“AMERICANS ARE engaged in a war over a word: racism.” Thus began Charles M. Blow in a July 2010 op-ed piece in The New York Times. The article, “Obama’s ‘Race’ War,” did not slow the debate, which continued through the 2010 elections and into the new Congress with the election of Tea Party candidates who dragged discrimination, immigration, and even “birther” issues into another year.

Blow reported four months later that there also exists on the American political scene a “sentiment that the current racial discontent is being fueled by a black liberal grievance industry that refuses to acknowledge racial progress, accept personal responsibility, or acknowledge its own racial transgressions.” He cites Harvard University, University of Washington, and University of Virginia data to note that racial prejudice is a two-way street. In tests taken between 2000 and 2006, three-quarters of whites were found to have implicit pro-white/anti-black feelings while 40% of blacks possess a pro-black/anti-white bias. Self-reporting in an ABC News poll in 2009, 34% of whites admitted to “some feelings of racial prejudice” while 38% of blacks admitted the same. This seems to be the way we are.

However, neither racial discrimination nor even racial prejudice is the same as racism. Discrimination involves treatment as well as differentiation, and even may be perceived as a corrective discrimination, as is the case of affirmative action policies around the globe. Prejudice mostly is directed at separation, not perpetuating advantage.

Racism is the most perverse of the attributes of social behavior related to race. Racism is the practice of differentiating on an assumption of superior and inferior biological traits that can be recognized in physical characteristics, especially skin color. In the common usage, racism is a defensive reaction from those who have, not from those who do not. In the vast majority of global circumstances, it is an expression of lighter-skinned peoples toward the darker skinned. While there are circumstances of “reverse discrimination,” there are few cases of “reverse racism” that would involve remaining in an inferior economic or social power situation and fewer still of reversing completely a power hierarchy. (Zimbabwe perhaps being one of them, although whites still have extensive economic power there.)

Racism issues have taken on near epidemic proportions in the U.S. since the presidential campaign of Barack Obama and more since his subsequent election, with racism, discrimination, and prejudice all being thrown into the mix. Demonstrators have shown up at health care town halls and rallies with signs picturing Pres. Obama as a witch doctor or with placards stating that “The Zoo Has an African [Lion] and the White House Has a Lyin’ African.”

Two years after the election, “birther” contingents keep popping up claiming that Obama was born in Kenya, not Hawaii, contrary to significant evidence that says otherwise, or that his mother was not legally an American, or an adult, or that he had dual citizenship. The birther list goes on. Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, Tea Party protesters, and other right wing commentators bring race to the fore at every opportunity. One survey in early 2010 showed that nearly one-quarter of Americans thought Barack Obama was a Muslim, despite all evidence to the contrary during the 2008 presidential campaign.

Affirmative action policies continue to be challenged and even civil rights and immigration legislation are being pushed toward a chopping block. Would all this be occurring if Obama had Russian, Jewish, or Asian heritage?

Discrimination and profiling are as embedded in society today as they were in the days of civil rights activism and before. This is not just
because of Pres. Obama’s skin color, although the darkness of his skin has generated much of the frenzy. Ironically, he actually is half white and was raised in a white culture.

Race and color also have been at the forefront of the immigration issue, especially as it has surfaced in Arizona SB 1070, a state bill that would make an effort to close the border with Mexico as well as generate some form of profiling in order for local police to identify possible “illegal immigrants,” which, in Arizona, automatically implies that the individuals are Mexican or Central American, with readily identifiable color, features, and stature. A Federal judge has held that the profiling portions of the bill possibly are unconstitutional and they have been stayed temporarily, but the debate over the bill continues to be heated and the arguments will go on.

The July 2010 incident where conservative blogger Andrew Breitbart created a heavily edited video implying racism on the part of USDA employee Shirley Sherrod again has raised the specter of ongoing racial division in this country. Attempting to counter arguments about racism among Tea Party participants, Breitbart involved the NAACP (where Sherrod spoke in March about her own evolution in racial attitudes) and the Obama Administration (which pressured her to resign) in kicking this hornets’ nest in American society with a falsehood about Sherrod. Breitbart and Fox News commentators instituted a debate about reverse racism, completely turning around the historic definition of the term racism.

The issue now has gone to court with Sherrod suing Breitbart for defamation of character. Far more important are Breitbart’s continued efforts to stimulate racial antagonism in a far-reaching blog on behalf of a small minority on the right. After 235 years of racial division in the country, progress on resolving race relations seems stunted and retrogressive.

