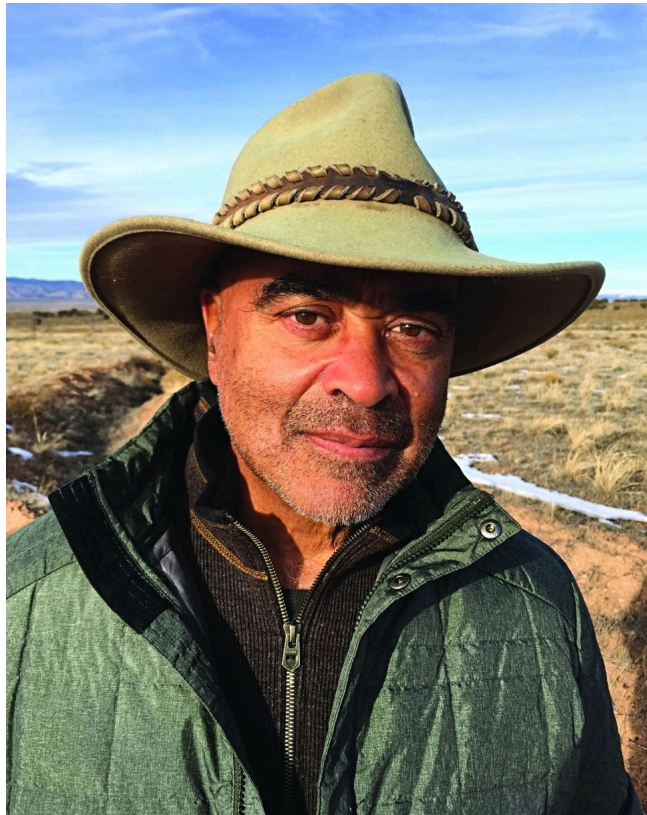


Guest Column: If you see racism, call it out

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Black Americans get a lot of messages about who matters and who does not in this country, and the question is: Are the messages intentional or unintentional? I lean towards unintentional but they have become deeply ingrained.

I've driven Interstate 15 in Utah dozens of times over the course of two decades, travelling from my home in western Colorado to one of my favorite adventure playgrounds in Zion National Park and nearby. The route takes me through Saint George, Utah, an area referred to as the state's "Dixie."

There are a lot of Utah Dixies, though there's movement to change some names: Dixie National Forest, Dixie State University, Dixie Hospital. Saint George is a retirement community, and Chamber of Commerce signs on the highway extoll the many virtues of retiring to the Dixie area.

But here's what I notice: Every sign, no matter how often it gets replaced, always features white couples.

I used to ski patrol at one of the Aspen ski resorts. Every year the Aspen Skiing Company would unveil a new marketing campaign, and employees were required to attend a meeting to see what the company would

promote that year. Ads and movies featured many hundreds of happy people — happy white people.

I met with the senior executive VP of marketing and pointed out that he was sending a message to folks that Aspen was a playground for whites only. Twenty years later, the Aspen Skiing Company, a company with the best of intentions in advocating for and creating racial justice, still does not include any Black images in its advertising, so ingrained is the image of skiers being white. And full disclosure: The Aspen Skiing Company has engaged me to help them with their mission and advocacy.

A few years ago I toured the national capitol in Washington, D.C. The tour ended in the rotunda where the guide proudly drew our attention to a huge ceiling painting and border sculptures that had plenty of room to capture key moments in the development of the nation: Brave-looking white guys astride ferocious looking white horses. Chinese railroad workers. Noble “savages,” aka Indigenous peoples. Men, woman and children trekking the Oregon Trail.

But what wasn’t there, in a building built with Black labor, was any depiction of a Black American.

When we sing the national anthem, if we get to the third verse, we pay tribute to slavery even there. The man who wrote this ode to freedom owned human beings who never experienced the freedom that Francis Scott Keys wrote about.

When we were very young, all of us were taught about George Washington’s father’s cherry tree, and the “Father, I cannot tell a lie” story. But most of us learned on our own, years later, that the father of our country owned slaves. But his slave-owning isn’t the odd part. The odd part is that we perpetuate an unimportant lie and neglect an important truth about the father of our country.

On our \$20 bill we honor a ruthless slave-owner. In an ad headlined “Stop the runaway,” which Andrew Jackson placed in the *Tennessee Gazette* in 1804, he promised to pay not just \$50 for the return of his escaped slave, but also “ten dollars extra for every hundred lashes any person will give him, to the amount of 300.” I will be glad to see Harriet Tubman’s face replace Jackson’s on the bill after a long fight to get this done.

And every Black person has had the experience of waiting in some check-out line, only to have a white person cut into the line right in front of them. In a sense, it’s not even rudeness. America has made us invisible.

So now, here we are... a country tearing itself apart with hate, distrust and dysfunction. Over time I’ve come to realize that racism, intentional or not, is the ladle that stirs this dangerous, unpleasant brew. Do we want a better country for everyone? Recognize racism. Fight it. We’re all in this together.

Wayne Hare is a contributor to Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, a nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West. He is a retired park ranger, manages wildland fires, and is a decorated U.S. Marine. He writes from Grand Junction, Colorado, and is co-founder of TheCivilConversationsProject.org.

