

bhtv-2014-12-22-loury-mcwhorter

LOURY: Hey there, John. How are you?

McWHORTER: Hi, Glenn. How are you doing?

LOURY: Doing well. Glenn Loury here, Brown University, and *The Glenn Show* with BloggingHeads.tv, talking with John McWhorter. John, introduce yourself, please.

McWHORTER: I am at Columbia University, as always. I teach linguistics, American studies, philosophy, and this coming semester, music history, believe it or not. And I -- (break in audio) have been doing BloggingHeads with Glenn for eight years now. Glenn, who are you?

LOURY: That's a long time. Oh, who am I? Well, I'm, you know, the guy that does *The Glenn Show* with BloggingHeads. I don't know, I'm an economics professor, and a pundit. And got myself into some trouble recently by writing a piece that could have been --

McWHORTER: Yeah, what's the response been on that?

LOURY: -- titled "Michael Brown is no Rosa Parks." And I have gotten -- I put something up on Facebook. It's coming out in the *Boston Review* January/February issue. It's the anchor piece for a symposium that the editors have organized, where my commentary is responded to by eight or ten other writers, and then I write a brief reply to their

responses. And I'd say it's been extremely polarized, the reaction to my argument in that piece, which I'm happy to summarize for the BloggingHeads audience. It's been either a bunch of people who have said, "You're so courageous, and thank you for your honesty," or it's been a bunch of people who have said, "This is sickening." I've been called a handkerchief head. For those not in the know, that's like Uncle Tom, [so that's?] Uncle Tom. And then others have said, you know, basically, they appreciate my effort, but that I'm deeply mistaken for whatever the reasons. Let me summarize the argument briefly, and then we can chat about that and other things related to Ferguson, Missouri, related the race and policing and justice debate that's ongoing, and the movement -- I put that word in inverted commas. The organizing energies, and the upsurge of protest that has sprung up. So my argument was let's not build a movement for racial justice around the events that tragically befell Michael Brown leading to his death in Ferguson, Missouri, back in August. I said, "Of course, black lives matter," which has been one of the, you know, themes of the protest. But I said the facts also matter, and I said in the Michael Brown case, the facts were ambiguous at best. I said that Brown was not killed because he lifted a pack of cigarillos from a convenience

store. He wasn't killed because he gave backtalk to a police officer and didn't step aside when he was asked to. He was killed in an act of self defense when he elected to assault a police officer, when he attempted to take that officer's gun, when he placed that officer in the position where the officer felt fearful for his life. I said, "That's what the grand jury concluded after (inaudible) investigated these matters." And I said that the factual circumstances were sufficiently ambiguous that building a narrative of the violation of black men by rogue police who were off of the legitimate program that they should be following, linking cases as different as a 12-year-old kid tragically shot holding a toy weapon when the police evidently thought that he was armed and dangerous, or a man dying when being taken into custody against his resistance after a police officer applied a chokehold, tragically dying. And other cases that could be named, lumping them all together into a single class, calling this the assault of police on black people, and then organizing a protest movement around that I said was a mistake. I said that I thought it actually misused, in some sense, the history and legacy of civil rights protest. And said that indeed, the communities in question need the police. And I said that many of these oppositions that people set up, for example,

between people of color in their communities on the one hand, and the police departments on the other were too simplistic by a long shot, and we were sort of losing touch with the real situation here. This was the burden of my argument, which people [would respond?]. So that's what I said, and I've gotten some flak for that. But I wonder what you think about all of this.

McWHORTER: Well, I think that I agree with your point. I mean, I wrote a less reflective version of what you wrote for *Time* magazine a few weeks ago, and I would say that the piece that I wrote, which said that what happened to Michael Brown was a tragedy, but that this one cannot be a rallying point because it's too ambiguous. It got around more than almost anything I've ever written. *Time* actually put it in their print edition. I had no idea it was going to get around so much. But I agree with you, but I've gotten a lot of response to the *Time* piece. I've actually had people deign to call me in my office about it. And I am struck by the fact that the polarization we see is so stark. I have never seen more riveting evidence, which good-thinking people like him, you know, who lean left are going to teach the misled people who lean right, rather than it going the other way around. And, you know, it's a fantasy. We've really hit a stalemate on this one. And

what I mean by that is, the first part of it I'll talk about here, is that on the black side, I've noticed -- because I've had endless conversations with people of all walks about this at this point, you know, from the barber shop, to black people who work at Columbia, to Columbia undergraduates, grad students, black people I know. It seems clear -- and you have probably noticed this in some conversations -- for a lot of black people in America, many of them can't imagine that Mike Brown was not a good boy. For many of them, no matter what the testimony was, no matter what the story is, no matter whether there's the fact that there's his blood on the pavement but then he died having reversed a certain number of yards back towards the car, many of them think that he must have been told that his job was to respect the police, and that there's simply no way that he could possibly have resisted being detained, and certainly no way that he could have attacked Officer Wilson. And to tell you the truth, I mean, from the way the event is told, even though there's some discrepancies, I don't find it hard to imagine that a boy who grew up on in a neighborhood like that one, with that neighborhood's relationship with the cops, might be capable of that kind of behavior -- and let's face it, especially if he was somebody who was capable of, you know, petty

theft from a store recently before. Many people really don't see that. And so for them, what they're always going to see is this boy who had done some petty theft, but other than that was this gentle giant that you write about so often. And he just got mowed down. And no evidence will convince them that he could have been as cocky as apparently he was. Now, I'm going to talk about the second part later, but I can see that many black people can't be moved, especially women where they figure that that boy must have been taught to be good to cops, because it was dangerous not to. So we're just stuck. There's nowhere to go from there. Have you heard that from some black people? Maybe in the comments, that Mike Brown could not possibly have been somebody who would have brought any of that behavior onto himself. That's not that he deserved it, but they seem to think that it was really Wilson saying, "Get up on the pavement," and Brown saying, "Yes, sir," and then all of that happening nevertheless.

