

TRANSCRIPT – A Conversation on Race in America and Foreign Policy
Assistant Secretary Linda Thomas-Greenfield and Ambassador Reuben Brigety
Burns Auditorium, State Department, September 13, 2016

PDAS BRUCE WHARTON: Good afternoon everybody. Let me urge – this is going to be a real family sort of a session, so let me urge everybody to feel comfortable to come right down to the front or stay where you are. I don't think we're going to need microphones for the Q&A part.

But let me – let me just provide a very quick introduction. Folks, we've got a problem. Too many Americans see racial and ethnic diversity as a threat rather than as a source of strength and a cause for celebration. Racism, both conscious and unconscious, hurts individuals, damages our communities, and undermines our values and our ability to work overseas. And this problem is not going to solve itself. Ignoring it will only make it worse. So it's up to us, the people of the United States, individually, in our families, and in our communities to address these problems. Sharing our experiences and speaking honestly about these problems is part of the way forward. We need to begin that conversation at home for our own sake. But doing so, I think will also strengthen our ability to promote our values and our policies overseas. So today we have two of the smartest, most honest and most compassionate critical thinkers I know to help us engage in that conversation and grapple with these vital issues.

Assistant Secretary Linda Thomas-Greenfield and Dean Reuben Brigety of George Washington's Elliott School both offer compelling life stories that provide examples of both the challenges and the opportunities that our country offers.

So in a just minute I'm going to ask them to share their ideas and their stories with us.

We're going to record the first 30 minutes of this session for the benefit of our posts in AF. So let me remind you – I was about to pull out my cellphone and turn it off to show you what I need for you to do, but do please silence your cellphones so that we don't interrupt the recording with ringing.

But after those first 30 minutes, we'll open this up to a conversation and I really hope that everybody in this room will feel safe and confident to offer observations and ask questions as you see fit.

So with that, let me turn the floor over to Reuben and the boss.

DEAN REUBEN BRIGETY: Thank you very much, PDAS Wharton.

Madam Assistant Secretary. Welcome. It's an honor to be here with you.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY LINDA THOMAS-GREENFIELD: Thank you.

DEAN BRIGETY: So as we sit here in Washington, D.C., September 2016, we are in the last year – the final months of the presidency of the first African American President of the United

States. We are 50 years after the march on Washington. We're well over 150 years passed the end of slavery. Why are we having this conversation?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY THOMAS-GREENFIELD: I think that's a great question to ask. We're having this conversation because we need to have this conversation. And we're having the conversation because we as diplomats, many of you in this audience, you a former diplomat, we have to explain to the world our jobs are to not only explain what's happening in the countries we're working in, but we have to explain to the world what's happening in the United States. And we have to be comfortable having that conversation. And I started hearing from our colleagues who are serving in Africa and colleagues in the Department, that they weren't comfortable having the conversation. They didn't know how to have the conversation. They didn't quite know what to say. We were accused of being hypocrites and sometimes we seem that way. And so we needed to find a way to have that conversation and I thought the best thing to do was for us in the Africa Bureau to start talking internally about issues of race. And for me, personally, it was a conversation that I wanted to have because of my background, having grown up in the south during and in the midst of segregation and when racism was legal, and as a mother of a son, and the aunt to nine black sons who deal on a daily basis with all of these issues. And I was very emotional about the conversation. It was more than professional for me. It was an emotional issue for me as well. And as I've noted to some of you when I've talked to you about this, when I saw the young man who was killed in Baton Rouge – that's my home. And then to have policemen killed in Baton Rouge where I have a nephew who's a policeman, it got real personal for me to try to understand how to explain this in a non-emotional way and the only way to do it is to have conversations like we're starting today.

DEAN BRIGETY: So if I can, as you said, there are a lot of dimensions to this conversation. Let me start with maybe a temporal dimension if you will.

