

## **Robert Zemeckis's *Forrest Gump*: The Complicated Politics of Race**

**Naichuan Gu**

The line, "Mama always said life was like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get" in Robert Zemeckis's *Forrest Gump* (1994), may be one of the most well known quotations in American film history. After being on screen for more than 20 years, the film is still loved all over the world not only for Forrest Gump's uplifting story, but also for its looking back at several historical moments during the period 1960s-80s, through which the audience can get a general understanding of American history in the last century. However, it would be preposterous to argue that all the moments in the film are restored objectively (especially the scenes about African Americans and racism) though people have different interpretations of these matters. The aim of this essay is to make viewers of the movie aware of the fact that pictures on the screen are not likely to be consistent with reality, but fabricated by media producers. From a broader sense, the audience should have a clear mind to read out the implied meaning behind the simple representation and be reasoning to make sound judgment. What's more, through an in-depth analyze towards recessive racism, such as white supremacy and stereotypical images of African Americans, viewers could have a better understanding of basic American social culture. Therefore this essay discusses the complexity of racial politics in *Forrest Gump* (1994) in an objective view, and contrastively analyzes the racism beyond the screen. The first part of this essay will introduce relationships between blacks and whites in the historical context of the story, while the second part will turn to the friendship between Gump and his African American friend Bubba Blue, and analyze the messages behind their friendship. Finally this essay will address the notion of recessive racism that characterizes the film by focusing on the social status of

African Americans. Through these compassion and analysis, those details about racism that usually ignored in the movie will be rediscovered, which contributes to helping the audiences understand the complex ethnic environment in the United States.

### **Part 1: Racial Problems between Blacks and Whites**

Forrest Gump lives in the mid-twentieth century. Long before the 1950s, African Americans were considered lower class and underwent strong discrimination from the whole society. A lot of African Americans lost their homes through foreclosures during the 1930s and 40s, many of them victims of fraud and deception. In the South, African Americans suffered a lot from an exploitative sharecropper system that kept them in debt permanently. What is worse, there were many laws that kept them working hard for little money, and laws that prevented them from marrying Americans of European extraction. For example, according to Jim Crow Law, in some States in the North, African Americans were not allowed to attend the same schools as white Americans, but had to attend black-only schools. In the South, buses and shops had separate sections, and some places simply did not allow black people. Restaurants and hotels were usually completely segregated for whites and people from other ethnics. In most of the country, cities were split in black and white neighborhoods, and there was little communication with each other. As can be seen, racial discrimination did not disappear with the abolition of slavery, but took root in the consciousness of the public—an attitude that goes against the traditional American spirit of equality and freedom.

On December 1, 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama Rosa Parks refused to leave her seat on a public bus in order to make room for a white passenger. Parks was arrested, tried, and convicted for disorderly conduct and violating a local ordinance.

When this incident reached the black community, 50 African American leaders gathered and organized the Montgomery Bus Boycott to protest the segregation of blacks and whites on public buses. The boycott lasted 381 days and finally the city passed an ordinance authorizing black bus passengers to sit virtually anywhere they chose on buses. The victory stimulated activism and participation from the South in the national civil rights movement. The film *Forrest Gump* features several historical scenes related to civil rights activism in the South, but it does so in a rather misleading way.

On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court of the United States handed down its decision that the education of black children in separate public schools from their white counterparts is unconstitutional. In the years following, hundreds of African Americans applied for admission into the University of Alabama, but all were denied by the school and police deliberately. But in 1963, a federal district judge admitted three African Americans with perfect qualifications. When they arrived to register for classes, however, George Wallace, the Governor of Alabama, blocked the schoolhouse. He was finally forced to move by General Henry Graham after giving a political speech. Wallace's speech is featured in the film, and during the speech, Gump picks up a book dropped by a black student regardless of Wallace's racist speech. As Wallace's speech says: "We are winning in this fight, because we are awakening the American people to the danger that we have spoken about so many times that is so evident today: A trend toward military dictatorship in this country."

Wallace is surrounded by white supremacists and his speech raises prolonged applause. In that scene, Gump acts as more than a mediator between racists and the black female student by picking up her book. Gump's low IQ provides a reliable evidence for his not understanding about racism and explains his "neutral status" in the

conflict between white bystanders and black students. In this famous and significant historical incident, the film does not reflect the scene seriously, but turns it into a funny accident using Gump's ignorance. Consequently, the audiences not only fail to understand the significance of desegregation, but also ignore the huge resistance against racism that has been carried by African Americans for a long time. From another point of view, even Gump is full literate and firmly stands on the black side, his voice still seems unilateral and lack of representativeness.