LOURY: Well, there is a dispute about what happened. And the grand jury's investigation and reporting in the minds of many people, not only blacks, has not resolved that dispute. There are conflicting eyewitness accounts, and it's possible for an observer to cherry pick the accounts that they decide they want to believe, so people are saying

-- they're still saying -- you know, some of the witnesses said Michael Brown had his hands up when the officer shot him. No one is saying that he was shot in the back, which some had been saying before, because the forensic evidence clearly refutes that.

McWHORTER: Makes that impossible.

LOURY: No one is saying that he didn't get into a physical altercation with the officer, because his DNA is in the vehicle and on the weapon, and on the officer's body or clothing, so that seems to be not something that [could be?] disputing. People are disputing whether or not indeed he charged back at the officer and placed the officer in fear of his life at the officer when the officer administered the fatal shots, and they are saying -- some are -- that they don't believe. It's unbelievable that a man, having been shot and having fled the shooter, would turn around and run back at the shooter. They simply find that hard to believe. And the most serious criticism that I've taken has been from people who say, "Well, why do you believe the grand jury? Why do you take the grand jury's findings as a characterization of the fact?" To which my response is I have no alternative but to take the grand jury's assessment as the basis for any judgment about the facts, because that's where the evidence is. I mean, now,

if I had been sitting on that jury, would I have come to a different conclusion? I don't know, I didn't review all of the evidence and hear all of the testimony in the same detail. But I have spent a fair amount of time looking at the publicly available record of the grand jury's proceedings. And that's the basis for drawing any conclusions here. So I have heard that. I want to be clear about something; when I say "Michael Brown is no Rosa Parks," I don't mean to say that he was a bad boy or a good boy.

McWHORTER: It's irrelevant. Yeah.

LOURY: I don't mean to suggest that he deserved what he got or that he brought it on himself -- although, you know, you go for a police officer's weapon, and you are placing yourself in a situation where something bad could happen to you, and he obviously had some discretionary role in the altercation that ensued with the police officer. But what I'm saying is let's not make a movement out of this case. Let's not make this kid and his tragic death into a kind of iconic representation of the experience of African American or African American men in this country. In fact, I'd go so far as to say let's not cherry pick every case in which a black person or a black male comes into a conflict with, and ends up dead, at the hands of a police officer, as if

they were all a part of the same fabric, as if they all represented the same underlying general tendency or impulse. I mean, for example, people have to impute psychological orientations and motives to the officers who were involved in these cases. The officer trying to arrest Eric Garner in Staten Island behaved in a way in part because of the man's race, is the suggestion. The officer who shot this kid tragically to death in this park, the kid who was holding a plastic replica of a weapon, not a weapon itself, who arrived on the scene and within a matter of second fired his weapon -- he thought that he was being confronted by somebody threatening -- is said to have been motivated by race. Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri is said to have behaved in the way in which he did in part because of race. And I just think we ought to be slow, not quick, to make those kinds of generalizations. I think that the slope that one steps on is a slippery slope, at least down to a very bad place, if you reflexively introduce into this kind of very sensitive conversation, racial motives. And I think that, you know, you have the horrible incident that happened in New York City on Saturday, when two police officers were assassinated by a deranged African American man who appears, at least in part, to have been motivated by antipathy towards the

police, who in his social media postings made mention of Michael Brown and Eric Garner as people whose deaths needed to be avenged, and he was taking it upon himself to do. And now we have this situation, and if that one gets characterized in terms of race -- I've been reading the reports very carefully. The newspapers do not say "Black man kills police officers." They put a photograph in there. We can see. They give us his name.

McWHORTER: It's a black name. Yeah.

LOURY: It's a black name, and we see the photograph, and we see that it's a black man. We can see his -- at least some of his -- social media postings, and we know that his motivations were partly racial. But I mean, just think about it. Suppose we've got 1,000 people marching down the Avenue in New York City, calling attention to black criminals who are killing their own, killing police officers and killing other white people, and it's time for black criminals to desist, and it's time for politicians to give as much attention to the black criminals amongst us and the depredations of their violent behavior as they do to the occasional police misstep. That's not a world that I want to live in. I don't know that that's a world that anybody seriously interested in the welfare of black people

should want to invite. So anyway, I think I'm rambling a little bit, now that (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

McWHORTER: Well, that brings me to the second point, which is that many people's answer to that is that it wouldn't be fair to concentrate on the black criminals and what they do to each other because they ultimately are victims of the system. We have to go to the root of the situation, which is white racism, institutional, systemic, or the "white privilege" term has become especially prominent during the debate over the past month. It's existed for a long time, but people are now putting it on shirts, so it really seems to become a meme at this point. And I think that that brings us to the other place where I think all of this just becomes a stalemate, and that is that what I hear from the other side -- and, you know, for everybody who loves me for the *Times* piece, there's somebody else who thinks that I ought to be burned in effigy. And it's because their idea is why are black communities so outraged when occasionally a white cop kills one of their boys, when of course, that boy was in much more danger of being killed by another black boy? And, you know, the people who say that cannot be dismissed as racist or as somehow not getting something. The typical answer that you get, the one that, you know, the kind of MSNBC crowd has is that those black on black

crimes are usually prosecuted. But for one thing, quite a few aren't. And that doesn't really deep-six the white person who looks at these communities and said still, we're talking about one thing that happens every now and then as opposed to black murders that are so normal -- in, for example, Chicago in the summer -- that it barely even makes headlines when a boy or his sister or somebody else is killed. Those people do have a point; why is it considered so hideous that Darren Wilson, possibly motivated by an underlying, very subtle kind of racism or possibly not, kills Michael Brown, and calls him a demon, etc. And we have to talk about the nature of that vocabulary.