Issues of racism are not, of course, the exclusive domain of the U.S., nor are they a legacy of slavery. Race hierarchies and conflicts exist throughout history and across every continent. Africa is rife with racial division, so are Europe, the Middle East, China, and Latin America. Malaysia has struggled for the last 400 years with racial sectarianism and continues today to have divisions and hierarchies among Malay, Chinese, Indians, and others.

The world is separated into races and skin colors, whether we like it or not. Other criteria of organization—such as religion, aspects of culture, languages, and politics—all enter into definitions of the international social environment, but none are as important as race and color. The issue of race and race discrimination gets more attention in the U.S. because color identification easily can result in contagion and there is a media that can be appealed to and that feeds on it.

The term racism has become an undefined epithet in the U.S. Race is a biological term, having to do with physical appearance. Author Michael Levin—Why Race Matters: Race Differences and What They Mean—pegs race to assumptions about ancestral origins and, then, intellectual capabilities. In the immediate, practical sense, race is about recognition and grouping, not about IQ or culture. There is an interrelationship between how people appear and their cultures and behaviors, whether there should be or not. This linkage is about ethnicity, not race. The IQ question needs to be set aside completely since it is not useful in the context of the practice of racism in the U.S.

Stereotyping is an ordinary human ability to simplify, just as we use norms or averages to describe natural and sociological phenomena. A mean score is intended to enable forecasting but “the average age,” for example, still is stereotyping. Humans use race this way.

Despite the fact that, biologically, race in-
cludes facial and body features, the nature of hair, brain characteristics, and even blood attributes and disease vulnerabilities, race for most humans is what we see. It is skin color first. It then is hair color and type; eye color; shape of lips, eyes, and cheekbones; body size; and stature. Human beings, of course, go beyond the physical features—in identifying themselves and others. Facial hair for men; clothing of every type; hair styles, including hair dyes; and decorations that are intended to be visible to others in identifying them (turbans, crosses, earrings, tattoos, etc.)—but physical features are the most visible and the most indelible.

Racism is a reflection of the use of race to form not only separation, but hierarchy. Light-skinned are higher up in the hierarchy than dark-skinned. In China, for instance, this puts Han Chinese (in their eyes at least) at a superior level to Tibetans. In Malaysia, the Chinese place themselves at a higher level than Indians or Malays. Throughout Latin America, Mestizos are at a higher level than the darker-skinned Indian populations.

Such prejudices (culturally ingrained discrimination and hierarchy) are a function of the human condition, that will expand, rather than contract, as population grows and competition for resources and simple space compounds. This contention integrates racial distance, communications, and culture theories, while drawing on theories put forth by sociologist Emory Bogardus on social, ethnic, and racial distance and those of political scientist Karl Deutsch on human communications and the establishment of community.

Communication theory, as it deals with race, asserts that the senses and the brain coordinate in cognition, but eyesight is the most powerful source of information about potential threats. Another individual's color (face) can be seen at great distance before other attributes can be determined (religion, political party, ethnic group, even sex) and becomes the primary discriminating characteristic in the human community. These discriminations primarily are defensive. That is, they determine who is "in-group" and who is "out-group."

Social distance theory argues that human communities are natural mechanisms for defense and are organized in concentric circles around the individual, beginning with immediate family and emanating outward in decreasingly familiar ranks. Those circles are determined on the basis of the immediately recognizable (mother and infant family) and learned support and threat, the latter being established on the basis of cognitive capabilities. Sameness of color is one element of this determination of community, but human hierarchy has had for thousands of years and across all societies a ranking of light to dark. Racism, it appears, is imbedded deeply in human society.

Can we stop being racist, or being prejudiced on the basis of color, or discriminating? We are bombarded constantly by advocates of racial justice with claims that we should, must, and can—to little effect. The argument, posed in these terms, essentially is that we become colorblind.

In Are We Born Racist?, Susan Fiske cites the research case by New York University psychologist Elizabeth Phelps and her colleagues on neural responses to yearbook photographs. "When white men in their study briefly saw pictures of unfamiliar black male faces, their brain activity spiked in a region known as the amygdala, which is involved in the feelings of vigilance generally, and the fear response specifically; the amygdala lights up when we encounter people or events we judge threatening." She adds that "several other labs, including my own, have uncovered a similar link between amygdala activity and white people's perception of black faces."

Four decades ago, the Harvard University political scientist Karl Deutsch made this argument about discrimination in a communications context: as innate tools, he argued, the five human senses—eyesight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste—are employed to separate friends from enemies. Of these, touch and taste are the least used because they are utilized in such close quarters. It will be too late to save you from the dagger.

The ability to discriminate

Some groups develop their sense of smell more than others and can distinguish between body odors. Hearing involves such things as machinery sounds, gunfire and explosions, and voice communications, sometimes amplified. While all of these may help in distinguishing an enemy, discrimination depends mostly on voice communications. The verbal content of a communication, as well as language, grammar and word usage, accent, pitch, timber, and tone immediately set people together or apart.