The admission of these African American students challenges segregation because it represents the vast demands of African Americans: an equal and free social and public environment for all people without discrimination based on skin colors. While the federal government's interference and enforcement on the issue seems reasonable and legitimate, George Wallace defines this operation as "a trend toward military dictatorship". Through all scenes on this historical incident, the film director changes the racial conflict between black and white into a political contradiction between dictatorship and demonstration of white people. And as a mediator, Gump keeps complete silent on the racial issue even though he picks up the book of a black student out of kindness instead of showing his standpoint clearly. The film seems to stress that it is the Kennedy Government's interference that contributes to the schooling problem regardless of African Americans' efforts even though segregation in the university seems to be removed. As a matter of fact, African Americans were still undergoing serious discrimination from the whole society after this moment, and in the early 1960s, the black civil rights movement became the main domestic issue in America. On August 28, 1963, over 200,000 Americans, including many whites, gathered in Washington D.C to urge Congress to pass Kennedy's bill for equal rights for blacks. The movement finally won a major victory in 1964 when Congress passed

the civil rights bill that orders public places to serve all people without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin. Wallace's speech glosses over the inequality and unfair treatment that African Americans suffered from, and also, the film does not mention even one word about the huge effort and sacrifice that African Americans made fighting for equality and freedom.

When Gump comes back from the Vietnam War, he meets Jenny who belongs to the Black Panther Party. Jenny is Gump's best friend from childhood, and she is a hippy girl during that period. In the film, the party members are portrayed as fully armed, very aggressive, and totally impolite. They give Gump a body search and yell to him: "We are here to offer protection and help for all those who need help...." However, when her boyfriend hits Jenny, they just watch and do nothing about it. Actually, Black Panther Party did turn to be aggressive and excessive in a later stage in history, but initially, the Black Panther Party's core practice was its armed citizens' patrols to monitor the behavior of police officers and challenge police brutality. In 1969, community social programs became a core activity of the party members. They instituted a variety of social programs, most extensively the Free Breakfast for Children Program, and community health clinics. The film tries to convince the audience that the Black Panther Party is an extremist and ultra nationalist organization, which is neither fair nor objective. What's worse, the depiction of the Black Panther Party is kind of a typical racial stereotype as African Americans are still being portrayed as rude and violent.

In the film, there is a scene showing a photo of Joan Baez in Jenny's room, and her famous song "Blowing in the Wind" is also sung by Jenny in a theater. Joan Baez is a typical American folk singer whose music includes songs of protests or social justice. She was a friend of Martin Luther King, Jr., and contributed a lot to the civil rights

movement. The song “Blowing in the Wind” is a typical anti-war protest song sung by many artists all over America. In the film, however, Jenny sings this song for a show in a strip club naked, and she is introduced as “Bobbi Dylan.” The character of Jenny stands for hippie culture during the mid-1960s in America, which relates to drugs, free sex, and other negative sub-culture images. In some degree, connecting a typical anti-war protest song to a naked girl in a strip club is neither a respectful nor accurate representation.

Pursuing this further, there are many details in the film delivering incorrect messages that mislead the audience toward a proper understanding of the race problem. Firstly, in the very beginning of the film, there is a black lady sitting at a bus stop next to Gump, and she seems quite indifferent towards Gump’s box of chocolates. The film tries to convince the audience that in the 80s in the South, African Americans shared complete racial equality with white people, which was a far cry from reality. In the 1980s, the conservative discourse had it that the nation had moved beyond racism and inequality thanks to the civil rights movement. Of course, overt racism had disappeared. People would not show hostility directly, and violence against African Americans had subsided. However, race-based inequality endured, especially in the South. Secondly, when Gump joins the army and gets on the recruit bus, a white soldier and a black soldier deny him a seat; then, another black soldier makes space for him. Through the two unfriendly soldiers and the kind one, the film tries to deliver the message that during the mid-60s, racial equality had been achieved, if not yet in society, at least in the army. But this is inaccurate: even in the army (that great equalizer), and even though white and black soldiers were fighting side by side against a common enemy, they did not live in harmony. Thirdly, during Gump’s life in the barracks, there are two black officers. One is Gump’s instructor and the other notifies

Gump's discharge from the army. The film suggests that many African Americans were in high position in the army and had therefore many white soldiers under their command. This is far from the truth: as a matter of fact, the racial conflict between white and black had not disappeared during Gump's era. Compared to whites, black soldiers were in very low positions, and only very few were promoted while the majority remained privates. The setting of the film about the army fails to be representative and objective; also, the hypothetical social environment is not helping audience understand the real racial problems between blacks and whites.

## **Part 2: The Friendship between Gump and Bubba**

Besides macroscopic viewing through the civil rights movement, the film also discusses the racial problem through characters' social relationships. When Gump graduates from the university, he attends the army in which he meets his best friend, Bubba. Bubba is an African American who is very kind to Gump, but finally dies in the Vietnam War. The film delivers lots of messages through their friendship, as the analysis of several scenes dealing with issues of race will show.