But then on the other hand, Michael Browns live in constant danger of getting into some kind of altercation and being killed by another Michael Brown. There is no easy answer to that, and for a lot of white observers of the media, and conversations like what we're having, there's simply no question at this point that there's something seriously wrong. That Al Sharpton is out there in a minute when a white man kills Michael Brown, but that black on black killing is somehow seen as part of institutional racism, or a response to circumstances beyond these people's control. I think that's also something that you've been saying in

your writing, and the people who say that cannot be dismissed as [out of court?]. And I think that they are beyond address.

LOURY: I think there are two points [here?]. One, what many people supporting the anti-police protest will say is it's one thing for common crime to take place. It's another thing for agents of the state to engage in violent behavior unjustly against the citizenry. The [catcalls?] are categorically different phenomenon, so whatever the relative numbers of these instances may be, qualitatively speaking, police violence is an abuse of an order of magnitude more dangers and more serious than the violence that may be created haphazardly.

McWHORTER: But see, that's a delicate case. That's a very delicate case, given that the people in these communities are armed, often to the same extent as the policemen.

LOURY: Yeah. Well, I'm just saying state action under the law is a special kind of action. I mean, the reason that we have these civil rights laws that say you can't deprive people of their civil rights, or, you know, no state will do this, the government can't do that. These are authorized actions on behalf of all of us. And for example, you might say that somebody who's embezzling public funds is doing something that is different in kind

from someone who's in (break in audio). Hey there, John, how are -- different in kind from someone who's embezzling private funds because of the betrayal of the trust of the voters, or something like that. Anyway, a person could say that. I'm not pressing that argument, the only thing I want to say here is -- which goes on the other side -- yeah, there are these violent acts, and there are these killings that go on in Chicago and in other cities around the country. And when the perpetrators are found and brought to justice, it's the police who find them and bring them to justice. And when these acts of violence are presented -- maybe because weapons have been [received?] and removed, maybe because dangerous people have been apprehended before they can actually do more harm, it would be the police who have apprehended them. When the murder rate in New York City in a generation goes from over 2,000 people killed a year to 300 (audio skip) odd people killed a year, it will substantially be the police who have helped to bring that circumstance about. (laughter) I'm kind of reluctant to say it because of all of the connotations, but Rudolph Giuliani is right when he observes --

McWHORTER: In his debate with Michael Eric Dyson.

LOURY: Well, for example, but, you know, it's not about Dyson, though. He's right to simply observe factually that

the remarkable decline in the extent of homicide in New York City has saved hundreds of black lives. Because it has. It has. The proportion of people who were victims of homicides who were African American is way out of line with our representation in the population. So if you got the murder rate down by 1,500 people a year, undoubtedly, there are many hundreds of African American men living now who would not be living if that murder rate hadn't come down. And it's the police who will have helped to bring that about. So constructing the dynamic of community-police relations in a stick-figured way, such that the police constitute an occupying army that is unjustly repressing the people simply doesn't accurately depict what's going on on the ground. It's a narrative. It's a story about what's going on on the ground --

McWHORTER: It is.

LOURY: -- that has some factual basis, but that I think viewed in its broadest light isn't really an accurate account (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

McWHORTER: And I think I have something to add to that, which is that on that point, I wrote a piece for *The Daily Beast* about three months ago where I said that you would think, therefore, that black communities would be thankful to the police for that. But let's face it, most black

community representatives and residents would not feel that way. For them, the cops are the enemy, and the idea of communities like that truly condemning the thugs among them seems counterintuitive. And I think that, you know, the (break in audio) white person writing me angry mail, they look at black communities and they wonder why black communities aren't rejecting their thugs. But really, they're not thinking about what human beings are like. But what they're missing shows what a stalemate we're at, because the simple fact is if you were in a certain kind of black community where that kind of black man is a norm -- now, that's not to say that it's anywhere near everybody. It's probably some, you know, bracingly small percentage of people. But where it's not abnormal for a person to go that way. You know, as it's said, there's an expression for it, which shows how conventionalized it is, somebody who goes the wrong way. Nobody talks about anybody going the wrong way in Scarsdale. It's a certain kind of community. Not all of them are black, but still. Somebody's going to go the wrong way. To truly reject every guy in the neighborhood who has gone the wrong way would mean mothers rejecting their sons. It would mean girlfriends rejecting their boyfriends, it would mean people disowning their cousins. It would mean truly

condemning your own. And the tragic fact is that in communities like this, your older cousin, your brother, your uncle, might be a wonderful person in 700 ways who also slings on the side, who has done some time, who has probably killed a few people, this particular uncle. That's normal. And you can't make that abnormal by snapping your fingers or writing a review in the *New York Post*, or expecting that somehow, someday, some summer, black women are going to learn to say some magic incantation to their sons that will make them stop doing things. There's nothing to do there. So unfortunately, yeah, the typical person in that community is going to be much angrier at Darren Wilson than about what their big brother did five or six years ago. That's just human nature, and it's not going to change, which is why I'm so dismayed as we end this calendar year, because there's nothing to be done about what that white observer is so appalled about. You know what I mean?

LOURY: I know what you mean about you can't disown your own and you can't expect people to make, stigmatize, and to denigrate behaviors that are very widely adopted within a community. I mean, the same could be said about, I don't know, teenage childbearing, for example, out of wedlock childbearing.