So W. E. B. Du Bois said that race is the original problem of America. He said that over 100 years ago. And if you assume that, and given our history, there's long been the conversation about the need to have the conversation. So why now? I mean, if you could encapsulate what you've actually been, like the specific events or the specific things just in the last couple of months, what is it that is precipitating to have this conversation now?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY THOMAS-GREENFIELD: Well, there are two things – or three. First of all, we have been having this conversation that we're in a non-racial America – a non-racial society. We elected the first African American to be President of the United States. So we're beyond race. So that was a conversation that we started to hear eight years ago, that we we're in a post-racial society in the United States. But for many of us we knew that we had not yet reached that nirvana – that we were not in a non-racial society. And then suddenly – not suddenly – but again we started seeing news reports of young black men being killed by policemen and the Black Lives Matter movement started to resonate across the United States. And then added on top of that, in the middle of a presidential election campaign, policemen were killed and that became part of the political narrative. And suddenly people became very uncomfortable talking about race. African Americans were very uncomfortable sharing their emotions about what was happening and white Americans were very uncomfortable

talking to African Americans because you didn't want to be accused of being racist if you had a different view. So this is why the conversation has become necessary at this time.

DEAN BRIGETY: So you said three things which I think are very interesting. The first is the idea of a post-racial America and challenges to the idea. The second are specific precipitating events around Black Lives Matter and police brutality towards African American young men. And the third is the political nature of the political season. I was wondering if you could talk about each of those three things in turn.

So post-racial America; you said that there are many white Americans that feel uncomfortable talking about race, so let me just talk to you about some of the conversations that I've had from my white friends.

So on the idea of a post-racial America, Barack Obama is in the White House, here that you and I sit – you, a daughter of the south who is one of the most powerful officials in U.S. government; I, son of the south, former ambassador who leads one of the schools of foreign affairs; we have Jay Z and Beyoncé, we have all these prominent and wealthy African Americans. Sure America wasn't a great place for an awful lot of – an awful lot of years – but surely people like the President, like yourself, like myself, are evidence that you could make it if you try. So to the extent that there are lingering issues, isn't it really just about personal responsibility? Isn't it really about individuals who aren't studying in school, who aren't taking responsibilities for their families, and can't we talk about that idea of personal responsibility as opposed to making it a race issue?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY THOMAS-GREENFIELD: That's certainly a conversation to be had and it's a conversation that might reflect the experiences of many people. If you work hard enough, you can make it. You can beat adversity. And you can overcome racism. And there are many of us who show that that – that's true. But it does not change the fact that there are deeply held views and ideas that have an impact on the African American community and on the community of people of color across the board where a person's views can affect the ability of that individual to move forward, and I will give you the example.

My son is a successful lawyer and I love to talk about it because even I was taken aback by the success. [LAUGHTER] But he's his mother's child. [LAUGHTER] When I saw the young man in Minnesota shot, laying in his car bleeding with his seatbelt on and dying, I had two emotions: the first was, "Thank God it's not my son." And then I felt terribly guilty, and then I thought, "It could have been my son." He's not some kid who is on the streets wearing his pants down to his knees, who doesn't have an education, who is not giving it his all to it – he was there once – but he's not all of that. He could be a young man driving a car who gets stopped by a policeman and end up having that experience where I would be the mother crying because it's my son. And it has nothing to do with his abilities. It has nothing to do with his class. It has everything to do with being a black boy – man – driving at the wrong place at the wrong time and coming across the wrong police officer. So I don't want to give the impression that I think all police officers are bad; one of them is my nephew. And I know that there are extraordinarily devoted, patriotic policemen across the board – every race – who are working to promote security and safety in their communities and who are respected in their communities. But there

are a few bad ones, and those bad ones have given a bad name to the police department writ large and they have given us difficulties as Foreign Service Officers to talk about human rights, police brutality when we're dealing with other countries in the world.

DEAN BRIGETY: Let me challenge you on that, again, with arguments that I've had with – discussions – I've had with friends. Let's assume that there are some bad police officers as there are in every profession. But let me challenge you in what you said that you were thankful this was not your son, but you felt guilty that it could have been. Couldn't that have been anybody's son? Couldn't Philando Castile or Alton Sterling or Tamir Rice or any of these others, couldn't they have – why does it have to be a race issue? Couldn't – couldn't white Americans or Asian Americans or Hispanic Americans have been subjected to this kind of violence in which a police officer fearing for his life, pulls the trigger. Why is this a black issue?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY THOMAS-GREENFIELD: Because we saw five, straight in a row, that were only black boys. And if we look at the statistics, we see it happening more to young black men than to others. Now I'm not saying it doesn't happen to others. We've seen cases of police brutality against women. A couple of cases recently shown on the news. But I think when we look at what we're seeing, it has tended to be young, black men that this has happened to. It is what CNN and – and the international press is reporting, it is what our African colleagues are seeing in the news, and it's what we are experiencing in our communities.