In the beginning of the film, Gump looks back to his family and says:

Now when I was a baby, mama named me after the great Civil War hero General Nathan Bedford Forrest. She said we were related to him in some way. What he did was, he started up this club called the Ku Klux Klan. They'd all dress up in their robes and their bed sheets and act like a bunch of ghosts or spooks or something. They'd even put bed sheets on their horses and ride around.

From Gump's recollection, it can be inferred that Gump is a distant relative of one of the early founders of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). The KKK is an organization that sought to restore white supremacy by threats and violence, including murder, against both blacks and white republicans. Furthermore, Gump says: "Our house had been in Mama's family since her grandpa's grandpa's grandpa had come across the ocean about

a thousand years ago some like that. Since it was just me, and Mama and we had all these empty rooms, mama decided to let those rooms out...that's how me and mama get money.”

Obviously, Gump's mother is a landlady and they live a middle class life. By contrast, Bubba comes from Bayou La Batre, Alabama and his mama does a menial job: she cooks shrimps. And Gump tells us more: “and her mama before her cooked shrimp, and her mama before her mama cooked shrimp, too.” In the film, Bubba's mother and grandma are shown as maidservants serving white families. Both of them are overweight, large-breasted and can be identified as Mammy archetypes. The Mammy archetype is a Southern archetype for a black woman who works as a housekeeper for a white family. In most media portrayal, the image of the Mammy is described as overweight, dark skinned, illiterate African American woman as described in Picture 1 (See Annex). It is also regarded as the symbolic character of the history of slavery in the United States. The film director sets Bubba's family into a stereotypical frame of reference related to slavery without any explanation, which is rude and offensive. From the image of Bubba's mother, it can be easily inferred that Bubba's family has lived a hard life since a very early time comparing to white people. The film director tries to convey that blacks and whites get along well even though Gump and Bubba's family backgrounds are so different. However, Gump's word, “Grandpa had come across the ocean about a thousand years ago” is definitely incorrect, it hadn't been more than 400 years since the first Europeans came to America by the Mayflower. Through Gump, a slow-witted individual, the director cleverly stresses white people's dominant role without talking about their responsibility. As a child rose in a middle-class family, Gump cannot understand the pain and suffering of someone like Bubba who comes from an underclass African American family. In the same manner, Gump is



unable to understand the behavior of his distant relative and his friends who “Put bed sheets on their horses and rode around.” The film thus ignores the violence perpetrated by Gump’s distant relative as it trivializes the KKK and tries to cover its violence through Gump and Bubba’s friendship. Such tricks can be found many times during the Vietnam War segment.

Firstly, when Gump and Bubba first register with Lieutenant Dan, Bubba is asked about his lips, and he answers: “I was born with big gums, sir.” Lieutenant Dan says: “Well, you better tuck that in, gonna get that caught on a trip wire.” It seems like light bantering but Dan’s joke shows another stereotype against African Americans—that they are all with thick lips. Bubba’s lips are thicker than ordinary people’s and here comes the film’s intention. With the special facial characteristic, all African Americans are described with thick gums and lips matching the stereotype largely developed in minstrelsy and rooted in the mind of the masses. Secondly, on a rainy night, they sit back to back in the mud water to support each other, and then Bubba says, “You know why we a good partnership, Forrest? ‘Cause we be watching out for one another. Like brothers...” This exchange shows the deep friendship between Forrest and Bubba. However, in reality, during the 1960s, the members of the KKK had reached their top since the beginning of history. What’s worse, a series of race riots wiped many cities such as Detroit, Atlanta, and Chicago. These large-scale riots suggest the intensity of the conflict and contradictions between black and white. However, not even one scene in the film mentions these riots and the only thing the audience sees is the brotherhood between black and white soldiers in the mud water during the Vietnam War. In addition, the death of Bubba also uses the same way to describe their friendship. When Gump’s troops run into enemy’s ambush, Gump’s saves many soldiers’ lives. When he finds Bubba get shot dying in the bush, he struggles taking Bubba out of the bomb area even

though he himself gets shot on the buttocks. Bubba finally dies in his arms. Through Gump saving his best friend regardless of his black skin and the great danger of the situation, most people may forget the conflict between blacks and whites and be convinced that men from both races forged a profound friendship during the war. It can't be denied that the film covers the casualty problem of black soldiers, but it still contributes to the spirit of the protagonist. Therefore, data of casualties between blacks and whites during the Vietnam War will be listed and problems behind these data will be discussed.

