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*By Glenn Loury, Merton P. Stoltz Professor of the Social Sciences, Brown University, and  
John Paulson Senior Fellow, The Manhattan Institute*

### **Introduction**

I have given as a title for this address, “The Case for Black American Patriotism.” I’ve done so because 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 American. Pundits say that we’re living in a period of “racial reckoning” in America and, indeed, racial dispute suffuses our public life – from school committee elections to national political contests. The estrangement of intellectuals, politicians, journalists, and activists derives from persisting black underachievement across so many fronts in our country’s economic and social life. The reality here is too familiar, too widely known to require elaborate recitation. Whether concerning health or wealth, education or income, imprisonment or criminal victimization – the relatively disadvantaged status of those Americans who descend from slaves, here in the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, more than 150 years after the Emancipation, is palpable.

What are we to make of this? That question has bedeviled me for decades – indeed, ever since I began graduate studies in economics at MIT a half-century ago. So, it is with heavy heart that I stand before you this evening – a black American economist in this era of racial discontent in my country; an Ivy League professor and a descendant of slaves; a beneficiary of a civil rights revolution – now two generations in the past – which has made possible for me a life that my ancestors could only have dreamed of. More than that, I am a patriot who loves his country. And, I am a man of the West, an inheritor of its great traditions. As such, I feel compelled to represent the interests of “my people” here and now. But, and ironically, that reference is not unambiguous – invoking, as it does, both communal and civic antecedents!

What, then, are MY responsibilities as a black American intellectual, right here and right now? I declare, for all the world to hear, that – no matter the political turmoil that may envelope us, and regardless of my racial or ethnic identification – my fundamental responsibility is to stay in touch with reality, and to insist that others do as well. As the great Thomas Sowell once put it,

given a choice between Rhetoric and Reality, we are always better served to eschew the former and to embrace the latter. That is what I am about this evening. That, I believe, is what this historic moment requires of all of us. The future of our democratic experiment is at stake.

So, at this Philadelphia Society Conference, I will be making the case for unabashed black American patriotism – for the forthright embrace of American nationalism by black people. This ought not to be a controversial position. But it is in many quarters. I speak to you here and now, but I intend that my words should echo beyond this gathering. The currently fashionable standoffishness characteristic of much elite thinking concerning blacks’ relationship to the American project – as was exemplified, for instance, by the *New York Times*’s 1619 Project – serves the interests, rightly calculated, neither of the country as a whole, nor of black people as a community. Indeed, the “America ain’t so great, and never was” posture – popular on campuses and in the liberal newsrooms – is a sophomoric indulgence for us blacks in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Our birthright citizenship in this great republic is an inheritance of immense value.

Let’s begin by noting that Americans of all stripes have a great deal in common. Those commonalities should be the bridges that are undergirded by patriotism connecting blacks and the rest of the nation. We all want the same things at bottom: a legitimate shot at the American Dream, where each generation does better than the one that came before. We want to enjoy personal safety and feel that our property is secure. We all want clean and orderly communities with good services. We want a government that works for us and not the other way around. Connections between various groups in America could be stronger if we focused more on the things that we have in common instead of things that divide us. Left to their own devices, I believe, that is what most Americans would be inclined to do. There are those among us, however, who make their livings by focusing on our differences. They claim that something is fundamentally wrong with America. They are in error. Their grave error threatens to tear us apart. They should be opposed forthrightly, and I intend to do so in these brief remarks. It is too easy to overstate our failures, and to underappreciate what has been achieved.

Racial disparities are real, of course. But inequality in America is not solely or even mainly a racial issue. The many poor and marginalized white people also deserve our concern too. Moreover, this black/white dichotomy is an anachronism. The demographic profile of the country is rapidly changing. The interracial marriage rate has risen. More and more people view

themselves as 'multiracial,' including the first black President and Vice President of this country. We talk incessantly about racial identity, but too seldom about culture or values. And yet, those are things that transcend race.

