

Loury and McWhorter Discuss Michelle Obama

Loury: Hello there, John?

McWhorter: Here we go. Hi Glenn, how are you doing?

Loury: Oh, I'm great. Spring is here. I'm so happy.

McWhorter: Yeah, it's coming here too, which means I've got yard work, but I think I will try to enjoy that.

Loury: Yard work. So that means you're a suburbanite or something?

McWhorter: Kind of a suburbanite. I'm in Jersey City and diligent vegetable gardener. Plus there is kind of a postage-stamp lawn. So it becomes a project for these warm months.

Loury: You know, I was going to say I didn't think on Manhattan Institute salaries people could afford a yard in Manhattan (laughter). I thought you had to be a hedge fund guy to do that (laughter).

McWhorter: You are correct. What you can afford is a postage-stamp lawn in Jersey City. And yeah, I'm lucky to have that. Yeah, cucumbers, sod, all that stuff. Do you have grass? Do you deal with grass?

Loury: You asking me if I have grass?

McWhorter: Yeah.

Loury: Well, I'm fortunate to have two residences, actually. One here in Providence, Rhode Island where I teach at Brown, which is a condo with a little grass in the back. But I don't have permission to step on it, since it belongs to the other condominium owner (laughs). But I can see it from my window. And then we have a house in Brookline, Mass, which has a nice yard. Yes, we do. Anyway --

McWhorter: Good to have grass.

Loury: So things continue to be interesting out there in the world of politics and public affairs, no?

McWhorter: Every two or three days, there's something interesting that happens. And yeah, it's really exciting. It's an exciting time to be following things like this, especially because of the unpredictability. But it definitely seems like our friend Barack Obama is in trouble again.

Loury: Barack in trouble, are you talking about bitter-gate?

McWhorter: Yeah, the bitter-gate. It's interesting because I've been defending him right and left for months. It seems to surprise people that somebody who works for the Manhattan Institute could like Barack Obama, but this is one person who does.

Loury: John, excuse me, but can you speak more directly into the microphone or something, just --

McWhorter: Sure.

Loury: -- on the audio side.

McWhorter: Sure.

Loury: OK, thank you, go ahead, you said you've been defending Obama for months now.

McWhorter: I've been defending him for months. Can you hear me now?

Loury: Yeah, I can hear you.

McWhorter: OK good. I think that the whole flap over Reverend Wright was a profound misreading of what it means to go to a church like that as a black American person. But in this case, with the idea that he has stated that when people are financially distressed or feel that that the government isn't work for them, then they cling to things like religion and guns. I think he meant what he said. I'm still for him, but I am not convinced by his explanation that what he meant was that people vote for those things because they feel left out of the economic picture. Because he isn't saying it clearly enough. This is a man with a legalistic mind. If it were really that he "misspoke", and if what he meant rather than cling to in an emotional way, was vote for, than quite simply, he'd say it. Nowhere has he said, "I didn't mean cling to. What I meant to say was vote for." He doesn't say that. He

doesn't say that because that's really not what he was thinking. He didn't misspeak. I think he said what he meant. And what he's been saying since then, that people vote for these things is what he wishes he said. I think that our friend Barack Obama let slip an aspect of himself that people did not expect, that I think he has been kind of hiding. I don't hate him for that. I still support him. But you know, with Reverend Wright, he showed himself to be culturally blacker than a lot of people thought he was. This time, he's shown himself to be more of a college town blue American than he has often let on. Perfectly predictable, given his background. And what he said about people clinging to religion is the sort of thing that you could hear in any number of faculty lounges and any number of college-town bookstores. It's a very common attitude. Naturally, he drank it in, with the life he's led, in going to Harvard Law School, teaching at the University of Chicago. It's not surprising. He just hadn't let it out before, and we're just going to have to deal with it. I think he'll get through it, but I think he meant what he said.

Loury: Well then I wonder if we do, or he does. I don't know if I'm going to include myself in that we, get through it, if at the end of the day, the condescension that many

people draw from those remarks is an accurate reflection of his attitude. I don't say it is or it isn't, but if I just follow you in saying that it is, then I do wonder whether or not in November, one gets through that. The other thing I was going to say is I find this strategy very interesting, and I've heard him say it a couple of times now. He says, you know, I misspoke or had a wrong choice of words, whatever the formulation was. He said, "It's not the first time and it won't be the last." Now I've heard that formulation. I heard it in the debate last night. And I also heard it in his immediate reactions, public statements that he made in the aftermath of the firestorm. And I thought, well, it's not the first time and it won't be the last that under stress and speaking as one has to do to thousands, different occasions and so forth, you can say things that come out the wrong way. Sure, sure, sure. But there was something of an edge, maybe even a little bit of a defiance in that it wasn't the first time and it won't be the last, that I don't know, just I found a little bit unsettling. I think it gives a big, fat target to guys like Bill Kristol. You must've seen his piece in the New York Times.

McWhorter: Yeah, that's right.

Loury: The mask slips is what Kristol says. And he says, indeed this is a glimpse of the genuine elitism, whatever. And as candidate Hillary Clinton has been pointing out, this unfortunately feeds into a certain narrative that Republicans have used to their benefit against Democratic presidential candidates going back to Michael Dukakis, of being snobbish, brie-eating, arugula-consuming (laughs).

McWhorter: That's right. That's right, it's true.

Loury: People, so you know.