Through the first view of Chart 2-1 (See Annex), it may be considered that Caucasian soldiers suffered the most during the war, but by analyzing chart 2, the problems become obvious. According to the most comprehensive reference work on the Vietnam War by Ed. Spencer:

African Americans often did supply a disproportionate number of combat troops, a high percentage of who had voluntarily enlisted. Although they made up less than 10% of American men in arms and about 13% of the population between 1961 and 1966, they accounted for almost 20% of all combat-related deaths in Vietnam during that period. In 1965 alone African Americans represented almost one-fourth of the Army's killed in action. In 1968 African Americans, who made up roughly 12% of Army and Marine total strengths, frequently contributed half the men in front-line combat units, especially in rifle squads and fire teams. Under heavy criticism, Army and Marine commanders worked to lessen black casualties after 1966, and by the end of the conflict, African American combat deaths amounted to approximately 12% —more in line with national population figures. Final casualty estimates do not support the assertion that African Americans suffered disproportionate losses in Vietnam, but this in no way diminishes the fact that they bore a heavy share of the fighting burden, especially early in the conflict. (Ed. Spencer, 125)

The proportion of the Casualties of the Blacks is higher than that of Caucasians, which means the ability of survival in combat of African Americans is weaker compared to the whites'. Meanwhile it reveals more problems behind it. Mostly because of draft exemptions for college education, blacks were also from poorer neighborhoods and enlisted more than whites for the bonuses. People with less

education and knowledge tend to share higher casualties than those from the middle classes. This can be proved by Bubba's purpose to attend the army. When he meets Gump for the first time, he says: "I was just looking into buying my own boat and get drafted." He does not consider much about serving the country or being a patriot, the only reason he joins the army is to earn government allowance to become the captain of a shrimping boat and it even costs his own life. Thus, Bubba's dream differs much from Lieutenant Dan's who lost his legs during war but was saved by Gump. His dream is to die in the field with honor. Actually blacks suffered 12.5% of the deaths in Vietnam when the percentage of blacks of the military age was 13.5% of the population. Even though they took the same responsibility as the whites to serve the country, the film is still guilty of perpetuating some racism through two victims of the war. All in all African Americans played a major role in Vietnam and, in the process, changed the complexion of the U.S Armed Forces. Contrary to popular impressions, a large proportion of African American servicemen were well trained, highly motivated professionals. About twenty of them received the Medal of Honor, and several became general officers. Despite the likelihood of seeing hazardous duty, they reenlisted at substantially higher rates than whites. In 1964 blacks represented less than 9% of all US Armed Forces; by 1976 they made up more than 15% of all men in arms. Although the percentage of African American officers doubled between 1964 and 1976, they still accounted for less than 4% of the total. However, in the film Gump is trained by a black officer and informed by two black officers, which could have hardly happened in reality.

### **Part 3: The Recessive Racism of *Forrest Gump***

Along with the lack of precision towards historical events, recessive racism is another misleading point in this film. Recessive racism can be defined as stereotypes on whole African American images, contrasted with individual person or representative character. The core of recessive racism can be considered as white supremacy as it corresponds to the notion that white people are superior in certain characteristics, traits, and attributes to people of other racial backgrounds. It is usually mistakenly considered by many people that white supremacy is only prejudices or acts of discrimination on individual level. However, in reality, white supremacy is a historically based system that declaring the dominated and privilege status of white people in every part of society including economics, religion, culture and politics. Comparing to the common racism, white supremacy is not only standing for prejudices and discrimination individually, but also defining a social relationship from the base level, which makes it more reasonable and dangerous. In the next part, several details about recessive racism will be analyzed individually and socio-politically.

After the Vietnam War, Gump tries to continue Bubba's will to be a shrimp boat captain. He goes to Bubba's hometown, buys an old boat and starts shrimping with Lieutenant Dan, who lost his legs in the Vietnam War. At first they don't go very well, then Gump goes to church every Sunday and prays. When Hurricane Carmen swipes through Bayou La Batre, the entire shrimping industry has fallen victim to Carmen and has been left into ruin. Coincidentally, Gump's boat survived the storm. And after that, everything becomes very easy to them and Gump's shrimping business succeeds and finally Gump becomes a millionaire. After that Gump gives Bubba's share of the shrimping business to Bubba's mother, which cause her faint from happiness. What's more, Gump even donates a whole bunch of money to the Four Square Gospel Church and Bayou La Batre Fishing Hospital. Gump's success and social responsibility not

only changes Bubba's family, but also contributes to the whole African American community. However, before Gump starts his shrimping business, Bubba had already been working in the shrimping boats all his life, and his mother had cooked shrimp for white people. Bubba himself also says that: "I knew everything there was to know about shrimping business." He is going to become a shrimping boat captain but dies by a river in Vietnam instead. There is no doubt that Bubba's enthusiasm towards shrimping leads to Gump's enterprise, and by Gump's fulfillment to promise, it also improves the living standard and social class of Bubba's family. As it is mentioned in the last section, Bubba's mother is a typical African American woman who is overweight, rude, poor, illiterate but industrious. She has been working as a servant just like nearly all of her ancestors before her, providing services for whites. However, in the film, with the bonus as Bubba's share, she moves her large family from their shack into luxurious new accommodations. Then, in the scene in which she moves her large family from their shack into luxurious new accommodations, she is shown seated at the table being served a dish of shrimps by white female servants. These scenes above are obviously misleading to the audience, and two racial problems hidden behind the screens must be questioned.

