it's racist past, we've failed to

develop any new ways of discussing the racial problems we still have. If you've been anywhere near a tv or an internet lately, you'll have seen how right Ford is. I'm not audacious enough to hope, but it's been really interesting watching how Obama's campaign has shown how we still have some, as they say, issues with race in this country. Whenever some public figure brings up an uncomfortable issue, like Ferraro did, we like to scream 'Racist! Racist!' at the person until they go away and we can all go back to pretending that race doesn't really matter in America anymore. I think Ford does a pretty good job of explaining how we've reached this point, and does some good by reminding the reader how racism still differs from other types of discrimination. I didn't agree with every argument, but the book will certainly make you think.

Ford is a law professor and it shows in his writing, but if you're one of those unfortunate laypeople, don't worry, it's not overly legal.

Finally, I didn't even notice that the top suicide king on the cover was black until AFTER I finished the book. It's sad, but I was proud of myself for that one.

Leigh says

If an issue involves a person of color is it racial? Richard Thompson Ford says Not Necessarily. Is discrimination bad? He says Not Always. But tread lightly, because, yes, Virginia, there really is such a thing as Racism. How do we distinguish between the spurious accusation and the real deal, the substantive solution and the naive response? That's what this wonderful and challenging book asks. Ford, an Integrationist at heart, argues that in this Age of Obama, we've made much progress but sometimes use race as a distracting shorthand for other, equally complicated issues such as class.

Lawrence says

Definitely food for thought here about the dangers of trivializing the struggle for civil rights. Oprah getting snubbed by Hermes in Paris isn't - and shouldn't be - a high priority for civil rights activists to address. The book both falls short and overreaches in its analysis, however. Dismissing the importance of looking systematically at the commonalities of discrimination against various groups while focusing only on unique factors isn't consistent with a subtle and full analysis of oppression. The point is that both perspectives can offer valuable insights. It is simply important not to ignore either. And, focusing only on the excesses of identity politics and multiculturalism as if that is all there is to the movement again makes for an inadequate critique. Also, while I appreciate some level of humor in the writing style, I thought that many times the level of humor risked - and did - create a glibness that diminished the credibility of the analysis presented. Ultimately, the book rushes the recommendations for fixing the problem. Surely, there's something more to recommend than just continuing the dialogue. Nevertheless, maybe the book if read by more concerned citizens will be the first step toward that end.

Troy says

I read the book, enjoyed it, and appreciated the author's use of anecdote to make his points. THis is probably one of the few "policy" books I've read whose author isn't in love with his own vocabulary.

Solutions-wise, he acknowledges that his answers may be a bit naive and unassuming of human nature, but I admire him for making them. In the face of overwhelming norms and behavior, we hope, someone exerts

some common sense and does what is right. It'll take guts, though.
