Jay Lenrow:
Welcome to the second virtual alumni book club. I’m Jay Lenrow, alumnus of the Krieger school class of 1973, and an officer of the alumni council. We are here on a snowy day at the Mattin Center on the Homewood campus in the digital media center. Now, we’ll tell you it’s also a special day because today is also the first day for our new president. President Ron Daniels moved from Philadelphia this weekend onto the Homewood campus and today he is working his way around in the snow here at Homewood. Hopkins senior Zoe Bell is taping this talk today and it’s available in transcribed form as well. It’s a pleasure to introduce our faculty host, professor emeritus Matthew Crensen of the political science department and an alumnus of the Krieger School class of 1963. He will discuss this months’ selection: *The Race Card: How Bluffing about Bias Makes Race Relations Worse*, by Richard Thomson Ford. Professor Crensen’s area of expertise is urban government and American political development. His publications include: *Building the Invisible Orphanage: A Prehistory of the American Welfare System; Downsizing Democracy: How America Sidelined its Citizens and Privatized its Public*, with Benjamin Ginsberg; and most recently, *Presidential Power: Unchecked and Unbalanced*, also co-authored with Professor Benjamin Ginsberg. During his 38 years on the political science faculty at Johns Hopkins professor Mathew Crensen strived to remain fresh and relevant in his teaching by continually coming up with new courses, many of them based in the learning laboratory of urban Baltimore. In 2007 this expert on urban politics, was honored with an Excellence in Teaching award, the fifth teaching award in his distinguished career at Hopkins. The honor came as a fitting cap to a distinguished career. During the summer of 2007, this popular professor threw out his reams of teaching notes, which by the way probably could have blanketed Homewood field, and headed into retirement. Dr. Crensen, thank you for being with us today and let me begin the book introduction unless you’d like to say something first:

Matthew Crensen: No, thank you.

Lenrow: Dr Crensen, this is an obviously timely book.

Crensen: And also a very provocative one.

Lenrow: A very provocative book. I expect some very good discussions online. Could you share for our listeners two passages that, to you, are representative of the author’s writing and discuss why you chose them.

Crensen: I’m choosing these two because they raise the central issues around which this book is structured. And it will give you an opening to the issues that I would like to discuss later. Here’s one, it’s from page 92. “Taking every racial issue personally can blind us to many racial injustices for which no one is to blame. If every racial injustice entitles its victims to lambast the person nearest to hand, then when there is no racist to blame, it follows that there is no injustice. As racial politics increasingly focuses on trivial slights, innocent slips of the tongue, and even well intentioned, if controversial, decisions, the most severe injustices, such as the isolation of largely black underclass in
hopeless ghettos, receive comparatively little attention because we can’t find a bigot to paste to the dart board.” And then moving back to page 33, “The success of the Civil Rights Movement inspired many others to frame their struggles in similar terms. Feminists, gays and lesbians, the disabled and the elderly are just a few of the groups who’ve successfully made explicit analogies to the cause of racial injustice. Conservatives attack affirmative action as reverse racism, multiculturalism redefined racism as discrimination, not only based on skin color or hereditary, but also culture. And a host of groups, dog owners, the obese, and smokers have implausibly but insistently compared their causes to the struggle against racism. At best, these causes try to extend the principles underlying Civil Rights to new situations, but at worst, these claims seem to define bigotry so broadly, that the losing side of almost any social or political conflict can claim to be victims of race-like biased. Today almost anyone can play the race card by making claims of what I call racism by analogy.”

Lenrow: It’s interesting in reading a number of reviews, I think that it would be interesting to our audience that the author, professor Ford, is a professor of law at Stanford Law school, he has an endowed a professorship there.

Crensen: Yes, he does. I find that the most interesting parts of the book are the parts that don’t have to do with the law.

Lenrow: But perhaps this has colored his perspective. Some of the reviewers have welcomed his approach because it’s not a sociologist’s approach.

Crensen: No.

Lenrow: But rather he takes more of the analysis that a political scientist would take or a lawyer would take.

Crensen: Exactly.

Lenrow: How much of that do you think has influenced his style of writing and the way he attacks the problems?