The first one is that the film evades racial problems by overemphasizing mainstream value. In the film, Gump's success is embodied through mainstream values: belief in God (praying in church), hard work (struggling in the shrimping industry), social responsibility (generous donation to community), freedom (running across America), and so on. The film overemphasizes these mainstream values through individual hard work, but when it comes to the reason why Bubba's family remains in poverty over generations, these values keep complete silent. There is no reason showing that Gump works harder than any one, and his success comes as a

coincidence, by surviving Hurricane Carmen during which many black fishermen suffered a lot. Through Bubba's mother's life, it seems that money changes her fate, the color of the skin being not the source of racial discrimination. Satirically, the money Bubba's mother used changing her life also comes from a white man's generosity. Because of Gump's success and kind deed, she has the opportunity to have a comfortable life. This is not just a comic scene but also a powerful statement from the screen: the serious racial discrimination problem does no longer exist in society and the mainstream value of American still works well. In Gump's wedding ceremony, the court is full with people from different races: Jenny is white; Bubba's mother is black. Lieutenant Dan's fiancée is an Asian girl. However, as it is told in the film, Lieutenant Dan is a big shareholder of Gump's shrimping business; Bubba's mother get Bubba's share from Gump. It seems that skin color has nothing to do with the social status, and as long as one works hard and believes in God, one can enter the upper class and live happy. Obviously on this point, the film does not address the old, enduring causes of inequality between blacks and whites; on the contrary, it endeavors to convince the audience of the virtues of traditional American values: hard work and individualism as the best weapons to eradicate racial discrimination. As in the beginning of the film, Gump and Bubba's families live in different social classes, but finally they all move to upper class and improve their standards of living. However, in reality, this process seems much more difficult especially for the underclass or people of color due to deeper social reasons. Several of them will be discussed in the next section to see why it is becoming harder for African Americans to rise up from the underclass.

As it is mentioned in the first part, a series of civil rights movement such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the March on Washington strikes the whole American society and they changed African Americans' situation and brought them

more rights in some degree. However, even with these positive changes, African Americans are still under great social pressure. On the one hand, African Americans enjoy more rights than ever before and legal, official discrimination has been abolished. However, inequality and subtle discrimination still exist. According to some study:

In 1989, the average high school graduation rate in America is 76.2% but the rate for black high school students was only 63.3%. And among black youth between the age of 18 and 24, those who went on to study in universities dropped from 35.4% in 1976 to 27.8% in 1987. The employment situation is also very unfavorable to the blacks. In 1988, the average unemployment rate was 5.5% in total while the unemployment rate for blacks was as high as 11.7%. The poverty rate of the African American is the highest among all racial and ethnic groups. In 1988, the poverty rate for the blacks was 32.4% while that for the whites was 10.1%. (Yu Zhiyuan 230).

Obviously inequality still exists in American society, but in the movie the portrayals of African Americans who own equal status (such as the woman sitting in the bus station and the two black officers) comparing with white people contradict the reality.

When the inequality problem shows in a sociopolitical way, it comes more reasonable to be understood by social stratification. Social stratification is the dividing of a society into levels based on socioeconomic status. In other words, social class is getting over stabilized and it is getting much more difficult to change one's fate (especially for those from the underclass) due to the lack of social mobilization.

According to some studies:

Social stratification is a system of structured inequality in which people receive different amounts of the society's valued resources. This inequality is relatively stable and gives rise to social classes, that is, groups of people of approximately equal income and wealth. In multiethnic societies, ethnicity becomes an additional basis of stratification. Differential power underlies all forms of inequality, and the system is underwritten by an ideology-propounded by the dominant group but generally accepted by the middle and lower classes-that justifies differences in social rewards. (Marger 43)

It seems that only if people work hard, they will succeed one day no matter which class they belong to at present. Perhaps today members of the middle and lower

classes can do something that they cannot imagine before and can enjoy some rights that they previously do not know, but some scholars can rightly realize that it does not mean there is no class or there are no differences between different social classes and their social status. There also exist differences in fortune, lifestyle, reputation and power. The reason why members of the relatively lower classes can be content with their present social status is the improvement of standards of living, which directly causes polarization between poor and rich. And there is another reason that cannot be underestimated: ethnicity. While it “becomes an additional basis of stratification” (Marger 43), skin colors seem to obstruct the rise of underclass from the very beginning.