How, then, are we to understand the disaffection afflicting so many black Americans? I believe this is the result of false narratives being promulgated by demagogues and ideologues – narratives about how something called “white supremacy” threatens them; about how we have, in effect, reverted to the era of Jim Crow; about how the country has its metaphorical knee on our black necks; about how racist cops are supposedly hunting us in the streets to the extent that it is now “open season” on black people.

### **On Racial Disparity: Rhetoric or Reality**

My work has responded to these departures from reality by looking directly at what has happened in our country over the last seventy-five years. Despite the persistence of racial inequality, a great black middle class has emerged with an influence on American culture that is stunning and has worldwide resonance. There are black billionaires. We black Americans have ten times the per capita income of the average Nigerian. And not only that. Culture barons – the powerful people running mainstream media, bestowing prizes and grants, directing human resource departments, heading universities and movie studios – have all signed-on as allies in the struggle for “racial justice.” This disproves the premise that the American Dream does not apply to black people. To say so is to lie to our children about their country. This is a crippling lie that, when taken as gospel, robs black people of agency and a sense of control over our fate. And it is a patronizing lie, one betraying profound doubt about the ability of black Americans to face-up to the responsibilities and to bear the burdens of our freedom. That is the true challenge facing black Americans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: not to throw-off the shackles of our supposed oppression, but rather, to take-up the burdens of our freedom.

Bearing the burdens of black freedom in America means acknowledging that socially mediated behavioral problems are a root cause of racial disparities. To downplay these behavioral problems is to avoid reality. When anti-racism activists claim that “white supremacy,” “implicit bias” and old-fashioned “anti-black racism” are sufficient to account for these disparities they are, it seems to me, daring you to disagree with them. Their threat is to call you a

“racist” if you fail to attribute pathological behaviors to systemic injustice – to claim that you must think something is intrinsically wrong with black people. You must believe that blacks are inferior. For, how else could one explain the disparities?

But this dare is not an argument. It’s a debater’s trick. In the end, what are those who declare that “mass incarceration” is “racism” – that the high number of blacks in prison is a self-evident sign of racial injustice – really saying? Here’s what they’re saying. They are daring you to respond: “No. It’s mainly a sign of anti-social behavior by criminals who happen to be black.” Doing so risks being dismissed as an immoral reprobate. (This is so even if the speaker is black. Just ask Justice Clarence Thomas!) Of course, nobody wants to be called out as a “racist.” But we should all want to stay in touch with reality. The reality is that the violent criminals taking lives on the mean streets of St. Louis, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Oakland and Chicago are behaving despicably. Ascribing their violent behavior to anti-black racism is simply not credible. Why, then, have so many been getting away with doing so for so long?

Neither does any sensible person think that 70 percent of African American babies being born to a woman without a husband is a good thing, or that this is due to racism. People may say this, but they don’t really believe it. They are bluffing – daring you to observe this reality: that the twenty-first century failures of too many African Americans to take full advantage of the opportunities created by the twentieth century’s revolution of civil rights are palpable and damning. These failures are being denied at every turn. But that position is simply not tenable. The end of Jim Crow segregation and the advent of the era of equal rights were transformative for our country. And now – a half-century down the line – we have significant disparities. Considerable responsibility for this state of affairs lies with black people, ourselves. Dare we acknowledge that unspeakable truth?

### **On the Racialization of Police Violence**

Here’s another unspeakable truth: Black Lives Matter activists are barking up the wrong tree! We need to put the police killings of black Americans into perspective. There are about 1,200 fatal shootings of people by the police in the United States each year, according to a carefully documented database maintained by the *Washington Post* which attempts to enumerate every single instance of a fatal police shooting. About 25 % of those killed are blacks. The fact is

that twice as many whites as blacks are killed by police in this country every year. You wouldn't know that from the activists' rhetoric.