Crensen: He doesn’t write like a lawyer, his writing is lively, sometimes witty, and usually pretty clear. But he’s definitely influenced by the law. He’s looking for almost judicial decisions in the situations that he describes, rather than some sort of sociological analysis.

Lenrow: In the lines of the quotes you gave us, one of the catch phrases professor Ford uses, I think, he calls it racism without racists, and one of the examples is the Katrina crisis. He said, the real racists were dead several hundred years before the hurricane decimated the world.

Crensen: And he talks a lot about neighborhood segregation, residential segregation, too, which was caused, or contingently caused, by the racial patterns of the past. In fact, if you
interview both African-Americans and whites, the strong majority of both groups would prefer integrated neighborhoods, but have different ideas about what constitutes integration. Whites think that a 20% black neighborhood is integration and blacks think that a 40% black neighborhood is integration, and the result is that the segregation remains.

Lenrow: It is interesting, obviously for someone like me, I grew up in northern New Jersey and came down here in the fall of 1969 as an undergraduate. And it was amazing to me hearing that it was only a year before that the Bethlehem Steel and Shipyards were integrated. And that as late as 1968, the restrooms and water fountains throughout this city, some of them were colored only.

Crensen: There’s an interesting Baltimore twist to this story. When the decision, Brown v Board of Education, it did not require immediate compliance. But 17 days later, the city council met and voted unanimously, with 3 minutes of discussion to integrate schools by the next semester. This reflects another problem that Ford talks about which is that whites, especially whites in Baltimore, don’t like to talk about race in public. I found a memoir of an English reformer who came to the U.S. in 1840 and one of his stops was Baltimore for about 6 weeks. It was less discussion about race and slavery in Baltimore than any other place in the U.S. It’s the kind of ambivalence of the border state.

Lenrow: I remember, distinctly, someone telling me back in my undergraduate days that Baltimore was the northern most southern city and the southern most northern city in the United States.

Crensen: Exactly, the leading figures of Baltimore have been divided between northerners and southerners as well. And since they have to live with one another and do business with one another there’s one issue they can’t talk about: race.

Lenrow: Professor, what issues could you single out that readers could find interesting for online discussions?

Crensen: One of Ford’s major arguments is that we now live in an age of post-racism. It doesn’t mean that racism has disappeared; just that it has become unfashionable. And so today, overt, explicit, public expressions of racial prejudice are generally condemned. And that’s progress. And that represents a step ahead. But it presents African Americans with a very high level of uncertainty because when discrimination and racism become covert, instead of overt, then how do you know when you’ve become the victim of it? And that sort of uncertainty promotes a widespread suspicion among African Americans and a tendency to play the race card in situations that discrimination is something less obvious.

Lenrow: I’m also thinking in terms of the current situation economically, and not only this country but around the world. If I learned one thing in my Hopkins education in history, it was that difficult economic times often allow prejudice to become a little more fashionable than it is in good economic times.
Crensen: Because the rule for bad times is: last in first out. The most recent hire is the first to get laid off. And the most recent hires in most firms are going to be African Americans.

Lenrow: How do you see that playing now as far as allowing there to be a reasonable discourse on race?

Crensen: Ford makes the point that whites are generally reluctant to speak about race in public, not only for the Baltimore based reasons that I mentioned before, but also because they’re afraid that they may say something that would be interpreted as racist, so they shy away from the issue. President Clinton tried to open a dialogue on race back in the 90’s; it never worked. One could be hopeful that such a dialogue will occur, but so far we haven’t been very successful.

Lenrow: It’s also interesting, I think, with the election of president Obama. Here’s a man whose father was an African immigrant and mother was the heart of the country, and you read on the news reports all the time that we have our first African American president and yet when I’ve spoken to some African American friends, they say: “Well, he may look like us, but he’s white. And how is that going to play out in this kind of discussion?

Crensen: In a way, of course, African American voters supported him overwhelmingly, but he couldn’t run as a black candidate and the problem he runs into politically, is whether he could raise the race issue, because he’s supposed to transcend race. In fact, there’s a point of view that says that because we have an African American president, whites will feel relieved that they’ve done their duty, they’ve elected a black man to the white house, and therefore the pressure for progress in race relations will stall. Because the president himself, because he’s trying to be above race, it’s very difficult for him to push a racial agenda on the White House.

