"America is a racist country," Mychal Denzel Smith wrote earlier this month in an article at The Nation. Smith called on whites to acknowledge racism's pervasiveness and eliminate it. I won't debate the accuracy of Smith's assessment of what America is, and I don't know whether or not he was using hyperbole to make his point. Either way, however, his demand that white people admit its truth as part of their pledge to fight racism only discourages some of them from doing what the article's title rightly demands, to "give up racism."

Smith reduces a complex topic to a yes-no question: Is America racist? Sixty years ago racial discrimination was legal; most blacks were barred from voting and sending their children to integrated schools. Now, we have a black first family. As Smith indicates, that does not mean racism has disappeared. But it does mean a simplistic approach to American racism is inadequate.

Was America racist in 1850? Yes. Was America racist in 1950? Yes. Is America racist today? I won't say "no", but a simple "yes", whatever the substance behind it, ignores America's progress. Doing so ensures that many of the whites Smith wants to reach will ignore his message, and I believe there is a more effective way to convince them.

Smith is correct that whites must recognize that racism profoundly affects us all, privileging some and disadvantaging others in countless, often unseen ways. Although Barack Obama certainly agrees, in The Audacity of Hope he acknowledged that even among racial progressives, "rightly or wrongly, white guilt has largely exhausted itself in America."

In his 2008 race speech, President Obama spoke about the "progress" America has made on racism, which shows that "America can change." But, he said, making continued progress requires "the white community" to "acknowledg[e] that what ails the African American community does not just exist in the minds of black people."

Smith argues the same.

Both Smith and Obama detail the reality of racism, the lasting effects of past discrimination, and the continuation of discrimination today. But first praising America's progress likely helped make some whites more open to hearing Obama's second message, one that also aligns with Smith's: Whites must not only acknowledge racism's existence, but take action to address it.

A point on which President Obama and Smith differ is in their construction of white privilege. Obama noted that many working class and middle-income whites don't feel "particularly privileged by their race." He warned against characterizing white resentment over policies like affirmative action as "misguided or even racist, without recognizing they are grounded in legitimate concerns." Smith, however, simply dismissed whites who characterize these policies as "reverse racism."
By showing empathy for the perspectives of resentful whites, Obama demonstrated a more nuanced approach that has greater potential to convince economically vulnerable whites to rethink their views on racism. Smith, on the other hand, tells these whites to surrender privileges they may not see. It's not about who is right or wrong; it's about what will work.

Smith is absolutely right about what actions white people need to take -- such as listening to people of color -- and his brand of truth-telling is a valuable part of the multifaceted battle against racism. Smith's article may be a terrific way to motivate whites who already agree with him, but we need to do more than preach to the choir. I'm in no position to comment on how Smith or any African American experiences racism, but I can offer an opinion on how middle of the road whites might react to his statement.

In Chicago, the day after Smith's article was published, President Obama noted: "We all share a responsibility to move this country closer to our founding vision." He emphasized that every American should have an equal opportunity to succeed. Convincing whites to give up racism doesn't mean soft-pedaling its realities. It just means taking a cue from a black man who won enough white votes to make him President of the United States. Twice.

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