



**Remarks by Glenn C. Loury  
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**AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY:**

A specter haunts the domestic political landscape in America today. It is the specter of racial conflict growing out of the anger and alienation of too many black Americans. This estrangement derives, in turn, from the fact of persisting black disadvantage across so many fronts in our country's economic and social life. Whether talking about health or wealth, education or income, imprisonment, or criminal victimization – the relative disadvantage experienced by those of our fellow citizens who descend from slaves is palpable here in the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, more than 150 years after the Emancipation.

So, I stand before you as a black American academic in an age of persisting racial inequality in my country. I am an Ivy League college professor and a descendant of slaves. I am a beneficiary of a civil rights revolution and a patriot who loves his country. I am a man of the West, an inheritor of its great traditions. I feel compelled to represent the interests of “my people” at this august moment, but that reference is not unambiguous!

Racial conflict suffuses our politics – from school committee elections to national political contests. Racial disparities are real, of course but, at the end of the day, just how important is race, as such? Inequality in America is not mainly a racial issue. Many poor and marginalized white people deserve our concern too. Is “race” an undeniable difference between people, or is it a social construct? Interracial marriage has grown dramatically, as has the number of people who view themselves as 'multiracial,' including the first black President and Vice President of this country. We talk incessantly about racial identity. But what about culture and values – aspects of our humanity that transcend race? I have become convinced that the alienation that afflicts so many prosperous black Americans is the result of false narratives that folks are being told by demagogues and ideologues – narratives about how “white supremacy” threatens them; about how we have, in effect, reverted to the era of Jim Crow.

My work seeks to rebut some of these false narratives. For just look at what has happened over the last 75 years. A black middle class has emerged. There are black billionaires. The influence of blacks on American culture is stunning and has worldwide resonance. In fact, when viewed in global comparative perspective, we black Americans are rich and powerful with, for example, ten times the per capita income of a typical Nigerian. The cultural barons and elites of America – those who run the mainstream media, who give out literary prizes and foundation grants, who man the human resource departments of corporate America, the universities and the movie studios – these powerful people have all signed-on as allies with blacks in our struggle for “racial justice.” They have bought into the woke racial sensibility hook, line, and sinker. All of this gives the lie to the premise that the American Dream does not apply to black people. To say so is to tell our children a lie about their country – a crippling lie which, when taken as gospel, robs black people of agency and a sense of control over our fate; a patronizing lie which betrays a profound lack of faith in the capacities of us black Americans to face-up to the responsibilities and to bear the burdens of our freedom.

The Civil War left 600,000 dead in a country of thirty million. That war, together with the constitutional amendments enacted just afterward, made the enslaved Africans and their descendants into citizens. In the fullness of time, we have become *equal* citizens. That should not have taken another century. Indeed, my African ancestors should not have been enslaved in the first place. But, whereas slavery was a commonplace of human culture dating back to antiquity. Emancipation – the freeing of four million enslaved persons as the result of a mass movement for abolition – *that* was a new idea, an idea fitfully brought to fruition over a century and a half ago here, in our own United States of America. This victory for human decency would not have been possible without the philosophical and moral commitments cultivated in the West – concerning the essential dignity and the God-given rights of human persons. That is, America’s Founding at the end of the eighteenth century brought something new into the world. Slavery was a holocaust which led to something that advanced the dignity of humankind – namely, the incorporation of African-descended people fully into the American body politic. This has been an unprecedented and monumental achievement for human freedom.

Yet, this saga is not over. Freedom is one thing. Equality quite another. The former is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the latter. Politics can take us black Americans only so far in our quest for social equality. I am convinced that it is both futile and dangerous for black Americans to rely on others to shoulder our communal responsibilities. If we want to walk with dignity – to enjoy genuinely equal standing within

this diverse, prosperous, and dynamic society – then we must recognize that we cannot achieve what we seek through political protests alone. Rather, we have to earn equal status by dint of our own efforts. Equality of dignity, of standing, of honor, of security in one’s position within society so as to command the respect of others – these are things that cannot simply be handed over. They won’t be won by insurrection, violent uprising, or rebellion. Equality of this sort is something we must wrest with our bare hands from a cruel and indifferent world by means of our own effort, inspired by the example of our enslaved and newly freed ancestors. We must make ourselves equal. No one can do that for us. Until we black Americans recognize and accept this inexorable fact about the human condition, I fear, these racial disparities will continue to persist.

Thank you.