DEAN BRIGETY: So let me use that as a segue to the question of, you know, Black Lives Matter, as you mentioned.

So as one friend said to me, the movement really ought to be called "Black Lives Matter when Killed by White Cops," because there appears to be to many who are observing this, the perception that the black community does not have the same level of outrage when black people are killed by other black people – a situation where Chicago is on fire, it is a war zone – which does not appear to be eliciting the same level of outrage as incidents when African Americans are killed, regrettably, by white police officers.

So how do you talk about what many perceive to be this disparity and outrage?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY THOMAS-GREENFIELD: I don't think there is a disparity. I think that when you talk to black communities about how the – how our institutions deal with the killings of young black men whether it's by crime in their community by other black people in their communities, the feeling is that those crimes are not given the same level of attention by our institutions, when in fact it may not be true, but people feel that way. So for people in communities the issue is really black lives matter; it's not black lives matter only if they're killed by a policeman, because sometimes they're killed by black policemen. So it's important that we look at this more broadly, and it's more than just the fact that this is happening in black communities. It happens across the board as you noted. But I think when we look at the publicity, it focuses on the black community.

DEAN BRIGETY: This is at a – this is in many ways at the nub of the problem, if you will, because there are many who are not in the black community who would argue that the very

premise of black lives matter is inherently divisive, which is not to say that there aren't things that are happening in the black community. But isn't it a form of racism in and of itself simply to focus on what's happening in the black community as opposed to talking about what's happening in America writ large. Can't we all just see ourselves as Americans dealing with problems of poverty, dealing with problems of crime, dealing with problems of social dislocation?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY THOMAS-GREENFIELD: I think we would like to see that happen one day in our country when the types of problems that we're witnessing affect everybody. But these problems are not across the board and we are seeing this problem manifest itself more prevalently in the African American community. And I would ask any of my white colleagues here in the audience, how many of you stay up at night when your sons go out and dread the phone call that you're going to get? And I might dare say it could be one or two of you, because you've got a kid that you know is always looking for an opportunity to get to call you in the middle of the night [LAUGHTER] and I had a kid who was like that, but he happened to be black. So every time I got that phone call from him, I never knew the extent of the phone call. I never fully slept when my son went out at night. If the phone would ring at 2 o'clock in the morning, I was always worried about what I was going to hear on the other line. And I dare say that very few of my very close white friends feel that emotional pain when their children go out at night.

DEAN BRIGETY: So that's another interesting question.

So what would you say to a close white friend who says, "You know, Madam Assistant Secretary," – they're afraid to call you Linda, I guess – Linda – Linda [LAUGHTER], "I am so empathetic towards your pain, but I don't think that way. When I see you, I don't see a black person. I just see a person. My parents didn't enslave anybody. I try to be fair-minded to everybody. So surely we can find – but it wounds me when people assume that if I don't support Black Lives Matter or if I don't vote for Barack Obama, or if I'm not a democrat, I must be racist on some level. How do you respond to that kind of assertion?"

ASSISTANT SECRETARY THOMAS-GREENFIELD: I don't think the Black Lives Matter movement is accusing whites of being racists writ large. What they are arguing is that we need to address this issue of young black men being killed by policemen. That's their movement. That's the goal of their movement. There are many of us who have broader goals that we work within the African American community, we work with the police so that they know people in the community and they start to work with people in the community, because it's broader than – it is broader than police brutality in our communities. That we start looking at young black men with different eyes. That we start focusing on some of their own experiences and try to be a bit more empathetic, but also work with policemen. I want to have conversations with policemen, both black and white, about what they experience, because I think they experience fear as well and I certainly know that my nephew experienced fear because bullets know no color when somebody starts to fire at police officers in blue, they're going to hit police officers in blue, and they don't distinguish between the white and the blacks in blue. And we saw in Baton Rouge that both white and blacks – a young black man was killed – police officer as well. So we need to be able to have this conversation – the conversation that you and I are

having – but also a broader conversation so people start to understand and they start to empathize with all sides, because empathy is what is going to cross the bonds and the barriers that separate people in communities. And we need that empathy.