As mentioned earlier, in American social reality, the comparatively lower classes are deprived of the opportunity to become members of the upper class and to realize their “American Dreams.” And the reason can be seen from a speech made by Sir Keith Joseph, the Secretary of State for Social Services, in 1972. He gave a “cycle of deprivation” (See Annex, Figure 1). In his view, “Parents who were themselves deprived in one or more ways in childhood went on to become the parents of another generation of deprived children. [ . . . ] The outcome of the research was to build a more comprehensive picture of the multiple disadvantages faced especially by members of the lowest social classes.” (Baldwin 115)

Here it can be suggested that what is depicted in the movie is different from reality. In modern American society, because of the improvement of living conditions, members of the middle and lower classes are closer to master power than at any time in history. Recently a research about the background of the best composers of the most accepted songs in the 1920s to the 1930s made by Edward Pessen, an American historian, shows that nearly all of them were born in the upper class or upper middle



class, which accounts for only 10% of the population. So, the real law of success is that success belongs to those who are not only talented, creative and diligent, but also at the same time possess a lot of financial resources. Here in *Forrest Gump*, it is reflected clearly with the Gump and Blue family. Gump's mother inherits a big house from her parents, which proves that she is born in a middle class family. What's more, she imbues Gump with the thought that everyone is born equally and it is fine to be different from others. She even sacrifices herself to get Gump into a school even though Gump's IQ is lower than normal. From these actions, it can be indicated that Gump's mother is well educated and conscious of the significance of education. With the right education and material foundation provided by his family, Gump has the opportunity to get educated in college, survives the war, succeed in business. It is undeniable that Gump's family background contributes much to his success in the long term. By contrast, Bubba does not have any access to education, in his first conversation with Gump, he says: "I've been working on shrimping boats all my life, I start out on my uncle's boat when I was about maybe 9." It is not hard to infer his family background and social class by giving up the chance to get education in such a young age comparing to white families. And it also explains the reason why Bubba's family remains poverty for generations. What's more, even Bubba can survive the war, there is no doubt that he will probably still live in poverty no matter how hard he works, just like his old families.

The second problem of recessive racism is white supremacy. As it is mentioned in the former parts, as a man with lower IQ than normal people, Gump succeed in his shrimping business which Bubba's family could not realize for generations; Lieutenant Dan, who lost his legs in Vietnam War, also raises up physically and mentally by the encouragement of Gump. As it says Hollywood movies

usually embrace and promote traditional American values and try to avoid depicting the plot and characters, which are different from the dominant ideology (Hall 28). As Edward Hall reminds us, “Hollywood movies usually embrace and promote traditional American values and try to avoid depicting the plot and characters which are different from the dominant ideology” (28). For those who have seen this movie, it depicts the 1960s that is not the same as the real history. Though the movie’s producing team says its depiction of the 1960s is not “political,” *Forrest Gump* lively describes the feminism and racialism of the decade. The movie recounts the history of enclosed white men and their final resurrection. As women and blacks acquire rights and voices in the political arena, the movie suggests, white males are simultaneously deprived of theirs. Through its modification by high technology, the “official” proof of Forrest’s memories, and a number of visual and oral media reports, which seem to be historical marks. The movie provides a lot of white men who undergone the confusion of the history: the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy; John Lennon and Elvis Presley, as superstars; George Wallace, striving against desegregation; the near-assassinations of George Wallace, and Richard Nixon’s resignation; and even Jimmy Carter, collapsing while running a marathon. Most of these characters of white men had huge influences on historical process in different aspects such like politics, culture, art, and society. By contrast, according to the portrayal of African American during 60s and 70s, they only appear only on the margins of the cinematic screens, such as shrimpers who suffer a lot from Hurricane Carmen, gospel singers who singing with Gump in the church, or as maid who server Gump’s mother. Furthermore, the representation of African Americans in 1960s generally features them as individual roles, instead of roles in a more sociopolitical way. According to Jennifer Wang:

Whether working or playing, the decades after the 1960s feature an “integrated” view of American society where African Americans are included, albeit at the edges of the

American fabric. Race relations have progressed, the film implies, as African Americans visually move from off the screen to center stage to the margins of society. (99)