McWHORTER: Exactly.

LOURY: Maintaining the normative sanction against it when it's become so prevalent in some communities, it's impossible to do.

McWHORTER: And you can't bring it back. Yeah.

LOURY: You can't push on a string, is the way I used to put it. You know, you can pull the string and unravel the fabric, but you can't push back and put the fabric back together again. [Trying to think like that?] --

McWHORTER: That's a good analogy yeah.

LOURY: I want to say something else, though, John. What do we want? Dead cops. When do we want it? Now. What do we want? Dead cops. That was a chant that could actually be heard. I mean, it's been played over and over again on Fox News. You can go online and you can see videos of people marching down an avenue in New York City, protesting against the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. And these people were chanting that chant. What do we want? Dead cops. When do we want it. Though, a couple of days later, some deranged guy gets on a bus in Baltimore, gets off in Brooklyn, New York. He walks up to a couple of cops and shoots them dead in the head as they sit in their car, not ever knowing what hit them. He brags about it, OK? So a march led by Al Sharpton, a march called by the National

Action Network, a march for justice for Eric Brown and Michael Garner contains within its ranks a group of people who can be seen on video -- it's gone viral on YouTube -- What do we want? Dead cops. When do we want them? Now. And then days later, 72 hours later or something, we've got dead cops killed by a person who appears to have been motivated in part by some of that very same kind of sentiment. Now I ask you this: if there had been any such activity to the right of center in American politics -- Tea Party rally, whatever. Doesn't have to be the Ku Klux Klan. It doesn't have to be the Ku Klux Klan. It could be the National Rifle Association, OK?

McWHORTER: They would have been put in a satellite and sent to Mars. Right.

LOURY: And the people assembled in the thousands to express such public sentiments. There's too many criminals getting away with murder in this town. We need to fry them before, you know, they kill somebody else, or something like that. And then somebody had gone out, sat outside the courthouse, waited for somebody charged with a crime, hadn't yet been tried and convicted to be brought out in handcuffs by police officers, and run up to him and shot him in the head, OK? What do you think we'd be reading about in the newspaper this month? We'd be reading about the extent to

which extremist elements inside it murder, and the entire movement would have been discredited for it, OK? Now, Al Sharpton was sitting in the White House next to the Vice President of the United States at a big, round table where the president had convened a conference in order to have a taskforce, in order to investigate police and black community relations. He's a the head of this, and this is not the first time that Al Sharpton has been involved in ways that leave him morally culpable for actions of this kind. Now, I mean, call me an old fuddy-duddy, OK? I'm over 60. All right. Call me a conservative if you must. I don't care. I don't think that's what the movement of Martin Luther King, Jr., and so on was about. I mean, I don't think that it is being well honored by its leadership, and by the lack of a kind of moral seriousness, the lack of ability to transcend narrow, sectarian (break in audio) the interest, the inability (break in audio) actually stand on high ground. Al Sharpton is now the spokesperson for racial justice in this country. That's a travesty. And this incident, this killing of these police officers, this horrific incident (break in audio) should be seen, I think, as (break in audio) profoundly dis-- (break in audio) --crediting of what it is that's been going on. So, you know, I've said my piece. I'm ranting a little bit

at this point, but I mean, it just deeply disturbs me, John, that this is what we've come to.

McWHORTER: You know, to tell you the truth, Glenn, I'm at the point where I'm not surprised. I mean, it's really sad that this shooting in New York this weekend, I don't know if I'm going to be writing about this. Not because I don't feel terrible about it, but because I'm not sure I have anything new to say. Al Sharpton is predictable, given the circumstances, because what started out -- I've been writing about this since winning the race in 2005. What started out as action -- which is what the civil rights movement was supposed to be about -- has devolved into gesture. So you have a bunch of people who are acting for real. They are doing things that make lives like mine possible in the 1950s and '60s. Now, part of that is the drama and the noise, because you have to have it to get anything done. Inevitably, there's a kind of person in those crowds who's really getting off more on the drama and the noise than the action. Once the main actions have been done, such as the outlawing of legalized segregation, such as the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Once you've got the concrete stuff out of the way, the smoke clears, the people who did the action start getting older and moving aside, and you have the people who were really just enjoying being

onstage. They suddenly become more prominent because there are less concrete actions to perform. And next thing you know, Stokely Carmichael, well, he went to Africa. Next thing, you know, I happen to be watching the HBO documentary about James Brown right now in pieces while I eat lunch. Al Sharpton, young at 24, appearing on Soul Train around 1970. People like that come in, and it's more about the drama than about the action. Al Sharpton today - - I swear to you, Glenn, it's very simple. I think that people talk too much about him. If that man had his hair cut short and didn't have a gravelly voice and sense of humor, we'd have never heard of him. He's a performer, mostly. It's fitting that now he has his own TV show. And so when he's out on the street, of course it seemed natural to him for somebody to say something as performative as "dead cops." Especially because, to a certain kind of observer of which there was a predominance in the media, the idea is that black people can't do anything they want because we're victims of the system. And so it's not the same as skinheads saying the same sorts of things, or, you know, some sort of bowtie conservative movement saying those things. It's different for black people, we have no responsibility. So that's what -- (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) Very quickly. I think that we're going to keep

seeing this until somebody comes along and says "Here's some actual actions that we need to take." Civil rights has devolved into performance. And so of course, the leader of it is going to be somebody who's fun to watch and has a neat sound. And there it is.