McWhorter: It's a problem. It's definitely a problem. As far as I see it, what this is is an example of the fact that Obama is untested. That doing a national campaign is not something that he was born and bred to. And so of course he is going to make some mistakes. And there are two kinds. One of them is fatigued misspeaking, or not putting something in the best way that one could. His frustration at the way especially YouTube now magnifies these things is perfectly understandable. A while ago, actually, I was saying I didn't like the way white people were looking at Barack Obama, when he was a much newer figure, as somehow a great uniter, as if anybody could unite the gulf between Michael Moore and Ann Coulter. I said it was as if people were thinking he was [mammy?]. People listen to the clip and they think that I was saying Barack Obama is a mammy,

which makes no sense at all. I wasn't criticizing him. And that is going to follow me to my grave. There are still people who think I said that. And you know, I wish people would listen for context more. This one, however, the bitter-gate comment. This one is not a misspeaking. This is a mistake in that I think he forgot that there are certain attitudes that are typical of the sort of brie-eating, chardonnay-sipping crowd, that you do not let fly when the cameras are running. That you cannot give voice to, except when you are in your living room with your wife or when you're with your best friends. I'm sure that Hillary Clinton has many similar feelings. How would she not? But she's more experienced. She would not let these sorts of things slip. But I do think this. And this is a guess, because I find that everything I predicted about Barack Obama starting a year-and-a-half ago has come true. So I'm going to venture this one. I still think he can beat McCain. People like Erving Kristol can call him elitist all they want --

Loury: You mean Bill Kristol, I assume.

McWhorter: What did I say?

Loury: Erving.

McWhorter: Erving Kristol. Bill Kristol can call him elitist all they want. But the simple fact is that Barack Obama's

color does matter. We are seeing him as a person who is a color, and that does have meaning. And I think that while, if he were a white Barack Obama, this elitism might be a serious problem, and that we might be dealing with a sort of recap of what hindered Adlai Stevenson from becoming president, the fact that he is also a color, and the fact that there is this expectation that many people see in him of uniting, and that he's going to keep saying it that way, and the fact that he has a certain narcotic way of speaking, which I'm sure he's going to return to, once he's outside the wonkery of the primary --

Loury: If he's allowed to do so, yeah.

McWhorter: I think he will. It's going to offset it. I think that there's a warmth people see in blackness that will mean that he will be a very special combination. And in the meantime, John McCain is many things. One of them is boring. He's a very unexciting candidate. Obama will remain exciting. And I think we may be in for something really special in November.

Loury: Well, OK, we'll see. And I don't want to detract from the positive qualities of Obama at all. I do find interesting, neither do I want to necessarily endorse your characterization of John McCain, but we'll see. But what I do want to do is to say how interesting I find this



juxtaposition of race and class, or maybe this kind of uneasy tension or unusual -- whatever I want to (laughs) race and class is going on here, so you say Barack Obama's color matters. Surely it does. And I think that it makes it harder for the claim of elitism to stick. But I was struck in watching a clip of Michelle Obama being interviewed in the aftermath of this controversy. She called attention to her modest coming up in Chicago.

McWhorter: The four spoons, right.

Loury: Yeah, the four spoons, exactly, exactly. The four spoons interview. No silver spoon in my mouth. In fact, we barely had spoons, you know. But we nevertheless sent two kids to Princeton, her father did and mother out of that household. And more power to them. It's certainly something they rightfully should be very, very proud of. When I heard though, I thought, how many people anywhere could say, you know, parents working in a mill town, how many people whose parents are miners, how many people who growing up in rural just barely getting by, hard-scrabble middle-America could even begin to say that they sent two kids to Princeton. And I'm not talking about anybody's IQ here. I'm talking about the fact that Princeton University isn't necessarily on the lookout for hard-scrabble kids

coming up the tough way from middle America, at least not very often.

McWhorter: Not white ones.

Loury: Exactly, my point. You know, I don't mean this in any way as an accusation, but I just mean that one of the reasons perhaps that this elitism charge has a chance of sticking with Obama, quite apart from a certain arrogance that sometimes comes across in his manner and so forth, is that there could be resentment, and not a small amount of it, in those parts of the society of people who will look at say, yeah, you came up the hard way, but you're black and everybody knows the red carpet is rolled out for you guys, as long as you can string a few words together and pretty much keep your noses clean. This kind of thing. So that's a kind of interaction between racial resentment and class resentment that might exacerbate Obama's problem, I'm thinking.

McWhorter: That is definitely going to be a problem. And to tell you the truth, I don't have any animus against Michelle Obama. But she is not as charming as he is. I don't mean there's something wrong with her. But she's not as charming. She doesn't know how to censor herself. She is more transparent about her impatience with the BS aspect of all of this. I'm sure she's a great lady, but she

doesn't come across as well as she might, kind of like Teresa Heinz Kerry, similar kind of vibe, not wanting to be bothered with all the nonsense. And it's interesting, because I think she could not be elected President.

There's certainly a certain peremptory quality --

Loury: (laughing) I think that's putting it mildly.

McWhorter: Yeah, that comes out of her. But with Obama, there is the charm. And I don't think that this is a superficial thing to be looking at. Most people do not vote on the basis of whether or not somebody would lift payroll taxes for people in which bracket. And there's something that he's got to know, OK, he slips. He has bad days. He's told us he's going to keep having them. And even saying that makes him charming, in this self-deprecatory, ironic era. And if he can keep on making those speeches, and he can keep on talking about unity and if he can keep on smiling, people are going to remember that man. As far as the sort of person who will look at him as a black person who isn't grateful for the things he's gotten, notice that that's his wife who has sounded that note, not him. And it doesn't sound like something that he would say. That's the sort of thing that he knows not to say. And not to mention, there's also the fact that to an extent Obama is seen as just kind of black. And that got nudged a little

bit by the whole Reverend Wright thing. But the fact is he's a certain color. He's got that peculiar history. And so I think that he'll always be seen a little differently. If he were a male version of his wife, this would be --

Loury: It's a little bit like what Shelby Steele argues in that argument that he's been shopping around. I'm not a big fan of Shelby Steele as a general matter, but I think he's onto something about the characterization of Obama as a bargainer, that is to say a kind of African-American figure who allows the main audience for black advocacy, which is of course white people, to feel more comfortable with himself or herself, in virtue of the fact that they offer themselves up, not as a profound challenge to the status quo, not as an indictment of the moral standing of the audience, but rather as somebody who is prepared to concede this is the greatest country on the face of the Earth. My story is possible only here and no place else, and thereby allays the audience's fears, allows them to feel good about themselves and so forth. This notion of a bargainer. And my point is that Michelle Obama ain't no bargainer (laughter). She doesn't even have to open her mouth before --

McWhorter: You can just look at her.

Loury: -- before you know that she is not up there to bargain with you (laughs).