But I think the important thing that I would like to say as well, because I know that as we deal with our African colleagues, they're asking why – how are you different in the United States, why is it different in the U.S., why is it OK for your police to commit brutal acts and it's not OK for our police? Well, it's not OK for any policemen to be brutal. But what I can say about the United States is that we have institutions. We have a system where grievances can be addressed. We have a court system that works and can be used to address some of these concerns. And so I think we have come a long way in our country. I'm not hopeless. I know that we can address these issues and these issues can be fixed in our country. So I don't see it as much as a crisis. It becomes a crisis when it can't be fixed and you don't know what the solutions are. We know what the solutions are. We know that we can go into communities and start to talk to people. We know here in the District of Columbia, for example, that policemen live in communities, they work in communities, the communities know them, and even there they have problems, but you see fewer problems in the city from that standpoint than you've seen in some of the other cities.

DEAN BRIGETY: So you talked about fixing the problems and questions you're getting from colleagues – you know, their African governments. So fixing the problem in this context implies politics; implies you're asking these sort of questions of politically what kinds of choices do we make as a society to address these problems. And I will speak for myself, watching this current presidential campaign, this is, I think easily the most divisive presidential campaign in my lifetime, where we've started to see political violence at campaign rallies directed towards various people where the rhetoric where one candidate started by talking about particular ethnic groups that are by definition rapists and murderers or what not. And yet, there are decent, well-meaning people on both sides of the political debate.

So how do you think about decoupling, or can you decouple, these questions of race from a political context. So for example, in the same way that you could decouple air, from the question of whether or not you're a republican or a democrat or a green or anything else, is it even possible any more do you think?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY THOMAS-GREENFIELD: I think it should be because this – I would argue this is not inherently political. It's social. And it needs to be dealt with by communities and by individuals and to a certain extent by our laws. But it's not in any way political. I think you will find that there are people on both sides of the political sphere, but I'm a lot older than you are Reuben, and so this is not –

DEAN BRIGETY: Not a lot –

[LAUGHTER]

ASSISTANT SECRETARY THOMAS-GREENFIELD: – this is not the most divisive political campaign I've seen. I think if you look back at the Goldwater years, you look back at the years where we were dealing with the Vietnam War and the divisions that we saw during the war. And

if you go back even a few decades and go back to the Civil War, we fought a war on this issue. So it doesn't get any more divisive than that.

So we're in a place where we've had – we are seeing some roll back. People are expressing views that we thought had been buried and they're coming up again. But ultimately, I feel that we will get through this and our country will be – will be better for it. Because our abilities to have these conversations, and we can, I mean, we are America, and people can go out into the streets and express different views, just as you said, and they can express those views without any fear that they're going to be arrested because they express their views. And – and our institutions and I think our country's history will help us get through this period of crisis that we feel that we're in right now, and I think we will move on beyond the political season.

DEAN BRIGETY: So let me ask you a couple of practical questions because as you noted from the very beginning there are a lot of very decent people who are not black who would like to have this conversation and do not know how. So what advice might you give to a white American, or an Asian American, that recognizes that we have a problem, but doesn't know how to address this with black colleagues.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY THOMAS-GREENFIELD: I would say look for opportunities to have these conversations, whether you're in your office space or you're in your neighborhood. You're sitting down with your children. I think the most important place is to have the conversation in your homes and encourage your children to have the conversations. I've found that once the door is open to talk about race, people are willing to do it because they're holding it in. They're being wound very tightly because they want to talk. They want to understand. Linda, why is this such an emotional thing for you? You know, why are you so upset that these criminals are being killed? And maybe they are criminals. I don't know. But I know my son's not. And so I want people to understand that whether I am – whether it's real or not to them, it's real to me. But I also want to understand where they are coming from as well, so that in the final analysis, if nothing else happens, we all understand each other and we all understand where each other is coming from. So I encourage people, you know, start in your homes; have a conversation with your kids; with your wife; with your brothers and sisters. You're going to be in different places on these conversations. I was shocked the first time I had a conversation with my sisters and brothers about LGBT and found that they had a different view from me. But I had the conversation and I at least got them to start thinking beyond where they were. And so that's the ultimate goal – it's to get people to think and think about where they – where they are in their beliefs, whether that makes sense, and whether they can have a conversation without feeling embarrassed. If you can't sit and have a conversation about this without being embarrassed, it's a problem. So you need to have the conversation.