*Forrest Gump* clearly delivers a message that during the multiculturalism and political upheavals of the mid-twentieth century, it is white men, not women or people of color, who have been propelling all-round social and democratic progress, which consolidates the dominant status of white supremacy among mainstream value. As one critic suggested: “if the next guy over is having a rough time of it, it’s not because America has failed to grapple with the real and complex problems that face it—it’s probably because he isn’t sufficiently upbeat. Or [the guy is] not decent enough. Lacks family values. Reads insufficiently of the Book of Virtues” (Biema 82). Actually Gump upholds traditional American values: loyalty, obedience and innocence. And these values have survived on Forrest, a fool with an IQ of 75. Thus, by “constitut[ing] itself as a universal set of norms by which to make sense of the world,” the dominant white order reasserts the timelessness of the traditional American values that are coded “white” and male (Fiske 42). What’s more, at the end of the movie, Gump’s son, who is born healthy and smart, gets on a school bus, and Gump is sitting on a bus waiting for him. There is no doubt that Gump is taking good care of his son physically and mentally. Meanwhile, these traditional American values carried by him as a typical white male are also going to be carried on by his son to the next generation. Contrary to Gump’s devotion, the liberal spirits represented by people of color are not mentioned at the end of the movie, seems like they can not pass the test of time. As it is analyzed in the former part, the film overemphasizes the opinion again and again that: Only if these traditional American value and mainstream political thoughts are on dominant status, racial and other social problems can be solved from its source. Consequently, most of the audiences in front of the screen would never think about the black soldier that died

in Vietnam and the numerous African Americans who have been living in poverty for a long time, instead, they tacitly acknowledge the opinion as reality without any hesitation.

*Forrest Gump* rewrites the traditional memories of American history of the 1960s by modifying the representations of race and democratic revolution. This essay mainly discussed the immediate and far-reaching significance of facing up to the racial problem in American history according to this movie. Through the comparison between several scenes to the reality in history, the visualization of African Americans and social environment is proved to be incorrect and misinterpreted. What's more, by diluting and erasing the effort that African Americans made during times of social and political transformation, the movie persuades the audience to “focus on timeless, universal values—those that support dominant culture” (Wang 109); by concentrating the discussion on personal responsibility and individual initiative, the sustained racial problem against African Americans can be resolved naturally. However, overemphasizing of these common values that in dominant position cannot avoid social and political demands during multiculturalism. As a critic argues:

The cold war's end gave Americans only a kind of abstract triumph-and left a void. The collapse of communism and the Soviet empire suddenly removed the dark moral counterweight by which Americans measured their own virtue. Chronic recession, the rise of Japanese and European economic competitors, the vast inflow of immigrants from non-European sources (strangers to the old American tradition), the shrinking of the buffering Atlantic and Pacific oceans (jet travel, satellites, global distribution of goods), all these have eaten away at the long American smugness, the postwar sense of superiority, of grace. (Morrow)

The article published in the *Time*, in September 1992 apparently does not comment on *Forrest Gump* directly, but exactly proves convincing historical backgrounds for the popularity of the film. Lance Morrow argues that the United States

has increasingly become a “nation that has lost many of its defining ideas about itself” (50). While the necessity of “restock[ing] its repertoire of folklore and self-image and archetypes” (50) becomes more and more urgent, Forrest Gump’s success, modified as an inspiring American dream for “providing a map through uncharted cultural territory, [or] narratives about American history in popular culture” (Wang 92), seems to be more reasonable and inevitable, as Morrow suggested in his article, America has developed a tradition of defining itself against an abstract “other.” However, American Americans and other people of color are not involved as subjects. Discrimination and inequality against minorities still obstruct the progress of constructing democracy of nationhood. And to the audience, it is more meaningful to switch their concentration from Gump’s success and Lieutenant Dan’s rise than to the African Americans who have been living in the underclass for a long time, which contributes to more objective understanding towards the racial problem in the United States during the last century.

### Works Cited

- Baldwin, Elaine, Brian Longhurst, Greg Smith, Scott McCracken, and Miles Ogborn. *Introducing Cultural Studies*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2005. Print.
- Biema, David Van. “Forrest Gump Is Dumb”, *Time*, August 29, 1994, 82. Print.
- Chafe, William H. *The Unfinished Journey: America since World War II*, 5th ed. NY: Oxford University Press, 2003. Print.
- Dai Jinghua. *Film Critique*. Beijing: Peking University, 2004. Print.
- Davis, A. *Women, Race and Class*. New York: Random House, 1981. Print.
- Defense Casualty Analysis System (DCAS) Files, part of Record Group 330: Records of the Office of the Secretary of Defense. Print.
- Ed. Tucker, Spencer C. from *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, and Military History*. Oxford, UK: ABC-CLIO, 1998. Print.
- Fiske, John. *Media Matters: Everyday Culture and Political Change*. Minneapolis:

University of Minnesota Press, 1994, 42. Print.

Gilbert, Dennis. *The American Class Structure*. NY: Wadsworth Publishing, 1998. Print.

Hall, Edward T. *Beyond Culture*. New York: Anchor Press, 1976, 28. Print.

Lance Morrow, "Folklore in a Box," *Time*, 21 September 1992, 50. Print.

Lantz, Walter. "Scrub Me Mama with a Boogie Beat." Cartoon. Universal Pictures, 28 March, 1941. Print.

Marger, Martin. *Race and Ethnic Relations: American and Global Perspectives*. Belmont: Thomson Learning, 1999, 43. Print.