McWhorter: That actually, that's the perfect summation of it. And it's interesting, I like Shelby Steele's work more than you do. I think he's -- the [camera's?] pulled way back, but I think that he in that is a genius. And when it comes to Obama, he's dead on. I'm a fan of Obama despite the fact that I don't expect him to be perfect. It's not that he can do no wrong. He'll do wrong things and I still think he'd be good for the country. But, I was just going to say, he is a bargainer. I think in his case, it's actually quite conscious. When we see him saying things that suggest that he would actually be perfectly at home with a lot of the politics that are shared over Chardonnay and faculty lounges and in that college world, when it's clear that that's where his head is really at, the fact that he has come out in public with all this yes, we can, and let's bring everybody together. He's doing exactly what Shelby said. And as far as I'm concerned, all power to him. But yes, he's a paradigm example of Shelby's identification of that person.

Loury: I want to agree with you maybe 95%. I want to excise the word genius. But otherwise, [succeed myself?] with your remarks, which is to say this. I thought that when

that Reverend Wright scandal broke, and the question, well, why does he stay. What's the nature of his relationship with this community and with this kind of fierce anger that Wright gave voice to, which of course is not unusual on the streets of the south side of Chicago --

McWhorter: Nope.

Loury: -- and Obama, I thought Steele really does nail this.

This is about identity and about the construction of self, I thought. I thought, well, he's here, that is Obama, on the south side of Chicago. He's in this congregation. And he's making his way. And it's not just political opportunism, although there's a little bit of that. You know, you got an 8,000-member congregation, you're going to get a few votes. But it's also about who I am as a person, who I understand myself to be, and finding a communal niche where I can express that in someone. But it's very black, in this cultural sense that you're talking about, this niche is on the south side of Chicago. So on the one hand, you're wearing that as a part of your personal journey. On the other hand, however, you're offering yourself up to the country as an embodiment of something else, something that's really very different. And as I understand Steele's argument, that's a kind of he thinks fatal flaw in Obama's political persona: the uneasy juxtaposition of this

blackness embraced identity on the one hand, and this bargainer, allaying America's fears and allowing them to be comfortable with him on the other. And I thought the Wright controversy exposed that in sharp relief.

McWhorter: It did.

Loury: So I guess we have to give old Shelby Steele his props.

McWhorter: Yeah, and it definitely gave his book a new profile.

It's interesting. I was at my step-grandmother's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday party a couple of weeks ago.

Loury: Good for her.

McWhorter: And yeah, people don't live that long. It's really something, and she's sharp as a tack. And there were some people there, my step-grandmother and my step-mother know everybody in the country. It's just amazing. And it turned out there were some people there from Chicago, a middle-aged black couple. And they go to Trinity Church. They knew all about this. And I found myself thinking, I wish all of these damned pundits who are misreading what it means to hear Reverend Wright say these things could just meet these two lovely people. They are perfectly normal. They're not firebrands. They are comfortable with white people. They are community -- they are active in their community. Perfectly normal people, nobody would have any problem with. They were there for the exact sermons that

are now on YouTube, and nobody, Bill Kristol would have no problem with these people.

Loury: Right, I know what you're saying.

McWhorter: It's just all of this is richer than any of these people see. It's frustrating. Very frustrating. But yes, I think that Obama's bifurcated persona is something that's going to be very challenging for people to deal with. It'd be interesting to see, though, whether if he were in the White House, we could get to the point where people actually did understand it, so that there was not a black President in the White House who people didn't really think of as black, the way say Colin Powell would've been if he were in the White House.

Loury: Yes, I think the possibility that that would be so, that his election would bring the country to the point of sort of radical confrontation with some of these impediments to our mutual understanding is a lot of what that hope offering is about in people's minds. It is the hope that yes, through this process and coming out on the other end, you just said it a minute ago yourself: something very exciting and very special might be happening this fall. Through this process, we're going to -- and I read these columnists on the op-ed pages. I believe it was Cohen in the New York Times just this morning saying this. But I've



seen it a dozen times. We're a country. We've got to grow up. We've got to get past this stuff. And here's the path to it. You know, if so, well then, that would be great. Maybe I'm a little doubtful about the path being quite so easy as all of that. But you know, hey, what do I know. I could be wrong about that.

McWhorter: And you know Glenn, that's why I want to get to this. Because we tried to get into this the last time we spoke, and there was some strange Verizon glitch and so we couldn't do it. But given your work and given your commitments, I find it genuinely fascinating that we are sitting here talking about Barack Obama, the first serious black candidate for President. You would rather see the white female in than our brother Barack. And I'm the "conservative", and I want Barack to be in. What is it that makes you seriously want, at this late date in the campaign, for Hillary to be our President and for Barack Obama to just go home.

Loury: Well, well, OK, all right. So here I am, I have to answer this question --

McWhorter: Genuine curiosity.

Loury: -- for the blogginghead multitudes. And my reputation may never recover from it, but here we go (laughs).

McWhorter: I can't wait.

Loury: Several reasons. One is I think she's more competent.

I genuinely do. I understand that that question is arguable. But every time I hear them discuss affairs of state, including in that debate last night --

McWhorter: She was better.

Loury: -- I come away from it with the sense that her grasp is deeper, and that her vision is more mature. You know, there's going to be experience. Experience has been made into a bad word. You know, I'm watching this political campaign and I'm coming away with some serious respect for people who are in the business of image management and all of this kind of media relations and all this kind of stuff. Because I believe the Obama campaign has done a brilliant job at it. How did experience become a bad word? How did it get equated, how does a lifetime or decades of experience at the top of American government get equated to having had the foresight or the judgment to stand against the war, which I was against from the very start just like Barack Obama. So I think she's better qualified. And I just think again, as I say, that show last night, when they were discussing, they were asked some questions about foreign affairs and so forth, and they were also asked some questions about domestic issues. And her answers were just more elaborate, richer --

McWhorter: She's an insightful --

Loury: -- more thoughtful, in my opinion.

McWhorter: Oh, they are.