Yet, hearing only can become a discriminating ability when distance is minimal, especially for the voice. Eysight, Deutsch said, is the most powerful discriminator. We can see facial colors a half-mile away, especially if the skin is light versus dark. It is the first line of defense. This is so in every society, no matter what skin colors are prevalent in that society, including in sub-Saharan African countries.

In Social Distance (1959), sociologist Emory Bogardus presented a culmination of more than four decades of research into what he called "the degree of sympathetic understanding that functions between person and person, between person and group, and between group and group." Bogardus charted the metric social distances between "loved ones" (at the closest end) and "enemies" (at the far end). He applied this instrument throughout the U.S. and his students administered it around the globe.

In 1967, Bogardus focused in on relations among racial groups in A Forty Year Racial Distance Study. With an initial survey in 1926, Bogardus surveyed the American population four times, with a concluding study in 1966. Looking at the scores from his total samples, including African-Americans (Negroes), scores from the mostly white respondents put Negroes and other dark-skinned groups at the bottom of the scale consistently across that time span.

In his questionnaire, Bogardus spaced seven questions on a continuum. At the first point in his nearness scale (posed in Western societies), Bogardus placed "Would marry into group;" then "Would have as close friends;" (these are reversed in some Islamic societies). Third was "Would have as next door neighbors;" an important consideration in physically defended villages and communities. The statements ranged down to "Would debar from my nation." Each statement poses its own understanding of how society is constructed. The "next door neighbors" statement especially is interesting as population expansion and migration across national-state borders has come to characterize societal development. In the U.S., ethnic (and often racial) boundaries have endured in cities and suburbs, down to racially defined real estate firms and agents, as well as language definitions of territory (and not just 'Se habla español' but also 'English spoken here') and vernacular newspapers. Bogardus' social distance and racial distance is translated into physical distance between homes (where we go and close ourselves in when it is dark).

Race and racism are such sensitive issues that it is difficult to have honest conversations about them. What discussions do exist are most often framed as questions of morality. As Bogardus, Deutsch, Fiske, and others have argued, race is about defensive community. Racism clearly includes an element of empowerment, of superiority of lighter-skinned peoples over darker-skinned.

While the notion of defensive community can be understood readily, what about the notion of superiority of white skin, or Fiske's citation of fear-inducing black skin? As in Bogardus' study, in virtually every society the racial ranking runs from light to dark. Why is this? When we talk about racism in the U.S., we always seem to be talking about what whites think about blacks. In trying to overcome racism, we talk about a problem in the minds of white people, about how white people (including Latinos and Asians) see black skin and automatically make negative assumptions.

My own research on race has carried me from New York to Florida, from Hawaii to Arizona and places in between. Then on to Asia, Europe, Central America, the Middle East, and Africa. I have gotten to know people well from each of these corners of the world. I systematically have surveyed Southeast Asians, with more than 2,500 respondents in five countries, over an 18-year time frame about ethnic and racial attitudes. Over an even longer time period, I systematically have questioned Americans about this issue. What I found is that nonblack people everywhere have deep set negative feelings about black skin. Even about just dark skin.
Whites in the U.S. detour around black males on the street, especially when they are in groups. The motivation is fear. It also is the case that Chinese from the north of China, the lighter-skinned, make negative assumptions about darker-skinned Chinese from the south of the country, as well as even more negative assumptions about Africans or American blacks or Malays. Thais think black people are "scary." Lighter, Mediterranean-skinned Indians from the north of India treat the darker peoples from the south of India with disdain. Northern Europeans look down on the Mediterranean types, Arabs still enslave black Africans (take a close look at race relations in Sudan), and African-Americans have a color code that puts the lighter-skinned among them (especially women) in some more desirable category.

There also are deep-set positive feelings about whites and their light skin. "Blondes have more fun"—although it was not the Nazis who embedded this thinking in Westerners and the rest of the world. This concept existed in American thinking, at least, well before the rise of Adolf Hitler and abides quite separately from National Socialism today. Women mostly, but also many men, dye their hair blonde, or just the ends of their hair. Few—very few—dye their hair black, especially not blondes. Dark dyes are just to hide gray, not blonde.

The use of black-and-white to connote something about the inner being is common in mythology worldwide and its corollaries exist in 21st-century thinking and behavior. Think about it for a moment. In the Middle Ages, there were white knights (good) and black knights (bad). The bad guy in American Westerns wore a black hat, robed a black horse, and often black clothing, while the good guy wore white. Brides wear white, expressing virginity and purity. That is everywhere today. Black witches are evil; white, expressing virginity and purity. That is the nature of humanity.