Now, 1,200 may be too many. I am prepared to entertain that idea. I am happy to discuss the training and recruitment of police, their rules of engagement with citizens, and the accountability that they should face when they overstep their authority. These are all legitimate questions. And there *is* a statistical racial disparity—although there is also a huge disparity in blacks' participation in violent criminal activity. I make no claims here, one way or the other, about racial discrimination in the police use of force. This is a debate on which evidence could be brought to bear. There may well be some discrimination against blacks in police use of force, especially non-lethal force.

But, very few black victims of police killings are unarmed innocents. Most are engaged in violent conflict with police officers. Some, like George Floyd, are unquestionably problematic and deserving of scrutiny. Still, we must bear in mind that this is a country of more than 300 million people with scores of concentrated urban areas where police regularly interact with citizens. Tens of thousands of arrests occur daily in the United States. These events—which are regrettable and sometimes do not reflect well on the police—are, nevertheless, quite rare.

To put it in perspective, the *Post's* Mapping Police Violence database lists 285 police killings of black victims in 2022. The CDC reports 209 black victims of what they call “legal intervention” in that same year. Compare this with 13,435 black homicide victims, the overwhelming majority of whom were killed by other blacks. For every black killed by the police in 2022, more than forty-five other black people were killed by other blacks. This is not to downplay holding police accountable for how they exercise their power vis-à-vis citizens. It is merely to notice how easy it is to overstate the extent of this phenomenon, precisely as the Black Lives Matter activists have done.

I repeat: the claim that something called “white supremacy” and “systemic racism” have put a metaphorical “knee on the neck” of black America is a lie being told daily by prominent black spokesmen – a lie that the media repeat uncritically. The idea that as a black person I dare not step from my door for fear that the police would round me up, gun me down, or bludgeon me to death because of my race is ridiculous. An unarmed black person is as likely to be killed by law enforcement as he is to be struck by lightning. This tendentious posture – where violent

conflicts between police and African Americans -- which are inevitable in our society -- are viewed as latter-day lynchings, is preposterous. Fear of being called a “racist” is the only thing that keeps many white people from saying so out loud. But it doesn’t keep them from thinking it. “White silence” may not be “violence,” as the social justice warriors would have it; but it certainly is not tacit agreement. And it should worry us. Everyone can see what is happening on the mean streets of urban America. Rhetorical bullying and hysterical tantrum-throwing, which have been on full display since the killing of George Floyd, won’t change a single fact on the ground.

But there is an even more fundamental point here: There is a terrible threat to social cohesion implicit in seeing police killings primarily through a racial lens. These events are regrettable regardless of the race of the people involved. Emphasizing an officer’s whiteness, and a victim’s blackness – tacitly presumes that the reason an officer acted as he did was because the dead or injured young man was black. This assumption is almost never tested against the facts. We do not necessarily know this to be so. Moreover, once we acquire the habit of racializing these events, we may not be able to contain that racialization to instances of white police officers killing black citizens. We may find ourselves soon enough in a world where violent black criminals killing unarmed white victims comes to be seen through a racial lens as well. This is a world no thoughtful person should welcome, since there are a great many such instances. Framing them as racial events is counterproductive in ways too obvious to detail.

When criminals harm people, they should be dealt with accordingly. But, they do not represent others of their race when they act badly. White victims of crimes committed by blacks must not to see themselves mainly in racial terms – if someone steals their automobile, beats them up, takes their wallet, breaks into their home, or abuses them. People are playing with fire by gratuitously bringing a racial sensibility to police-citizen interaction. They play their race cards from the bottom of the deck. They may find soon enough that theirs is not the last word in that story.

### **What We Have Here Is a Conflict of Narratives**

Why, the success of the civil-rights movement notwithstanding, has the unequal status of black Americans persisted into the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Clear thinking about this problem, I insist,

requires us to distinguish between the role of anti-black discrimination, past and present, and the role of behavioral patterns to be found among some blacks. This, I admit, puts what is a very sensitive issue rather starkly. I acknowledge that anti-black biases still exist, though much less so than in decades past. But, I am arguing that we blacks need to identify and seek to reverse behavioral patterns that prevent some of our people from seizing newly opened opportunities.