Loury: The idea that some talking head on MSNBC is going to dismiss all of that as wonkery, and say, oh, I'm just too serious a person to be persuaded by that. Wonkery is exactly what I want in the person whose finger is on the button, OK. That's what I want. I want wonkery in the person who's going to be making the decisions that are going to affect life. So I think she's better prepared to be President of the United States. Secondly, I'm just going to confess here. Some people vote because, well, the guy's black. I'm black. Let me vote for the guy. That's not me. I vote because woman's 60. I'm 60. Let me vote for the woman (laughs). In other words, what I'm saying is, there's a generational connect that I have with Hillary Rodham Clinton. And not only with her. Yes, we are baby-boomers. Yes, the '60s were the formative decade for us. Sorry, that's true. Yes, we were quite numerous in that we've had an outsized impact on the culture for decades and I'm sure the generations X, Ys, and Zs are sick and tired of it. I understand all of that. Nevertheless, we 55-65-year-olders have journeyed through life to reach the prime and the peak of our capacity. All of it has come to now.

And now's our time, kind of my feeling. I'm speaking about myself, but this is kind of, vicariously extending to Hillary Rodham Clinton. So when I look at what I see as a kind of almost tragedy, and many people, I think even her enemies would agree there's something tragic about, as she looks like she may go down to defeat here after all of this. Something very sad about it. I feel the frustration of a life lived primed for a purpose, and then having that snatched away from one, even when one is quite convinced that one is the best or better prepared person to take it on. So I identify with that. It's as if one of my young protégé students were to come along and get the [job department?] that I had been living my whole life for, you know what I mean. You're going to fill this chair, and then they appoint the 40-year-old instead of me. And I feel a little bad about that. I feel bad for her, all that. Another thing is, again, I feel funny saying this, because it's so contrary to the prevailing narrative. I really admire her grit. I admire her toughness. The kitchen sink, that's again the public relations line from the Obama campaign is that she and her husband have thrown everything but the kitchen sink at him. But from my vantage point, viewing this campaign, she's endured a great deal. Some of it's self-inflicted, to be sure. Poorly-run

campaign. I'm no expert in political campaigns, but even I can see they screwed it up at a number of junctures. But even so, she's kept her chin up. She's soldiered on. She's fought the good fight. And I just have a good deal of admiration for that. And finally, I want to say this, again, controversially: the woman thing is really a big deal to me. It's bigger than the black thing. People may be surprised to hear me say that. I really think that the currents of our culture, our political culture, our relations that we have in the private sector and so on, all across the board, around questions of gender and sex, is much, much more pathologically screwed up and difficult to untangle than our [province?] around race, which of course is not trivial and I'm fully aware of them. I think that therefore, her relegation to the sideline when she is the most qualified person for the job, when she has paid her dues and accomplished what she's accomplished and arrived at this point, of a woman who but for the phenomenon of Barack Obama would be in a very strong position to be elected President, I just feel like something is being tossed casually aside that we really ought to linger over and ponder. So this quick embrace of this kind of maniacal anti-Hillary notion. You can't believe a thing she says. The Clintons always this. The Clintons always that, and so

forth, throws way too much overboard for me. I mean I don't buy it and behind it I fear that what there lies is an unexamined sexism in our political culture that Hillary Clinton is the victim of. So there you are. There you are.

McWhorter: All of that makes perfect sense to me. I even understand the generational aspect of it that you would feel. Maybe that's partly why for me Obama is more compelling. The sexism against Hillary Clinton is absolutely disgusting. I've always been put off by the certain peak in Hillary hatred that there is out there, which clearly would not be directed at her if her name was Harold. I see where you're coming from. And how could I condescend to Hillary Clinton, but I feel sorry for her in the same way that you do, because yeah, she does deserve it. It is her time. And how could she have known that this person was going to come out of nowhere and basically charm his way past her, which is what I think basically has happened. But this is where I come from, and I guess I have my personal reasons too. Everything you say is true. She is more qualified. I openly admit that. He is more than qualified enough. It's not like he looks like a deer caught in the headlights.

Loury: I'll certainly concede that point. I'm not trying to suggest otherwise.

McWhorter: Right, yeah, so I think he's quite admirable on that scale. He's as good as, say, a Mondale was. She's exceptional. But the other day, I was doing a radio show. It was a conservative radio show. And I was wrestling with the host, trying to make him understand why it would be good to have Barack Obama as President, despite the fact that his policies would not be the ones that this radio station's terribly interested in. I've been doing that a lot lately. If I may, I'm actually getting kind of good at it, [to a draw?]. And then they had a caller in. And it's a black guy, probably in his 50s from Indianapolis. And I've been making all these constructive proposals. I've been trying to talk policy to the extent that I can. And this guy says, "Are you one of these people who takes the white conservative line that there's no white supremacy?" That's what he says. I'm sure that he's a perfectly intelligent person. He is living in the United States that we know. He is living in this post Jim Crow United States that very well may be about to elect a black President. And he drives in his car, driving down the highway, looking at the nation that he has lived in for 55 years. And what he sees is white supremacy. Now I'm sorry. There are

still some problems with the notion that our problem now is white supremacy. It's drama. It's melodrama. It's something he's been taught to say. It feels good for him to say it. And he's caught in that. He'll never let it go.

Loury: Don't you have a term for this, some kind of alienation or something?

McWhorter: Yeah, but I never thought it was very graceful. It is therapeutic --

Loury: Yeah, no, it's not graceful, but it just might be spot on (laughs).

McWhorter: And I think in his case, that's what it is. And I'm sure he's a nice person, good to his mother, raising kids. But I think he is caught up in an unproductive and fantastical way of thinking. Now, I think, and maybe I'm wrong, but I don't think I am, if Barack Obama and Michelle and the kids were in that White House for eight years -- and I think it would have to be eight years, not just four -- then there would be a whole generation of college students not long after that, who really never knew anything but those people in the White House. As far as those college students being black and brown, it would shape them. And I think that those students, those people, that generation, start calling themselves the Obama



generation, simply would not be able to internalize that kind of therapeutic alienation the way people older than them have. And you know, if America's problem is the color line, if any of us believe that race is really our biggest problem -- and I think fewer and fewer people do, but I really do think it is a problem. That Guy talking about white supremacy, that is, at this point, although he doesn't mean it as such, that is a blot on the coherence of our discourse in America -- if that's something that's really important, I want Obama over Hillary Clinton, because let's face it, Hillary Clinton could not change people's minds about whether or not there is white supremacy. Obama would be more than good enough. And it would kind of put me out of the job. I think this whole delicate race discourse that we have, and this is more Shelby Steele and that a lot of it is awfully artificial, awfully coded, awfully liturgical, I think we could get rid of a lot of this stuff, and we could move on to solving real problems.