In English, we have "black humor," "black ops," and "black sheep." In China, a negative turn in the stock market goes into the "black." There are a thousand more examples of the separation of white and black, in every region and in every race and ethnic group, into positive and negative, good and bad, life and death, heavenly and evil. These divisions precede colonialism and the rise of the Europeans. They are far more deeply set in the division between whites and blacks that we see in the U.S. today; they are much more finely honed than this, into gradations of light brown and darker brown. The color categories are reinforced by religions and caste systems.

These examples may belabor the point, but it is important to emphasize that race and color prejudices exist in every society. It certainly is not unique to the U.S., as Americans (blacks and whites) and others often portray it to be. The color spectrum in the racial-color hierarchy runs from light to dark, from white at the top to black at the bottom. This theory argues that racism is set much more deeply in biology and psychology than in sociology or politics. It is set in the human psyche, in the fear of the dark, in the dread of the unknown. It is a much more difficult question to answer and respond to than one which argues that racial prejudice resides in simple history—that is, it is not a leftover of the slave trade.

Babies do it, too?

Because of social sensitivity and political correctness, there are few studies that probe innate racial prejudice. An exception is the report by Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman, "See Baby Discriminate," published in the September 2009 Newsweek and their 2007 book NurtureShock. Their analysis is built around a 2006 application of a "Racial Attitude Measure" by Birgitte Vittrup at the Children's Research Lab at the University of Texas. Vittrup's experiment looked for inherent negative racial identification in a control group and provided options for parents to attempt to eliminate prejudicial options in their children. This latter effort failed. That is, even when parents tried to control their children's environment to prevent the infusion of racial discrimination, they could not. The studies also found that white babies as young as six months old have already begun to discriminate among skin colors, and negatively toward blacks. It appears to be impossible to be, like cable television's mock news commentator Stephen Colbert pretends, colorblind.

A member of an audience where I spoke a couple of years ago responded to this thesis by saying that she did not want to believe it, because it would make the dilemma of racism unsolvable. However, the problem has not been resolved by epithets, accusations, or charges. It cannot be solved in court. In fact, problems with racial identity and infusions of racism into politics and social organization have, if anything, expanded in recent years. A poll published in the Arizona Republic in the wake of the passage of SB 1070 and subsequent court actions, finds that, by a 48% to 34% count, Arizonans believe that Latinos are more likely to be discriminated against compared with non-Latinos as a result of SB 1070 debate. Anecdotal evidence gives strong support to this view, even though a substantial majority of Arizonans supported the bill.

The challenge is to deal with the problem in the U.S. civil rights context, and to see the matter as a global and pervasive condition that will have to be dealt with through education and socialization in all societies. What can be done in the U.S.?—several things that will not be easy. First of all, American thought leaders have to take an active position, with both right and left reducing the incendiary rhetoric that unites racial antagonisms with guns. This is not a Second Amendment issue. Both the 'politically correct' and emotional right wingers have avoided addressing the nature of racism and its origins. If racial division is innate, as Vittrup's study suggests, incendiary shouting by cable television talk show hosts will not resolve the situation.

Second, if the problems are innate, psychological and social modifications in human thinking have to be started somewhere. The logical answer is in the schools. There is a reason for public schools; they are a part of the acculturation process—in what is taught about each other and in the opportunity to mix and socialize. This is not an argument for "ethnic studies" in schools. In fact, it is the opposite. Ethnic studies programs that are populated only by students from the ethnic group being studied (for whatever reason) do not resolve this problem, only heighten it or even exaggerate it.

Injustice is not the issue. The issue is how to expand the social parameters that encompass our groups and expand the use of senses other than sight that we use in establishing safety circles. Fiske also reports that, although "people who exhibit more prejudiced attitudes or behaviors show more amygdala response [threat or fear]... white's amygdalae do not go off to famous black faces. Likewise, their brains grow accustomed to new black faces after repeated exposure." Simple exposure as well as arguing for affirmative action and integration can be a solution, at least in part.

There is, possibly, little that can be done to address this problem, as the questioner in my audience proclaimed. At the moment, though, nothing is being done about it, while politicians and the media play the issue for what it is worth in pushing side-taking on this and other issues. That has to stop. Race is not going away, but it cannot be allowed to divide an ostensibly equal rights nation between white and black or between white and brown.

Llewellyn D. Howell, former International Affairs editor of USA Today and professor emeritus of international management at the Thunderbird School of Global Management, Glendale, Ariz., is the author and editor of several books.

USA TODAY ★ MARCH 2011

65