In recent writing I have recast these two positions as causal narratives. Under the “bias narrative,” one argues that the cause of persisting disparity is anti-black racism and that we must continue to reform American society toward achieving a level playing field. The focus there is on the demand side of the labor market. Such reform, now well-advanced, is necessary but not sufficient. By contrast, the “development narrative” emphasizes the need to consider how people acquire the skills, traits, habits, and orientations that foster their successful participation in American society. Here the focus is on the supply side of the labor market: youngsters without the experiences, who are not exposed to the influences, and who lack access to the resources that foster and facilitate their human development will fail to achieve their full potential. These two narratives are not mutually exclusive but, in terms of prescribing intervention and remedy, they point in very different directions.

### **An Economist Walks Down Memory Lane**

This tension between a focus on demand side versus supply side factors in accounting for persistent racial disparities is a very old theme for me, dating back to my doctoral thesis at MIT where I contrasted the concept “social capital” with the more familiar economic idea of “human capital.” My fundamental point was to distinguish the logic of economic transactions from the logic of human relations – especially when trying to explain persistent racial disparity. Business investments are transactional, but human investments are essentially relational. As I saw it, conventional economic theory was incomplete when it comes to explaining racial disparities and there were two aspects of this incompleteness – one having to do with human development and the other with racial identity.

My first point was that *all human development is socially situated and mediated*. That is, the development of human beings occurs inside of social institutions. It takes place as

between people, by way of human interactions. The family, community, school, peer group – these *cultural institutions* of human association are where development is achieved. Many of the resources essential to human development – the attention that a parent gives to her child for instance – are not *alienable*. Most developmental resources are not “commodities.” The development of human beings is not up for sale. Rather, structured connections between individuals create the context within which developmental resources come to be allocated to individual persons. Opportunity travels along the synapses of these social networks. Because people are not machines, their “productivity” – that is, the behavioral and cognitive capacities that bear on their social and economic functioning – are not merely the consequence of a mechanical infusion of material resources. Rather, these capacities are also the byproducts of social processes mediated by networks of human affiliation and connectivity. This was fundamentally important, I thought and still think, for understanding persistent racial disparities in America. That was the first point I wanted to make, all those years ago, about the incompleteness of human capital theory.

Second, *what we call “race” in America is mainly a social, and only indirectly a biological, phenomenon*. Persisting of racial differentiation across generations between large groups of people in an open society where individuals live cheek-by-jowl is irrefutable indirect evidence of a profound separation between the racially defined networks of social affiliation within that society. For, over time, “race” would cease to exist unless people chose to act in a manner so as biologically to reproduce the variety of phenotypic expression that constitutes the substance of racial distinction. I cannot over-emphasize this point. We speak casually nowadays about “racial equality” and “racial justice.” Yet “race” is not something simply given in nature. It is socially produced; it is an equilibrium outcome; something we are making. It is endogenous. It follows that, if one is to understand the roots of durable racial inequalities in any society, then one will need to attend in some detail to the processes that cause “race” to persist as a fact in that society because, almost certainly, such processes will not be unrelated to the allocation of human developmental resources in that society.

I concluded from these two observations that we economists should recognize the limits of our tools to explain persistent disparities by race because the creation and reproduction of racial inequality ultimately rests on *cultural* conceptions about identity that people embraced.



These are the convictions people affirm about the legitimacy of conducting intimate social relations with racially distinct others. (Here I do not only mean sexual relations.) I concluded that racial inequality is inescapably a cultural phenomenon, implicating not only the transfer of resources but, more fundamentally, the decisions we make daily about with whom to associate and to identify. My contrast between *human* capital and *social* capital reflects my conviction that beliefs of this kind ultimately determine the access that people enjoy to the informal and non-fungible resources needed to develop their human potential. What I called “social capital” when I coined that term in 1976 is, on this view, a critical prerequisite for the production of “human capital.” And, as we know all too well, this human capital – the skills, education, experiences and social aptitudes individuals possess – determines a person’s earnings, and his or her capacity to generate and to accumulate wealth. Persisting racial disparities should not be unexpected on this view. And they certainly should not prevent black people from enthusiastically embracing the larger American project.