LOURY: No, I think you're wrong. I think the close relationship between the Obama administration and Al Sharpton on these matters is what proves you wrong. I don't think this is just performance. It certainly begins that way. It certainly involves a dimension of what you've described. But I think there's something real going on here. I think these private meetings in the White House, when people sit around tables and try to think how they're going to message, and what they're going to say, and how they're going to respond, are significant things. I think when Valerie Jarrett and Barack Obama regard Al Sharpton as their eyes and ears on the ground in Ferguson, Missouri, I think that that's significant. I think that when one of the commentators on my piece in the *Boston Review* that's about to come out is Danielle Allen. She is a professor of political thought at the Institute for Advanced Study. And she's just been appointed a professor of politics and director of the Ethics Center at Harvard. So she's moving from the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton up to

Harvard to take over a major leadership position in political thought and ethics at Harvard. She's an estimable scholar, she's a fine woman -- I don't mean in any way to disparage her, but I simply want to report that when I suggested in my piece that Al Sharpton shouldn't be taken seriously as a moral leader in the 21st century, her reaction was Al Sharpton is the face of the movement in the 21st century. The National Action Network is organizing people on the ground. The family of Michael Brown reached out to Al Sharpton to help them do the public imaging, and Al Sharpton is to be taken -- she says "Glenn Loury doesn't take Al Sharpton seriously. Well, he should," she says, OK? So I'm saying all of that to say Al Sharpton has moved beyond this caricature figure that Tom Wolfe in his *Bonfire of the Vanities* satirical novel, it seemed to me, captured perfectly is this kind of ambulance chasing huckster who had a perfect pitch sense of how to get the TV cameras rolling, how to embarrass public officials, and how to put people in tight spots so that he could get, whether it was corporate money, or public attention, or whatever it is, he could get what he was looking for. Al Sharpton has graduated from that into a confidante of presidents, OK? And I think that a culture of impunity, in which a man like Al Sharpton can get a pass from somebody like Charles Blow,

and dozens of others. Not just him, dozens of others, can get a pass so that they don't actually go back and dig up the Tawana Brawley thing and make it something that we're talking about every time Al Sharpton appears in front of a television camera, so that they don't go back to the Freddie's department store fiasco, so that they don't go back to the Crown Heights riots and replay over and over again clips of Al Sharpton talking about Jewish diamond merchants, and Oppenheimer South African Hasidic community in Brooklyn connections in the aftermath of the tragic death of that kid under the automobile of a -- etc., etc., everybody knows about the Crown Heights riots. [Say they don't?] remind us of who and what Al Sharpton actually is. But, I mean, every time I hear him, I think about those things. And the performances that I see with him standing before a bank of microphones flanked on either side by the relatives of some deceased poor young African American man who got into it with the police and came out the worse for it, every time I see him doing that, I'm reminded of that. But when I pick up the newspaper and I read about him, or when I turn on my television and see images from White House meetings, it's as if none of it had happened.

McWHORTER: No. You're worrying too much, Glen. I think first of all, yeah, it's interesting that we're supposed to

forget about Tawana Brawley, etc., but then every time a Republican says something stupid, we are reminded of speeches that Ronald Reagan made about, you know, newsletters by Rand Paul's father. We're supposed to always think about the history whenever anything happens. But with Al Sharpton, we're supposed to think about him exactly right now. Well, you know, part of it is that I think for a lot of people -- and I'm sorry, but I am talking mostly about white people -- there's a subtle racism involved there. There's a sense that he can't really be held responsible for his actions because the monkey doesn't really know any better. He's being treated as a child. I frankly think that a white version of him would not get such an easy pass from the media. But then also, remember, there's the idea that black people aren't responsible. We have no agency. Anything that he did wrong has to be understood because he's black. But more, the main point is he's not being taken seriously. Rather, you know, do you really think Barack Obama thinks that Al Sharpton has anything meaningful to think about these things. One thing you and I both have to give him is that he has been good at creating an awareness of the police profiling issue. He's not the person running around in the track suits 25 years ago. I really do give him credit

since Amadou Diallo of creating awareness. What he cannot do is do anything beyond that, because creating awareness, let's face it, is, to an extent, a kind of show business. He can put on a show; he can bring people into the tent. What happens beyond that is really just not what he does. But what you're worried about is that he gets to sit in the White House. But it doesn't matter what he says. His being invited there is a gesture. The reason that people like Hillary Clinton kiss his ring is because they've learned that it's better to do it than to not do it. If you don't kiss Al Sharpton's ring, then he's going to go around with his hair and his voice and his sense of humor, and basically call you a racist -- or if you're Barack Obama, he's going to say that you're a race traitor. And there are a lot of people who are going to get distracted by that, including a media that would enjoy it. So instead, you see him on MSNBC, and you see him making speeches out in the streets, making people laugh. Of course you invite him, because then you've done your job, and it doesn't hurt anything to invite him. They're not taking him seriously. They're playing politics. Wouldn't you rather not have Al Sharpton walking around saying clever things about what a race traitor you are? Quite frankly, if I were somebody who was in politics, I would

kiss his ring, because then I would know that I wouldn't have him running around saying stuff to distract people from what I was trying to do. You shouldn't be worried to see him being treated that way.

LOURY: You know, we disagree about this. I mean, MSNBC has taken this guy -- this is a kind of, I don't know if he would be Glenn Beck, or I don't know, Mike Huckabee. I mean, I guess we could try to search around and try to find somebody on the right who would be a media personality. Rush Limbaugh, somebody like that. But who actually shows up at [banks of?] microphones and holds press conferences when there are dead bodies laying around, who is actually inciting -- strong word, it's a strong word. It's a strong word. And I understand that it's a strong word. It's citing a kind of malevolence, OK, in the interest, presumably of justice. There's nothing just [about it?].

