

It feels good to be a victim _ Glenn Loury & John McWhorter [The
Glenn Show]

MANSFIELD: This is a program on constitutional government and our guests today are Glenn Loury and John McWhorter. Glenn Loury is an economist, he is a professor -- he's the Merton Stoltz Professor of Social Science and Economics at Brown University and he got his PhD in economics from MIT. His books include *One by One from the Inside Out* and *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality* and *Race, Incarceration, and American Values*. That's most recent. And then John McWhorter is an associate professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University and he got his PhD in Linguistics from Stanford. And he's the author of *The Power of Babel: A Natural History of Language*, *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America*, and *Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue: The Untold History of English*. I'm going to let them talk to each other and with us and if they want to introduce themselves further, be welcome. So, Glenn Loury.

LOURY: Okay, thank you very much, Harvey. It's very good to be back here at Harvard. I was on the faculty here between '82 and '91. That was a long time ago, and I think the reason that Harvey Mansfield has invited us to his program

has to do with the series of conversations that John McWhorter and I have been having online at -- on the *Glenn Show* at Bloggingheads.tv. That's my video blog. I'm every other week or so chatting with somebody about some issue of politics or culture. We put it up on YouTube and the Bloggingheads site. People look at it and we have something of a following. And John and I are now in our tenth year of commentary at the *Glenn Show*. We are -- John McWhorter can speak for himself, he's an able linguist and culture critic --

MCWHORTER: I know what you're about to say.

LOURY: The black guys at Bloggingheads.tv.

MCWHORTER: Yes.

LOURY: And that's almost literally true. You know, every now and then there's a person of color at the site, but you know, mostly not, as in other areas of American life. But it falls to us from time to time to take up the questions of the day, you know, the things that are being hotly debated and contested. You know, Colin Kaepernick taking a knee and leading the black laborers at the NFL in the direction of social justice warriorship. Or Black Lives Matter and the issue of police violence and brutality, and whether or not the framing of the problem of violence and constraint on African American humanity as it's playing out

in American society is properly undertaken by framing it in terms of police violence, and so on. John and I have not always the same view about those things. We go back and forth about it. I expect that we're here to do a little bit of that back and forth with, colloquy with you. I just want to make a couple of remarks. Let me say a little bit of something about myself. I said I taught at Harvard. I was a Reagan conservative in the 1980s. I would have gone into the government but for personal scandal that had me withdraw from a high-level appointment in 1987 in the second Reagan administration term. I am/was, am/was, a black conservative. I say am/was, okay, because like there's been a little bit of evolution, there's been some shifting. My book, *Race, Incarceration, and American Values* would, I think, pass muster with progressive commentators on the race issue as being politically appropriate, but others of the things that I've said and written, not so much so. *One by One from the Inside Out*, this was a cry from the heart about the importance of behavioral dysfunction as a basis of African American disadvantage and the need for us to take responsibility within our families and communities and address these dysfunctional behaviors. That was a collection of essays of pieces that I had written over the preceding 10 years.

They were conservative in their tone. They extolled Booker T. Washington and this kind of thing. They criticized affirmative action. They talked about black on black crime without blinking and so on. I've evolved, but not that much. And I must say, and this is by way of prelude, and I'm going to turn it over to John to do a similar, and we maybe will have some back and forth, I must say that I feel sometimes like I haven't gotten off of square one. I'm looking around at the state of the discourse. I don't see honesty, I don't see transparency, I don't see straightforwardness. I see an avoidance of the reality of the root of African American persisting disadvantage. I see narratives about white supremacy, about plunder, about endemic intrinsic American racism, about the denial of black humanity at every turn. I don't see much talk at all about the development of the capacities of African Americans to actually compete on our own merits in what is an increasingly difficult competition in the modern world, the globalized world, the small world that we live in. I see a kind of being locked in to a rhetoric and a discourse that I believe is inadequate, and a politics that I believe ultimately is inadequate to the problem. So, in one of our last conversations John asked me how I'm feeling about talking about race. We're the black guys at

Bloggingheads.tv and I had to say, "God, I'm in despair. I worry for my country. I worry for my people." In what might equality for African Americans actually consist? We do political theory in here, right? What is equality? What would it mean? I'm in a university. I'm looking around the university. We have an Africana Studies department, God love them. We have a diversity initiative, full-throated endorsement from the provost and from the president, a slew of deans who are responsible for overseeing this or that dimension of inclusion. Diversity and inclusion, we're devoted to it. Go to the science lab, go to the school of engineering. The paucity of African American faces in these places is not possible to ignore. What is that about? For my money, it's about the fact that an inadequate number of our youngsters are achieving the capacities of performance and function in those particular areas of human endeavor to penetrate these elite and exclusive institutions in numbers. And what is the narrative in response to that fact? The fact. The fact being if you look at test scores -- we're not supposed to talk about test scores. Test scores are a bad thing to talk about. If you look at the actual levels of achievement you see huge disparities by race. If you look at the narrative for talking about the underrepresentation