Loury: OK, so I have to take issue with that, John.

Therapeutic alienation, which is to say people refusing to see the enormous world-historic transformations that have occurred in American public life around questions of race, and continuing to understand themselves and to interpret

their political environment through the lens of something that might've been appropriate in the Jim Crow era, but is no longer is appropriate. Is that fair as a...

McWhorter: I would only add that you might reasonably have felt that way even up to about 1980, because it's not as if the end of Jim Crow changed life as it was actually lived immediately. But after about 1980, things became different.

Loury: OK, so I'll concede that that is a problem and there's plenty of it out there, you know from the Al Sharptons and so forth, and from people who call in the radio shows and from people who are writing essays in sociology courses. Plenty of it. It's a problem. But I don't think it's The problem. And moreover, while if I were running for President or something, I would never utter the phrase white supremacy, if I were trying to understand as an analyst various aspects even of contemporary American culture and politics, it might occur to me to use the phrase or some equivalent to it, which is to say the unacknowledged and maybe even not fully conscious implicit supposition that normalcy is defined in terms of a kind of hierarchy of social outcomes in which whites come out on top. I'm trying to give a crude, off-the-cuff definition of white supremacy. But here's what I'm trying to say. If

the jails fill up with young, black men around these cities, and they are riding away, for crimes that they well may have committed and deserve to be punished for, then whether or not we see that as a failure of those people over there or we see it as in some ways reflective of failures central to our very collective lives together as a society, might depend on the fact that those people are black and that, in the minds of many people, that outcome is not so anomalous. It's kind of about what you would expect from them. And if that way of thinking is commonplace and ends up being reflected in policies and in politics in the way that we talk about problems and understand them, how we assign responsibility for the maladies of our civilization, then that's something that I might want to include under this column that I will have labeled white supremacy. And I hope in doing so, I wouldn't have slipped into the swamp of therapeutic alienation. I just feel an analyst who understands perhaps that race nevertheless continues to influence what we value and what we're prepared to mobilize ourselves around, and what we are not prepared to mobilize ourselves around. Something like that.

McWhorter: Sure. And you use the word column in a different way, in order to get across the point that you just made,

which I agree with in principle, you had to just speak a column, a political column. That was probably 1,200 words. You had to put it very carefully. It was a sinuous, reasoned, high IQ argument. And because I am used to hearing them, because I deal with wraiths, I understand what you mean, and a certain crowd will understand what you mean. But my, it's gotten complicated, hasn't it? You had to say an awful lot to get across how white supremacy might be a problem of ours as opposed to the 150 other things --

Loury: Yeah, wouldn't fit on a bumper sticker.

McWhorter: Right. My feeling is this. Let's say that the prison situation is the result of white supremacy.

Interesting. Not very long ago, the Second Chance Act was passed in Congress.

Loury: Yes.

McWhorter: And what the Second Chance Act is is a bill designed to go national with programs to help ex-cons not wind up back in prison. So the idea is to give them employment counseling, to find them housing, which is an enormous problem. It's hard to find somewhere to live if you are an ex-con. And next thing you know, you're out on the street, and then what are you going to start doing? Getting people off drugs. Not just some, but generally most people behind bars have some sort of substance-abuse problem.

Loury: Indeed.

McWhorter: That needs to be fixed. And so there's been this growing movement. Some localities have been more into it than others. They're working on it in Newark, near where I live. Now, it's national. It's been moderately well funded. It really could've been better, but life isn't perfect and we're at war. But we've got the Second Chance Act. This is a very important thing. This is what I call civil rights legislation. Now, that had just become a fact on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther King's assassination. And there everybody was on TV, including me, and you've got that refrain that you're supposed to say, but we -- I don't even need to finish it -- everybody's saying that. No one said a blinking thing about the Second Chance Act. Like for example, we can talk about white supremacy in the prisons. Well, it looks like something is being done to address that. And what I don't understand is why so many people seem to think that it's more important in this polity of ours to go on TV or to write op-eds and talk about how we have a long way to go, rather than paying attention to the sorts of things that are actually helping us go along that way. I find again and again that people -- and I'm not saying this of people -- but again and again, people who call themselves

interested in black uplift aren't interested in policy. Their eyes glaze over when you bring it up. And I find that to be a lapse in attentiveness, to put it as politely as I can.

Loury: What you say is a good point. I remember Jim Webb, the senator from Virginia who's a member of the joint economic committee the U.S. Congress held hearings last fall on policy toward people in prison and various ideas were kicked around. And the Second Chance Act, which was then pending was one of the things that got mentioned in those hearings. And he made a big deal out of thinking and talking with his staff. I could see that they had a lot vested in getting it past, important piece of legislation. And more generally, the idea that if you're concerned about the wellbeing of black people in this country, you need to pay attention to certain areas of policy which intersect with their lives, whether it has to do with welfare, education, imprisonment --

McWhorter: And today it's all on the internet. That's another thing.

Loury: Indeed. You need to pay attention to those things. And it's not all just about some large macro indictment of a racist society that's indifferent to the plight of blah, blah, blah. I think this is absolutely right. But perhaps

we black people cling to our therapeutic alienation because we're frustrated with the inability to improve the quality -- government's inability to improve the quality of life in our communities. No irony intended.