McWHORTER: [Oh, but that -- incite?] --

LOURY: OK? I mean, yes. But I mean, I'm saying, this stuff has consequences. You're saying don't worry, don't worry, don't worry. You're saying the people in the White House and other places, and in the mayoral office in New York City who take this fellow into their console, are using him, and do not themselves [view him?] seriously, and I'm simply not (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

McWHORTER: You remember that the incitement -- Al Sharpton walking down the street hearing people saying that had no idea that he was inciting anything. We were supposed to understand that a slogan like that is a kind of theater, in the same way as -- this goes back to a now rather antique conversation --

LOURY: Excuse me, John. I just want to be clear. I'm not saying that Al Sharpton was saying --

McWHORTER: No. [I'm not?].

LOURY: He was at the head of a march in which some of the marchers said it. I don't know that he had any control over [what was said?].

McWHORTER: No. And he heard it said, and he didn't turn around and say, "Oh, no, no, no." You know, he kind of let it keep going. Yeah. And I'm just saying, we're supposed to hear that stuff like a lot of rap lyrics. It's supposed to be heard as a kind of symbolism. It wouldn't occur to Al Sharpton that he shouldn't be seen with people saying things like that, because to him, he's performing. He would have expected everybody to understand that that wasn't seriously meant. I'm sure when he heard the news, he thought, "Oh, shit." That's not what he thought he was hearing around him. Now, I don't think this is ideal. I think that we should have somebody who's the most prominent

civil rights leader, if there's going to be one, who's interested in getting stuff concretely done. But you see him surrounded by people saying things like that, and you think, "This is our civil rights leader?" And I just think, well, yeah, if the civil rights movement has devolved into performance. (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

LOURY: OK. Well, perhaps we don't disagree so much on it. But I want to shift the ground a little bit. Still in the same ballpark, however. So you remember the night that the Ferguson, Missouri grand jury result was announced by the district attorney out there, McCulloch.

McWHORTER: I was up most of that night, yes.

LOURY: So there was violence, rioting, looting, arson in Ferguson, Missouri [attendant?] to that announcement. Maybe you've seen the video where Michael Brown's stepfather, the husband of --

McWHORTER: He's yelling on the steps.

LOURY: This woman Lesley, I believe, Mc--

McWHORTER: McSpadden. McSpadden.

LOURY: McSpadden. Stands up. She's bereft in grief that her son's death hasn't been vindicated, and that the police officer who [affected her?] son's death has been given a pass by the grand jury. And her husband gets up on top of

a vehicle or something, and he shouts out, "Burn this bitch down." OK? And indeed, they proceed to do just that. Some in the crowd proceed to do just that. They overturn police cars and set them afire. They loot, they destroy property, they commit arson and they burn stuff down. Now, the president of the United States went into the press room at the White House to make a statement after the grand jury's announcement. As he was speaking, these events of violence and rioting in Ferguson, Missouri were unfolding. And some of the television outlets put up a split screen in which you had the president basically splitting the difference. You know, on the one hand, on the other hand. You know, of course there's anger. However, we live in a country of laws, and the grand jury has spoken. And if you're going to protest, you have every right to do so, but protest peacefully. This is the president of the United States. This is Barack Hussein Obama, OK? At the same time, at exactly the same time, people were shouting "Burn this bitch down." Gunshots were heard. People were taking cover, OK? Looting was ongoing, and the security cameras captured it. And afterwards, you had all these videos of people running rampage through stores and shops and gathering up the goods and carrying them out armful through the broken doors [and stuff?]. I can't help but think that

not only was Barack Obama diminished by that moment -- and it was a Sharpton-esque moment. You say I'm putting too much on Sharpton? It was Sharpton-esque. (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) Both the guy on top of the car, yelling out to the crowd, because Al Sharpton had been meeting with those people, OK? On the one hand -- and the humiliation of the president of the United States meekly calling for a different splitting maintenance of order even as we understood the anger of the crowd, even as law was being run roughshod over, people's property was being destroyed and their lives were being endangered. Not only was Barack Obama diminished by that moment, which will live in infamy, the presidency was diminished by that moment, OK? You can't split the difference with rioters. There's nothing to understand there. Now, I can understand if Tanehisi Coates wants to call to our minds the violence of the 1960s as a necessary precondition for the civil rights movement, even though I think that that's historically mistaken.

McWHORTER: That's history (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

LOURY: I can understand if Michael Eric Dyson and some others want to play fast and loose with this fire, which is, "Oh, if people go out and commit violent acts and break the law and there's a little bit of violence, well, that's what we

need in order to, you know, make this omelet that we're trying to make of justice. Justice never got here nice and pretty. Justice always required a little bit of unrest." I can understand left-wing academics and left-wing journalists engaging in that behavior. The president of the United States is the embodiment of the state. He represents the law. He and the attorney general can't split the difference with this. They can't start telling us about how they felt when they were 19 years old, walking around the city, when in the background, you've got demagogic incitement, and ultimately, you've got violence. Now, I'll tell you where this ends. This ends with the Brotherhood of Benevolent Societies of police officers organizing themselves into vigilantes. This ends with NRA card-carrying members and these right-wingers saying, "We can't rely on the state to protect us." There's more at stake than the grievance that black people might feel -- some black people who still lag behind, and live in places like Ferguson, Missouri, and feel that they're getting the butt end of things. There's more at stake here in the Oval Office than assuaging their concerns, than showing sympathy for their sentiments. Real leadership requires (inaudible). We just had a teachable moment, and the lesson was not to teach white people, as Nicholas Kristof

wants to do, that they don't get it. The lesson might have been to teach black people and others who are sympathizing with their claims that we now live in the 21st century, that this was not 1967 anymore, OK? And that the only way forward in a country of immigrants, a country that's being remade from year to year and decade to decade by the millions of people who are coming mostly from non-European points of origins to rebuild inner city St. Louis, to make Cleveland a livable place, to put restaurants and shops again on the avenues and parts of New York City and Chicago that otherwise would have gone under, OK? That Silicon Valley is overrun with people who are not white, very few of them who are black. The country's moving forward, the world is moving forward. This is the 21st century. Crybaby, oh, 400 years of slavery, throwing a tantrum is not the way to get anything accomplished in this country [anymore?]. That's the teachable moments lesson that ought to have been taught, and the teaching should have started with the president of the United States. And instead, he invites Al Sharpton to a meeting, and everybody sits around and sings, you know, old civil rights ballads. I mean, sorry, but there you are. That's where I'm coming from.