of African Americans -- I speak now about Brown, I speak now about the physics department, or about the electrical engineering department, or about the applied mathematics department, and I speak about the paucity of black faces there -- you take note of that, the basic response is the institution is not inclusive, we're not doing enough. I want to say something like, if we are not able to instill within our children a capacity to function at a level that is competitive in these elite venues, we will not have true equality. Do you really think that affirmative action-abetted inclusion initiatives that count heads and get the numbers, but that don't address the underlying function is a path to equality? No, it's not. It's a path to permanent patronage. It's a clientelism argument. It is not a good substitute for mastery over those skills to play a political card which induces a sympathetic response from administration because that's the easiest path. The easiest path would be to say, "Don't worry, we're going to bend over backwards, we're going to get a few more in. Don't worry, don't worry, don't worry." The hard path is, A, saying something that's true but that is unpalatable. Functioning is disparate by race and it will not change unless we actually address the objective circumstances that are producing people, some of whom are able to do the

calculus course in the applied math department, and others who are not. And not enough blacks are getting that developmental exposure and enhancement of their human capacity so as to be able to meet our diversity and inclusion. That's hard work. That would be hard. Just saying the fact of it is hard and doing something about it is harder still. Much easier is this dance that we engage in, this ritual that we enact, this self-flagellation that these institutions are inclined to in which you say, "Don't worry, don't worry, don't worry," and yet the real business of the university continues on. So, that in my mind is not equality. In my mind, it's not equality to have the jails overflowing with black felons. Let me just say it one more time. People who have broken the law, people who have stolen, people who have hurt other people, the jails are not full of innocent, nonviolent drug offenders who've been scooped up by racist cops. The jails are basically full of people who are dangerous, contemptuous of social order, and a threat to their neighbors, especially their black neighbors. So, here we are with the jails overflowing. There are too many people in prison in the United States. I've written a whole book about this. There are too many black people in prison in the United States. It's the new Jim Crow? Oh, I see. It's America's way in the 21st

century of reenacting the old American drama of plundering black bodies by corralling them, because there's contempt for their humanity? No, it is not. And pretty much everybody knows that it is not. Anybody who lives in a city knows that it is not. They know what the character of the threats are. They know what the pathological behavior of a few people who happen to belong to this group has wrought. And yet the pabulum, oh, it's the new Jim Crow, oh, this is just America's way of denigrating black people yet again. Denial of a dishonest rhetoric. It's not a path to equality. You think people don't know? They know that you can shut them up by waving the bloody shirt of racism in their faces, by wagging your finger in their faces, that you can make them go silent, doesn't change the objective facts on the ground. So, I have probably said as much as I should say by way of introduction. I'm furious. I'm furious. I'm furious here in my 70th year of life that a half century after the civil rights movement, when I look around at the intellectual and political leadership of my people, when I look at the persisting disparate circumstances that characterizes their social condition, and when I listen to the superficial and manipulative rhetoric that's offered up by way of explanation, I'm furious about that. I have decided that I'm going to

devote myself to saying such truths as I think I may understand, notwithstanding the zeitgeist on the theory that there are few, and hopefully over time a few more, and hopefully over time a few more yet -- I don't want to ever expect it to be a majority -- who will open up the discourse and allow some air to get in. Because we're dying over here. They're dying in Chicago. They're dying in east St. Louis, they're dying in Oakland, California. We're dying over here in these schools that are producing kids who can't read. We're dying in these jails full of these young men whose humanity never had a chance to reach its full extent. You're going to blame white people for that? Well, you certainly can do it. And by the way, there are a fair number of white people who will pat you on the back for doing it. They'll give you awards for doing it. They'll make you into a star. They'll make you rich for doing it, for blaming them for the failures in your own community. Yeah, they're failures in our community. I haven't even started talking about raising children. I haven't started talking about the conditions of family life. Oh, no, we're not supposed to talk like that. That would be blaming the victim, wouldn't it? Asking people to raise their children is blaming the victim? So, that's where I'm coming from. You all have at me.

MANSFIELD: John.

MCWHORTER: I'm not 70. (laughter)

LOURY: Let's establish that first.

MCWHORTER: I am 52 and that's the oldest I've ever been.

