



Could a Truth Commission Unite America

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Can democracy stand the test of time? Many factors have triggered the deep schism in American politics today. But a root cause of our faltering democracy may be our failure to grapple with the truth about the nation's history of discrimination and institutionalized racism. Because Americans can't even agree on basic truths about our history of exclusion, slavery, and Jim Crow segregation, we have become mired in contentious debates about what role, if any, the government should play in addressing past injustices and their present-day legacies. To forge a path ahead, Americans must acknowledge our problematic past and collectively commit to upholding the principle of liberty and justice for all.

Where could we possibly start? As a first step, we can look to other nations that were once deeply divided, and learn from their efforts to address their difficult histories in pursuit of accountability and justice. The United States might do well to consider transitional justice approaches—the political, social, and legal processes societies use to respond to legacies of systematic or serious human rights abuses, primarily during periods of political transition like changes in leadership after a period of civil war or conflict, or the transition from an authoritarian to a democratic political system. These temporary judicial and non-judicial mechanisms and practices include criminal trials and prosecutions, truth commissions, reparations, and institutional reforms to help transform a society and reestablish the social contract. The United States is not undergoing a political regime transition, but transitional justice tools can still help us promote national reconciliation and reinforce our democracy as we reckon with the truth of our history and legacies of systemic harm and oppression.