(laughter)

McWHORTER: It's funny. That's what should be in the movie, that moment. And it's a symptom, it's complicated, it's an unwitting legacy of the civil rights victories. But really, for these purposes, it comes down to the same thing, which is performance. We have lost our sense of the difference between creating change and a kind of catharsis. And there are a lot of black people out there, including ones working at the Academy, who I think for want of something better sometimes think that the essence of true black identity, and therefore of black progressiveness, is the performance with any thought as to what it's going to create something secondary. And so for example, is something like Ta-Nehisi Coates thinks of Watts as having been necessary for change. You have to think about the fact that OK, yes, the long hot summer scared, you know, polyester-clad white America to death. And so a lot of concessions were made. But boy, it would be difficult to identify anything now that we think of as good that came from those long hot summers, except for maybe encouraging people in the sentimental, psychological sense to police themselves about racism. Maybe a TV show like *All in the Family* wouldn't have been possible without Watts. But in terms of how anyone's living, I don't know if that would occur to everybody because of that -- you know what it

reminded me of, Glenn, actually? This, for example, Dyson's editorials and various people who were angry at Obama for not being angry enough on that day? Remember the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas trial, where Anita Hill sat there, calmly responded to these, you know, almost contemptuous questions that were being asked her by these old white men. There was a little movement that I think was mainly in print, because there was no internet to get this around at the time. Black female academic who wondered why Anita Hill didn't turn it out, as they put it. They had this idea that Anita Hill should have started speaking harshly with certain kinds of inflections, and maybe certain kinds of neck gestures and things to sort of put Arlen Specter in his place by talking to her the way a black woman would talk to an errant boyfriend or her son who had gone wrong. And, you know, what would that have done? It would have been a great performance, it would be fun to play the tapes of that now, but how would that have helped her case? She would have lost her case if she had turned it out in front of all those people. But there were people who thought, "Well, that's what she should have done. That would have been the real black thing to do." We're still stuck in that. And so for a lot of people, that guy standing up and saying, "Burn this mother down"

was the right thing to do, a certain kind of white person saw it as authentic. But all of us, everybody is forgetting that performance is not what the Montgomery bus boycott and not what Selma was about. We need more concrete goals, but nobody knows what they are, so one performs.

LOURY: Well, I got to say something here, John. I don't disagree with what you just said about the performative dimension, the dramaturgic dimension, and about how that's deeply woven into the spirit of protest of African Americans going back. I think that's true. But what I want to say is this romanticization of the riots, this idea, this historical narrative in which we see on the one hand, Martin Luther King, Jr. piously invoking the Christian scriptures, and sitting calmly with a suit and tie on as he negotiates --

McWHORTER: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

LOURY: -- with Lyndon Johnson over the Civil Rights Act, or whatever on the one hand. But behind him is Malcolm X with the (inaudible). Behind him is the angry Stokely Carmichael --

McWHORTER: More like after him. Yeah.

LOURY: -- with, you know, the black power movement. You know, so now we look back 50 years, OK? But what I want to

say is those riots were an absolute and unmitigated disaster. They were a disaster for black people. Not only is it the case that businesses fled and some of these communities never recovered economically from the damage to housing stock and to a willingness to make investments in them and so forth and so on. And [last for?] decades afterward. Not only was that (inaudible). Not only was the political backlash fierce, some scholars attribute the rise of mass incarceration to the political backlash of, you know, middle of the road white voters to the sense of disquiet that they felt at a feeling that things were unraveling. Not only that, they didn't accomplish diddly in terms of actually moving the needle forward for the people on behalf -- people now refer to it as rebellion. You know, the fashionable thing in academic circles now when one writes about riot behavior by uncontrolled mobs of people, burning down their own communities and destroying the property and endangering the lives of the others, they call it rebellion. They call it rebellion as if it was some kind of politics, right? They fancy themselves fighting for justice, and throwing off the shackles of an oppressive system, when all they're doing is wallowing in their own degradation. Looking back decades on that stuff and romanticizing it, and telling us you never get any

progress without a little bit of violence, without a little bit of this sort of violence, it's kind of unspeakably irresponsible, intellectually, in my opinion. That is now how black Americans gained the vote. We didn't gain the vote through the threat of violence. We gained the vote by persuading a majority of our fellow citizens that the meaning of the country and of the Constitution and the ideals was not being fulfilled, and then by marshaling a coalition sufficiently large to be able to actually change the structures in which we live. That's the only way that progress is going to be. Black people can't do it by ourselves, and we can't do it with our fist balled up. We can't do it throwing a tantrum and pounding on the floor because we can't have our way. We have to get together, organize and persuade a majority of our fellows that in the interest of the country, whatever it is they [want to get done, let's do it?].

McWHORTER: You know, [it's sad?], I guess that makes you a conservative. Because it's at the point where old people - - I mean, people who are now aged black people -- people that old are under no -- I'm going way beyond any [stage?].