McWhorter: Yeah, well, I think we need to change our sense of what has fixed things. Like for example, if we're going to talk about black history. And it's funny, I'm being courted to write a book about the history of black New York. And everybody tells me that this is a terrible idea and nobody's going to buy it. But more and more I'm thinking I actually want to write this, because our history is really not being told right. In 2008, the Second Chance Act passed. That's black history. That is much more interesting than anything that's going to happen this year in the wake of Gina, Louisiana. We're going to hear more about that. That is less important than that. In 1996, there was welfare reform. People just scoot on by that. I think people are more interested in what Tupac Shakur was doing in 1996 than welfare reform, which really has put money in the pockets of poor black women, and has been proven to have sharply reduced black child poverty. It dipped abruptly after '96. It had been falling a bit since '93, then after '96 it goes into freefall.

Loury: Yeah, I know the story, John.

McWhorter: Wait, I'm just saying that that is something that helped people. But because it wasn't something about a street protest or something like that, it gets ignored. I mean --

Loury: I think welfare reform is a mixed bag, on the whole positive. I just want to go on the record with my own opinion.

McWhorter: What was wrong with it? Oh goodness, what was wrong with it, except not enough child care?

Loury: Well, not enough money. Not enough support for people. Long-term outcomes for children, I think it's a mixed bag. But I don't want, I'm not prepared to argue welfare reform with you right now, and I don't want to make that the subject of the last few minutes. What I want to agree with you about is that there are a number of areas of government policy where the state intrudes powerfully into the lives of people. Certainly welfare is one of them, whether for good or for ill. And incarceration is another one. And education is another one. And that if you're a population who are disproportionately on the bottom of society, these institutions of state intrusion and governance and management and influence over your life are hugely important things. Therefore, attention to the detail of how they operate, and they operate this way for everybody,



although they may disproportionately affect your particular group. It behooves one who would speak for such a group of people, who would call themselves advocating the interest of such people, to get themselves enmeshed in the details of that. All this stuff that's about Jesse Jackson, who becomes an easy target now in his older age, with his career behind him basically as a public leader. But I was around and sort of commenting in the '80s when Jackson was at the peak of his power. I always thought that his refusal to sit himself down behind a desk somewhere and actually try to run something that influenced the lives of his people, other than getting in front of a television camera and moving in a frenetic way from one event to another amidst all the hyper-excitement of his celebrity, to actually try to govern Washington DC by running by mayor there, or Chicago, represent the people of the State of Illinois. And get himself or his staff enmeshed in the details of the legislation that would affect tens of millions of people who were looking to him for leadership. That his steadfast refusal to do that, almost a kind of laziness -- I regret to be piling on Jesse Jackson, but this is my view -- that it was just a great tragedy and a terrible loss. And that really the only path to the

lifting up of his people ultimately would've been through something like that.

McWhorter: Yeah. And I would add that I think there's way too much dog-piling on Al Sharpton. Anything that needs to be said has been said. I think that there's --

Loury: He's kind of a self-parody almost, isn't he?

McWhorter: Right, there's his manner. But there's something to be said for the awareness that he's created of police brutality when there is police brutality. But I will never forget reading an article where Charlie Rangel, Congressman from Harlem --

Loury: Well now there's a reading.

McWhorter: -- well, that's a whole different thing. But he said that Al Sharpton had never -- and he doesn't hate Al Sharpton or anything -- but he said Al Sharpton had never shown any interest in a bill being passed in Washington. And I think that that's, like you're saying, that is a problem. I don't know if it's lazy, but I do think that it's a matter of people thinking that drama is more important than rolling up your sleeves. And of course you need both. But I would venture to say that the rolling up your sleeves is every bit as important, if not more, in terms of as you said, genuinely uplifting one's people. And as such, I think the Second Chance Act should be

considered more interesting than whether or not that cover of Vogue a few weeks ago with LeBron James and Gisele Bundchen, LeBron --

Loury: I didn't see it, cover of Vogue?

McWhorter: Supposedly, LeBron James is holding Gisele Bundchen. And he's looking mock fierce and she's smiling. And the idea among people so concerned with the uplift of our race, was that LeBron James could be taken to be a kind of King Kong stand-in --

Loury: A kind of what, I'm sorry your voice trailed off there.

McWhorter: King Kong. A King Kong stand-in. And so is this the stereotype of the hyper-sexualized black male.

Loury: I see, uh huh.

McWhorter: People were more interested in that than the Second Chance Act. I don't get it. I just don't get it.

Loury: Popular culture, pretty powerful right. They also probably have more minutes of coverage on these cable TV channels of the various machinations of the latest pop starlet than they do of many other serious matters affecting the lives of the American people.

McWhorter: That is true.

Loury: Probably the same thing. Can I ask you what you thought about that debate last night? There've been all these complaints about too much attention to the various gaffes,

you know what I mean. Bitter-gate, [two's little landings?], and not enough attention to issues. Do you think that's fair criticism?

McWhorter: I do not, because as far as the issues go, the differences between them are not particularly exciting, because they're coming from politically largely the same place. And so we are all human beings. And some of these gaps are important. I think that the bitter-gate gap really does play into something that one might want to think about. And I really actually like the fact that finally, Obama did actually get some hardballs from the questioners. It really wasn't fair the way it used to be that Obama would be offered a seat and a cup of tea, and Hillary would be thrown tomatoes after all the time. Now they actually treated him like a serious contender who should be able to take serious criticism, in other words, like a whole person. So I actually thought it was pretty nice. I think she won. She was cool and collected. He seemed defensive. Then again, so would I be if I had to answer questions like that. But he's not as good a debater as he is a speaker, as we've seen, so it wasn't a surprise.

Loury: I guess that's clear. I was also taken, a little bit surprised by and maybe pleasantly, that Stephanopoulos and Gibson did direct some pretty sharp questions to both

candidates. But it seemed especially surprising, or noteworthy as I saw them being directed to Barack Obama. You know, then following up and bringing up stuff that you know that a lot of people out there are going to say, "Why are you bringing that up?" And yet they persisted. And I don't think his answers were all that compelling, to be honest with you.