Lenrow: I guess that’s the political equivalent of a country club admitting one black and one Jewish and one catholic member and thinking that…

Crensen: And saying we’re non discriminatory.

Lenrow: It would be obviously most unfortunate if we let this golden opportunity to discuss racism and try to truly transcend the politics ultimately in some way…

Crensen: For now at least, and I think also because there are so many more urgent things that need to be decided, that it’s going to make it difficult to talk about race.

Lenrow: One of the nice things that if you look at the public community that I don’t recall in my life time any president being elected with a greater percentage of the population wishing him well.
Crensen: Yeah, I think the only one who even comes close is John Kennedy, but I think that Obama is in the 60’s somewhere. Many people who did not vote for him now favor

Lenrow: That’s very interesting. What else do you think that the readers might be interested in knowing about this book?

Crensen: Well, it has to do with the idea of racism without racists. Ford makes the point that many unfair things happen to African Americans that don’t have anything to do with race. He tells a story, for example, of having to wait for a cab, to hail a cab in Manhattan to go to the airport. It’s four o’clock in the afternoon, he’s standing there on the side walk with his luggage, and cabs are just passing him by one after another. Later on, he complains to a friend about the bigots who drive cabs in New York. But the friend points out that at four o’clock in the afternoon the cabbies are getting close to the ends of their shifts and they want to get the cabs back to the garage and don’t want to take people on long trips to the airport. And so in fact, they were discriminating, not against his skin color, but against his luggage. And he takes care to point out, as a kind of moral to the story, that people should not be too hasty to charge racism and play the race card because it my undermine complaints about legitimate discrimination.

Lenrow: How do you think if Professor Ford was here with us discussing his book, how do you think he would react to the fact that this is part of the book club and if he were to energize our listeners to delve into one area of the book, where do you think it would be?

Crensen: Probably the end, where he proposes solutions. He says the first thing we need to do is to decide what purposes, what objective we’re trying to achieve. And we should pursue policies that take us to that objective the kinds of discrimination complaints that come from, what he calls, slips of the tongue, innocent kinds of slips, distract attention from much more serious kinds of racial discrimination, which we’ve already discussed, especially residential segregation. It has very serious consequences because it affects not only where you live but your access to good education, good jobs, transportation, and good housing. And the way to make progress is not to charge racism, not to look for racists because the racists that created that situation are long gone. We have to take a different approach than the race card.

Lenrow: Are there any other questions that you think the readers could be asking themselves as they read the book?

Crensen: Well, I wonder now that racism is no longer fashionable whether it will become more difficult rather than less difficult to confront it. For example, a speech that Attorney General Eric Holder gave in black history month, he charged Americans with being cowards because we’re afraid to discuss the issue of race in public.

Lenrow: I think that’s very appropriate. It’s obviously much more difficult to get behind the smiling face and see what’s inside, then when it’s on the surface.
Crensen: There’s another question, too, I think, and it comes through somewhat in the book, but I think readers will profit if they ask it while they’re reading it. Psychologists have conducted experiments which seem to show that virtually everybody is a latent racist. Ford cites some of these studies in his book, as a matter of fact. But as long as they don’t behave as racists, as long as their racism remains covert, isn’t expressed, is that kind of latent racism really a problem? In other words, shouldn’t we focus on conduct rather than attitudes in solving the race problem?

Lenrow: One of the reviews I read has some interesting statements to make. One was that, overall, the race card is one of the best written stylistically focused and concise books I’ve ever read on the subject of race in America. It is a work that avoids delving into the supposed motives of people and instead focuses on their actions, as well as explicating multiple ways for confronting an incident on a racial/political/personal/ - emotional level, which seems to agree with what you’re saying. Well, Professor Crensen, I want to thank you very much. For our listeners, we understand that you’ll be posting six questions on the website for online discussion during the month of April. We welcome you all to join in on what I hope will be an interesting and lively discussion. Thank you from Homewood, this is Jay Lenrow, saying goodbye.

Crensen: Thank you and I look forward to the discussion.