LOURY: You're not talking about [me then, right?]?

McWHORTER: Are under the -- (laughter) are under the impression that no, they really don't agree with you. And

you're reminding me of something I haven't thought about in eons. In August 2005, for the *Washington Post*, I wrote an editorial basically saying what you just said about the anniversary of Watts. And I was saying that, you know, despite the catharsis that was involved, those riots did not build anything. And we have to ask why that was the proper response then, as opposed to, say, in 1925 to '35 when, you know, black communities were quite fed up for obvious reasons, and yet that sort of thing didn't go on. How did we get from a riot being white hooligans running in and terrorizing to black neighborhoods into it being black neighborhoods burning themselves down. And, you know, I got a response. A response in the *Washington Post* was published by none other than Roy Wilkins, i.e. Roy Wilkins who used to run the NAACP, his son Roger, who was on the front lines. You know, this was somebody who was there during what I think was a crucial, transitional period. And he wrote an indignant response where he basically said that people were fed up. "I was there, I saw." You know, ignoring my point that people had been fed up for hundreds of years. Why exactly then? It was the new mood in the air. A specific mood, not just that the schools weren't good, etc. And it was clear that he thought of me as, you know, one of these young black people who was a traitor to

his race, quite frankly. He and I ended up at a small event a few years later where it was quite clear that he did not even want to speak to me. And this is the son of Roy Wilkins. And with all due respect to him and the things that he saw and went through that I did not, even he is under the impression that the theater of those riots, the fact that people turned it out, so to speak, was somehow in itself significant. He can't make the connection, or lack of connection, between that and somebody poor now. He can't see that it didn't change anything, because I hate to say it. It doesn't matter. To him, what matters is that there was the emotional catharsis. And that's where we're stuck. If you say what you're saying, which is what was the result, for many people, that's somehow beside the point because what's really the point is that people were running around and making loud noises and scaring white people. But that itself cannot be an end. I think for many people at this point, though, that is an end. And that's where we're stuck. That's the end.

LOURY: I think we're in a very bad place, John.

McWHORTER: We are.

LOURY: You know, I was thinking about that shooting in the public housing stairwell in Brooklyn --

McWHORTER: Akai [Sanders?]. Right.

LOURY: -- that occurred a few weeks ago in New York City. I don't --

McWHORTER: Not Sanders. Yeah. Akai. Yeah.

LOURY: I don't remember the name of -- yeah.

McWHORTER: Akai Gurley. Yeah.

LOURY: The guy goes in, the guy goes around -- the police officer -- with his gun, you know, drawn and the safety off, and it accidentally discharges and he kills, tragically kills this guy. And so then there's some talk about how do you police public housing projects? And should the policemen be checking the stairwells? And should they have their weapons drawn when they do so? Can you imagine that conversation now in the aftermath of the assassination of those two police officers? No one is going to be able to credibly tell the cop that he can't go into the stairwell with his gun out ready for whatever might happen. I mean, I'm very, very worried, because police -- not only in New York City, but around this country -- are being mobilized by this event. Right now, they're in mourning. There will be a funeral. Then it's going to be a spectacle to see. There'll be two funerals. They will be spectacles to behold, because you and I know that thousands upon thousands of uniformed police officers

from all over the country are going to converge on New York City in order to show solidarity. They're going to be on heightened alert everywhere, thinking that the very act of violence that was somehow incited or instigated by a mood of anti-police rhetoric would break out in their cities, too. They're going to be on hair-trigger sensitivity, right? The next time somebody waves around a plastic toy gun and the cop isn't sure whether it's plastic or real, he's going to shoot. And then after he shoots, he's going to say, "You know what? I couldn't take a chance. They're killing cops out here these days."

McWHORTER: No, we're going to have a [case like this?].

LOURY: I mean, people are playing with fire. They are playing with fire here. And they act as if they don't even know that it's hot.

McWHORTER: Yeah. This has been the year of this sort of thing. You know, it's Michael Brown, it's Akai Gurley, John Crawford, Tamir Rice, and Eric Garner all within this calendar year. And the question is where it's all going to take us, or whether history is just a matter of repeating itself, or whether history is random. But it's been quite a calendar year for this sort of thing.

LOURY: [It has?].

McWHORTER: I think we should end here though, Glenn, because we've gone a whole hour.

LOURY: Yeah, we should. Let me just say one more thing. I think people need to keep things in perspective. There are two and a quarter million people in prison. Your average prison stay is about two years. It's a little bit longer. Half of those people are black, more or less. What that adds up to is three, 400,000 African Americans being taken into custody and committed to confinement every year. Nearly a half million, OK? How many shootings do we have? How many cases of abuse? How many cases of physical abuse of people do we have? I mean, I'm not minimizing the cases. The cases are important. I'm asking people to put it in perspective. Hundreds of thousands of times, handcuffs are put on people. They're taken into custody, they are arrested, they are processed. A handful of times are there incidents in which there is police violence or brutality or excess. Again, I'm not minimizing it. I'm not saying that it's OK. I'm just saying keep it in perspective. It does not constitute the norm in terms of what's going on out here. Quite the contrary, I would say. So anyway, now I'm full-fledged conservative. I'm on record defending the police. (laughter)

McWHORTER: These things are very difficult to talk about,
and very difficult to fashion political views around. And
we're just going to have to see where it goes. Anyway, I'm
going to start grading my (inaudible) 55 sociolinguistics
essays, and so --

LOURY: I hear you, John. I got to do something like that,
too.

McWHORTER: Yeah. And so let's talk again soon. And --

LOURY: We will.

McWHORTER: We'll just see what happens.

LOURY: Thanks for coming on. I'll talk to you later.

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