McWhorter: No, he was not at his best, and I think he's recently been called on some things where he really just doesn't have, there's no way to have a good answer. We have seen that he, like Hillary is very much imperfect and that he's got some negatives. Finally, he's got some negatives. It's interesting, I was wondering a year ago, how perfect could this person be? I was thinking, is this an act or is he really just a very fortunately, perfectly well-balanced, utterly at ease with himself in the world person, with no real flaws except for maybe some shady business with a real-estate deal that clearly is something that he did not do on purpose. Now we see, OK, there are cracks in the plaster. I don't think any of them would make him a bad President. But they're there. And that was very much on view last night. Suddenly, he was not perfect, no more Teflon. It made him real. It made this whole election cycle realer than it's been.

Loury: There was a particular moment there, this subject of  
this follow Airs, Ayer, I'm sorry if I don't --

McWhorter: The Weatherman.

Loury: The Weatherman guy came up, and evidently a resident of  
Hyde Park, whenever, professor friend of Barrack Obama's  
and they have some association. So he's asked about that.  
In part, in his answer he says, in response to Hillary's  
trying to make some hay on this point, hey, you're  
associated with a guy who said some awful things. He  
thought 9/11 wasn't so bad. He regrets that he didn't blow  
up more stuff when he was blowing up stuff. And that's  
reprehensible she says. And he responds, "Well, your  
husband pardoned a couple of weather underground people, so  
there." And I thought, at that moment, I said, well gee,  
the President of the United States exercises his clemency  
powers on behalf of some people who have paid their dues in  
prison is one thing. And having a personal relationship  
and apparently liking, getting along with somebody who was  
involved in those activities is another. They're not even  
close to being equivalent. I don't know. People may  
disagree with that. But I don't see them as close to being  
equivalent. And the repairing to that move, which was  
obviously prepared as a way to counter the other thing,  
sounded more like the constituency out there is, give the

media who already like me something that they can say to try to even things out, rather than to actually address what might be legitimate concerns. My feeling was that that might work with Hillary Clinton. But it's damn sure not going to work with John McCain.

McWhorter: Well, the sithics (sp?) of this one are interesting, because I mean do we really expect that before he knew he was running for President, he was going to clutch his pearls and run away from this former weatherman, based on events that did happen when he was eight years old, even if the guy still says that he wishes that he had done more, notice that he isn't doing it now. In other words, I think with Ayers, there's a little bit of therapeutic alienation. And I've seen him on film. There's a certain drama about the man. Is Barack Obama supposed to have just run away from him? And we presume there would've been dozens of people unsavory in certain ways who he should've just kept away from completely, in case he wanted to run for President and being sure that he was actually going to get as far as this. I think that it's all a little silly. This is more grasping at straws, that Barack Obama does not spit in the face of an aging radical.

Loury: You know, I think if a white supremacist person who had been violent, in the spirit if not actually the deeds of

Timothy McVeigh were known to be the personal friend of a Republican who was running for President, a Mitt Romney or John McCain, I think it would be news. I think it would be listened to by people. And I think it would appropriately go to the question of exactly who is this person that we're dealing with here. All the more so, the person that we're dealing with is not entirely well-known to us. He's a relatively newcomer on the scene. I agree with you, it's uncomfortable. It's a little bit sleazy. I feel dirty even talking about it.

McWhorter: It gets into how many people somebody killed at a time. It also gets into numbers though. I think that if what Ayers were known for was blowing up a building and 250 people died, that'd be different from -- and I'm not apologizing what the Weathermen did -- but there's a degree issue here as well. Aging, radical, blew up a building in Greenwich Village that ended up killing some people within his own group, for example. That's the episode that's most remembered. That's different from Timothy McVeigh. But yes, when we are dealing with the real campaign, they're going to have to be some better defenses than things like that. I'll be interested to see whether on the basis of things like that, we wind up with McCain in the White House. How much of this stuff is going to change the swing



voters' feelings when it comes to the gut rather than the head. So Barack Obama has a lot of work to do. I'll be interested to watch him do it.

Loury: Yeah. So where are you on the Condoleezza Rice for President thing?

McWhorter: Well, she said she wasn't interested.

Loury: I hadn't actually heard that. She said she's not interested.

McWhorter: She said that she would not run with McCain. So no Condi for Vice President. I think Condoleezza Rice is great. But she doesn't excite me in an Obama-esque way, because she doesn't happen to have black issues as something she cares deeply about. That doesn't happen to be her thing, and all power to her. But for that reason, I don't think that her symbolism in the White House or living next-door to it, as the Vice President, would galvanize the country in any serious way. She'd be there and she'd do her job. But frankly, I think she's only processed as a black hero in a very abstract way. She serves a Republican administration. She's not into black stuff. She's just her. And so she's what she does, but she's kind of off to the side. But she has said officially that she's not interested in that, which isn't surprising. And so she has

not been on my radar screen lately, I guess. Who knows what we'll see in the future.

Loury: You know, did you know I did a conversation on bloggingheads with your colleague --

McWhorter: Did you do Heather?

Loury: Heather McDonald. I'm sorry Heather for not remembering your name immediately.

McWhorter: How did that come out?

Loury: She made a big impression on me (laughs).

McWhorter: You were doing education, yes.

Loury: She's smart and she's tough (laughs). I thought it came out well. I mean I think we got, she and I, into one of these back-and-forths about whatever the issue was where we were talking over each other and was probably a bit of emotion involved and everything.

McWhorter: She's fierce.

Loury: Some of the views blogged in to say Glenn has a problem with women.

McWhorter: Oh no.

Loury: Well, I'd like to think I don't. I'm really, if I do, I'm working on it, you guys. I'm working on it.

McWhorter: What, because you interrupted her?

Loury: Huh?

McWhorter: Is that, you're a sexist because you interrupted her? That's how these things go.

Loury: Well, yeah, if I hadn't interrupted her, I wasn't going to get to talk (laughs).

McWhorter: This is such a tiring business.

Loury: She's quite capable of taking care of herself, I wanted to tell this guy (laughs).

McWhorter: Yeah, yeah. Oh no, she's a person. I don't think we have to genderize her. Wow.

Loury: We had broad grounds of agreement as well as our predictable disagreements. But I came away with the impression that ah, here's the woman behind those columns I've been reading in City Journal. Mmm, she's formidable.

McWhorter: Did you request that, or did she?

Loury: Say again?

McWhorter: Did you request that or did she?