### **Racial Equality and the American Project**

To that end, the narrative we black Americans settle upon – emphasizing “bias” or “development;” looking to “their” politics or to “our” culture; combatting anti-black racism or rebuilding the black family; embracing victimization or accepting responsibility – is crucial. Ultimately, this choice of narrative governs how we black Americans view our place within this great republic, the United States of America. This is worth arguing about. Is this a good country – one that affords boundless opportunity to all who are fortunate enough to enjoy the privileges and to bear the responsibilities of American citizenship? Or – as latter-day historical revisionists would have it – is this a venal, rapacious bandit-society full of plundering racists, founded in genocide and slavery, propelled by capitalist greed and unrepentant anti-black antipathy? (I regret to report that this latter narrative is being taught to young people in schools and universities across the land. And yet, I believe that the weight of the evidence overwhelmingly favors the former.

The founding of the United States of America – 1776 to 1787 – was a world-historic event by means of which Enlightenment era ideals about the rights and the dignity of persons, and the legitimacy of state power came to be instantiated in real institutions. True enough, the

Founding entailed a compromise with slavery. And yet, now, some forty million strong, we black Americans are by far the richest and most powerful large population of African descent on this planet. The question, then, is this: are we going to look through a dark lens that sees the United States as a racist, genocidal, white supremacist, illegitimate force? Or are we to see our nation for what it has become over the course of these last three centuries: the greatest force for human liberty in world history? I fervently urge the latter course. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. well understood, that's the surest pathway for black people to economic and political flourishing.

The Civil War left 600,000 dead in a country of thirty million. The consequence of that war, together with the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments enacted just afterward, was to make the enslaved Africans and their descendants into citizens. In the fullness of time, we have become *equal* citizens. That should not have taken another hundred years. Nor should my ancestors have been enslaved in the first place. But here's the thing: slavery was a commonplace human practice dating back to antiquity. Emancipation – freeing four million enslaved persons as the result of a mass movement for abolition—*that* was a new idea, a Western idea, an American idea. It was the fruit of Enlightenment philosophy and Christian charity. It was an idea brought to fruition over a century and a half ago in our own United States of America, with the liberation of an enslaved people. Such an achievement would not have been possible without philosophical insights and moral commitments cultivated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the West – ideas about the essential dignity and the God-given rights of all human persons. That is, America's Founding at the end of the eighteenth century brought something new into the world. Slavery was a holocaust out of which emerged an accomplishment that advanced the morality and the dignity of humankind – namely, Emancipation. The ultimate incorporation of African-descended people fully into the American body politic has been a monumental, unprecedented achievement for human liberty.

To whom much has been given, of him much shall be required.

Here, then, is my final point: It is both futile and dangerous for us black Americans to rely on others to shoulder our communal responsibilities. Freedom is one thing, equality quite another. The former is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the latter. Black Americans are a free people, but equality remains an elusive goal. If we want to walk with dignity – to enjoy truly equal standing within this diverse, prosperous, and dynamic society – then we must accept

the fact that “white America” can never give us what we seek in response to our protests and remonstrations. Rather, we must earn equal status by dint of our own efforts. I take no pleasure in doing so, but I feel obliged to report this reality: equality of dignity, equality of standing, of honor, of security in one’s position within society, an equal ability to command the respect of others – such things cannot simply be handed over on demand. They will not be the fruit of 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. My fear is that, until we recognize and accept this inexorable fact about the human condition – until we eschew the Rhetoric and embrace the Realities about “race” in our country – the disparities that have so troubled our nation and that so threaten its domestic tranquility will continue to persist. Thank you.