Wang, Jennifer H. "A Struggle of Contending Stories: Race, Gender, and Political Memory in *Forrest Gump*," *Cinema Journal* 39: 3, Spring 2000, 92-115. Print.

Yu Zhiyuan. *English-Speaking Countries: A Survey*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2000. Print.

## Annex

Chart 2-1 DCAS Vietnam Conflict Extract File record counts by RACE OMB NAME (Race) (as of April 29, 2008)

| Race                                      | Number of Records |
|---|-------------------|
| American Indian/Alaska Native             | 226               |
| Asian                                     | 139               |
| Black or African American                 | 7243              |
| Hispanic One Race                         | 349               |
| Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander | 229               |
| Non-Hispanic More than One Race           | 204               |
| White                                     | 49830             |
| <b>Total Records</b>                      | <b>58220</b>      |

Chart 2-2 Vietnam War Statistics

|                           | Proportion of whole soldier served within the borders of South Vietnam | Proportion of the Casualties | Proportion of the Casualties in its race |
|---------------------------|--|------------------------------|--|
| Caucasian                 | 88.4%  | 86.3%                        | 2.19%                                    |
| Black or African American | 10.6%  | 12.5%                        | 2.65%                                    |

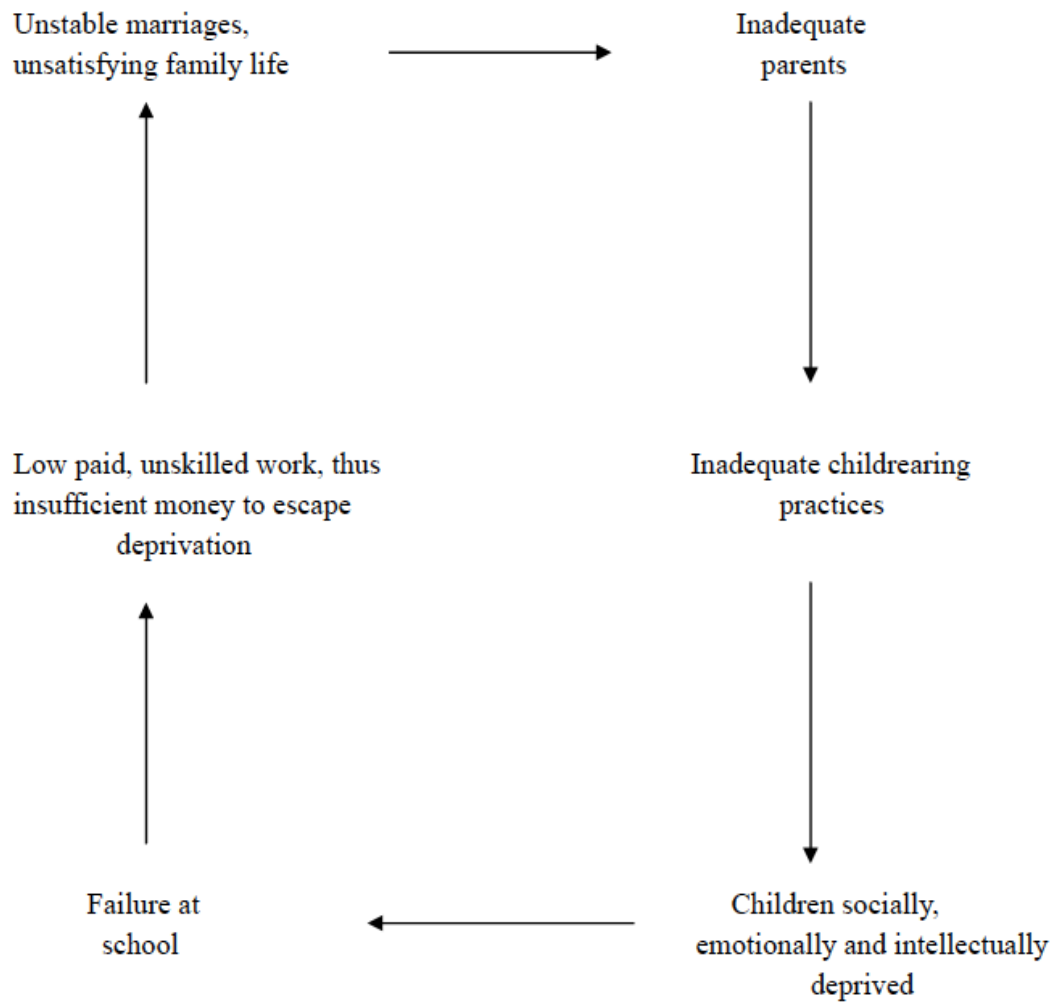


Figure 3.1 The cycle of deprivation  
(Baldwin, et al. 114).





Picture 1 (Lants)