DEAN BRIGETY: You know, one of the things that has struck me on this whole – on a lot of issues – is the importance of humanizing the problem as it were – your issue – so I know a lot of men that were pretty unreconstructed misogynists until they had daughters and that began to change their view and we obviously know now we're in a period of understanding LGBT in our country much better, and that's part of the reason that is happening is because families, as you say, will talk – it's hard to talk about the uncle or the aunt or the son that clearly is LGBT, and that humanizes it, but it's a different challenge with regard to issues of race because you may not

inherently have a person of a different race in your family; you might have someone as a co-worker, you might see somebody who's working at the store, but those kinds of intimate relationships, whether it be a member of your church or someone outside of work colleague, are not as prevalent as we would think, and it takes a fair amount of courage to develop those kinds of personal, intimate relationships that allow for this kind of familiarity.

Do you have, you know, any thoughts as someone who's lived all over the world and, you know, I know your son is going into an intercultural marriage – as I've done with an Ethiopian woman – that counts. So I'm interested if you have any thoughts on that.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY THOMAS-GREENFIELD: You know, I think we are – we are a very multiracial society and we engage across races all the time. Some of us, you know, they say Sunday is the most segregated day in the United States because black people go to their black churches and white people go to their white churches and the two should never meet, but the truth is the two do meet. Every single day we're meeting with our kids in school, our kids have multiracial relationships, and so there are opportunities to really cross those boundaries and have this discussion, I think. And people just need to kind of take grit and move forward and have the discussion. And it may be uncomfortable. And you can start the discussion by saying, "This is going to be uncomfortable but let's see how far we can go with it." If it gets to the point where you're arguing, then stop for a moment. Take a breather and come back a few weeks later and continue to have the discussion until you come to some kind of understanding. You may never come to a meeting of the minds. You may never come to a place where you think it's OK for a policeman to shoot anybody, even a black kid on the street. And there are other people who are on the side that says they're in the wrong place at the wrong time, they got shot and they deserve it. And there are people who say that on both sides. And we just need to have that discussion where at some point we're bridging the gap and we understand where we're all coming from.

There are so many black women, and it's particularly women, who are emotional basket cases because of their sons, because we don't know when it's going to happen, but we know it might, and I don't think that any of our white colleagues have that feeling. I just don't. I'm feeling a little more comfortable now because my son likes to sit at home; he works 18-hour days and he likes to sit at home when he goes home. So I'm a little more comfortable than I was 10 years ago when he wanted to go out and party with his friends. But I still know that I can get that phone call. And I will never – never – there will never a moment in my life when I will feel a comfort level that I am not going to get that phone call. And it may be a phone call for my husband. It could be a phone call for any of my brothers or my nephews. I know that I might get that phone call and I – and it's a very uncomfortable place to be.

DEAN BRIGETY: So as we come to a close, keeping in mind that you're speaking not only to the audience here assembled with us in Washington, but diplomatic posts across Africa, potentially across the world, what are your sort of closing offers of advice or thoughts that you'd like for us all to take with us as we try to grapple with all these issues ourselves?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY THOMAS-GREENFIELD: You know, I think that our country has come a long way and we have seen tremendous progress in this country on race relations and on the accomplishments that various people, whether they are African American, or immigrants

from Africa, or immigrants from other places in the world, that we are a country that is welcoming, and that our core values are values that respect human rights and respects the rights of all people. And that is in our core. That doesn't change because we have had these issues. But I know that these issues will eventually leave the front pages of the Washington Post and of the New York Times, but they are issues that communities will continue to deal with and I encourage all of you to look for an opportunity to make a difference; to have an impact on people's lives, and whether it's in Africa or it's in the United States, that you should look for that opportunity. I don't want to hear – and I heard this – an African young man say, “I'm afraid to come to the United States because I don't know whether I will get killed,” or “I'm afraid to drive because if I get stopped by the policeman, a policeman, I might get killed.” This is what I was hearing when I met with young African men traveling in Africa. And they have no reason to fear that these – what we're seeing in the news is not America, it is a small part of what we experience in a society that is continuing to evolve. And we should work to improve these things, not just in our country, but also in other countries around the continent of Africa.

DEAN BRIGETY: Madam Assistant Secretary, thank you very much for your time.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY THOMAS-GREENFIELD: Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]