Loury: Did I, I'm sorry John.

McWhorter: Did you ask for her or did she ask for you?

Loury: I don't remember. I didn't ask for her. It was pitched to me. Now, I don't know whether she asked or whether somebody thought it was a good idea. May be that she asked. I just don't recall. No, I did not ask for her. But when I was asked about it, I was very happy to do it, having seen her pieces over the years. I'm hoping to be

able to get into with her the question of campus rape,  
which as you know is something that she's --

McWhorter: She has definite views about that. I would say that she is probably the Manhattan Institute's favorite writer. I think they consider her their star quantity. And yes, she's very challenging in debate. You know, as we close Glenn, I wanted to ask you something. This is something I always forget to ask you. What are you working on these days? What's the new thing?

Loury: Oh, OK. I didn't know I was going to be asked about my work. That's always a great thing.

McWhorter: We never talk about that.

Loury: OK, so you know about the Tanner lectures I gave on incarceration and race last spring at Stanford. Coming out, well, a modified version as a book from the MIT press this fall. I've got a follow-up project, which is a treat, that's more of an academic, it's MIT press and, you know, while the lectures are perfectly accessible to a non-specialist, the style is somewhat academic.

McWhorter: Someone will send me that book to review, I can almost guarantee. Look forward to it.

Loury: Oh, I'm sure you would've been on the list in any event. And the follow-on is a more popular book about the problem of race in mass incarceration. You know, A Nation of

Jailers. That's my working title. But I don't mean for it to be a Jeremiad, a kind of long, anguished cry about the injustice of white supremacy, blah, blah, blah. Neither do I mean for it to be a kind of closely argued sort of wonkish policy tone. But I do mean for it to be a little bit of a history of how we got into where we are, and a lot of dwelling on what all is at stake in here in what we do. So it's not just punishing people for the one-off offenses that they might commit, it's also a welfare institution in a certain sense, a broadly construed understanding of that word. When I say welfare, I mean we're governing people. This is about managing millions of people who are behaviorally problematic. So it's the states bringing force to bear in the interest of the maintenance of order, with the consequence of our willy-nilly necessarily being deeply insinuated into the lives of these people, and having impacts on the lives of them, their children, relatives, the community, and all the rest. And yet we don't see it in that light. We don't see this massive institution of policing and courts and parole and probation, punishment and stigma, stigmatizing, secondary punishments for people after they come out and all that. We don't see this as part of the larger system of social welfare, human resource development, and all of that.

Instead, we see it as doing justice. Person commits an offense. They come before the law. They are disposed of in the way that they should be, or we can argue about how that is exactly. But we deal with them and then there's just that. But the aggregation of those one-off instances of dealing with offense comes to constitute an important institution that has a life of its own and that has consequences, and that we need to try to think in some rational way about. So you were talking about the Second Chance Act, and I'm thinking about the general problem that people only stay in prison two, three, four years on the average. They come out, they're 30 years old, or 28. They maybe go back, come out, go back. But whatever, they're in society. There's a churning kind of dynamic that goes on. We all have a tremendous interest in having that process redound to the positive development of those persons. Not because they've earned it or deserve it, but because they're here, with us, willy-nilly. We're not sending them to Devil's Island or to the moon, you know.

McWhorter: No, they'll be back.

Loury: They'll be back. I'm thinking of Arnold Schwarzenegger (inaudible). They're coming back. So you know, this kind of thing, this kind of spirit, the idea of this thing. So that's, I've got some other technical projects I'm working

on with graduate students around here in the economics department. But the other main thing that I'm doing is trying to help the provost and president at this university and some of my colleagues here think through what is an appropriate way to memorialize, I use that word advisedly, but I mean build in and then ongoing way to our university life, our teaching, our research, and so on. Concerns about the university's history being founded on a fortune that was amassed in part through slave trading by the --

McWhorter: Oh this project, yeah, I know about that.

Loury: Yeah. So they call it the slavery injustice initiative, and it's been a big deal around here for a number of years.

McWhorter: I thought that was finished.

Loury: Well, phase one is finished. The report of the historian-oriented committee, that looked at the university's history, that brought up and exposed various facts about it, and that made a series of recommendations of how to go forward. That part is finished. Now we're in the business of acting on those recommendations, one of which was the creation of a research center here at Brown. I chaired the faculty committee that advised about how that might be constituted. And I'm now working with people around here to see how, it involves trying to recruit

people to the faculty, thinking about various research initiatives, trying to see how to make the maximal use of resources in place that are already doing good work in allied areas, and how to make that impact positively on our curriculum with these terrific students we have around here. So not to worry. I'm not about to become an administrator. But I have had the responsibility here and I've actually grown very fond of the idea of what might be done in trying to help us think that through.

McWhorter: I gave a talk up there a couple of years ago on that.

Loury: Uh huh, I think I was aware of that. I didn't hear your talk.

McWhorter: Yeah. I thought it seemed like it was all being gone at in a very intelligent way. Incidentally, I'm going to be at Brown next week.

Loury: Are you?

McWhorter: Think it's next week. Yeah, the end of next week, I'm giving a talk in the music department --

Loury: In the what department?

McWhorter: Music department about the contribution of black music to the development of American musical theatre. I'm going to have recordings and stuff. So this is going to be something completely different.



Loury: Yeah, well I know about this aspect of your interest. I heard you gave a talk at Harvard on musical theatre or something.

McWhorter: I forgot about that. That's right.

Loury: So I will definitely want to come out and hear you.

Please send me an email and I'll keep my eye out --

McWhorter: I will.

Loury: -- for an announcement. But if you send me an email, it'd be great to see you. We should, if we get a moment --

McWhorter: Yeah, let's get together.

Loury: -- we should get together and have a coffee or something, you know.

McWhorter: Yeah, I'll be, I think it's Thursday. I'll send you an email about. So yeah. Glenn, I think we're over an hour.

Loury: Yeah, and it's been great, as always.

McWhorter: This is a fun one (laughs) yeah.

Loury: So we'll talk again soon.

McWhorter: We will. See you soon.

Loury: OK John.

McWhorter: You too, Glenn.

**END OF FILE**