(laughter) And I share Glenn's frustrations for many of the same reasons. And as we've discussed on Bloggingheads, I write about race less since about early last year than I ever have before. I quietly turn down most offers. I no longer speak live about race at all except when it involves Glenn, despite the money that I could make doing it. And it is because of a certain stalemate in the dialogue that I see. And I'm not sure that we can quite get past it. And it's based on really just two things. It's not complex. It's actually rather simple. It's two logjams that make it impossible to have an honest conversation about race in this country right now. And I've decided to sit out the debate for about five years until fashions change. And I don't want to make it seem like I'm talking around the fact that, as Glenn was referring to, the idea that freshmen are now given Ta-Nehisi Coates' book to read, to me basically just stops the race debate in its tracks. If it's going to be like that, then I'm not in it until some time passes. This is what I mean. There are two problems. One is a white problem. One is a black problem. I'm going to do

the white one first. It has become a matter of religious faith among educated white people in America to feel a sense of atonement for being racist. When I say that it's religious, I don't mean that as kind of trash talk. I don't mean that as a way of getting attention. I mean that it has become a matter of what any anthropologist who had no preexistent biases would identify as a religious faith. We don't use the word religion, but it is a faith. And that is the idea that, for example, I'm going to use a phrase that we're all so used to but really break it down, America needs to come to terms with racism. Okay, what terms? What does that mean, come to terms? What would the situation be if America came to those terms? Let's imagine the America that we're all about to walk back into after this seminar. This is an America where America has come to terms. What, is it about something that would be written? Is it about conversations that would be had? What are the terms? One imagines a certain musical sound track, but that's a movie. What are the terms? It has no meaning at all that America would come to terms. Does it mean reparations for slavery because we've talked about that and nothing comes of it and yet we keep talking about the coming to terms. It means nothing. What it means is that educated whites now consider it a mark of being morally

advanced to acknowledge their inner racists and the idea is that at some point America will come to terms with that racism. But what are the terms? That has no meaning except as an analogy to Christian theological conceptions. It's about a judgment day. It's about this time when all of a sudden something happens where white people are absolved of their inner racism and then we move on. But obviously in terms of the lives that we're leading walking around with our bottles of water that has no meaning at all. And so that's not activism. To be a white person and to think I am racist, I have white privilege, I'm going to acknowledge this all the time does nothing for the black people that Glenn was just talking about. It's something that's inwardly directed. It's very humane, it's well-intended, but it has nothing to do with anything that Dr. King was talking about. It has nothing to do with anything that the civil rights movement was about. It's an inwardly turned and frankly idle matter. I have not written about this because I think it would be mean to the people who convene Aspen, but I'll say it here that I was at Aspen in 2017, and various things were discussed at Aspen. It was a very smart event. All sorts of brilliance was going on at Aspen, but of course at one point in the middle there was this event that was about racism in the 21st century.

Okay, so racism in the 21st century. Now, the question would be, given all the other events, what were we going to learn at this event? What was the new thing? But there was nothing to learn. I went to this thinking to myself I shouldn't go but I'm black and I'm at Aspen and there aren't that many black people, I should go and I'm going to learn about the racism here at Aspen. So, I went. The food was spectacular. Now, it was run by one of my favorite black commentators. I'm not going to name who she was, but I really wish they had not wasted her time doing this. And there were three panelists and everybody who was black at Aspen went to it and a lot of the white people as well. This event had no substance whatsoever. It was church. It was literally church. No one would have used the word church, but there was this church service in the middle of Aspen. So, an eminent black foundation director who I will not name talked about how when he was coming up in the business he would not wear casual clothes on casual Friday where he worked because he thought that it wouldn't be good for a black person to do that and everybody clapped. That was considered very funny. Then a middle-aged -- I know I'm middle-aged too -- white man talked about how he has a coach to teach him about white privilege every week. Somebody comes to his house every week and

teaches him that he's privileged as a white person and everybody clapped. In other words, he has a pastor. And then everybody left, and everybody talked about how wonderful this event had been. Nobody learned anything. That event served for white people at Aspen to atone for being racist and everybody went off and actually learned things. It was a church service. That is the way things are now. Every third story on *Slate* is a church service. Every third story at NPR is a church service. It really doesn't help anything. To acknowledge that racism is something more abstract than cross burnings on lawns is one thing. To walk around thinking of it as a permanent stain that you must always atone for and never really will until America, quote, unquote, comes to terms with racism is fiction. It is something as benighted and idle as something that we might see in an unlettered tribe and find curious. That is the white problem. Black problem. We have been taught as black people to pretend that racism is more of a problem than it is. So, to be a good smart black person is to walk around identifying racism in various ways. Of course, it's not usually overt and so you're supposed to find it in subtle ways. And you know, look for it and you'll find it. And that means that you are taught that to be a good educated black person is to claim that we

are the only people in the history of humanity who can only succeed under ideal conditions. We are taught that to say that makes us proud. That's supposed to be the basis for a true ego, a true sense of pride. It's unquestioned often, just as it's unquestioned that a white person is supposed to attest to their privilege and think of themselves as racist and buy Ta-Nehisi Coates' books, etc., etc. As a black person you are supposed to say that oh, well, that's just racist, well, the reason for that is racist. And the problem for that is this, if anybody has listened to Glenn and said, "Yes, racism is real, isn't it, so don't we have to think about that?" One, if you're white and what you're thinking about is, don't I have to think about my inner racist, I'd say no, not as much as you've been taught, especially over the past 15 years. It serves no purpose. And more to the point, yes, if you're black, there is racism, but why have you been taught to fetishize it so much? Why have you been taught to proudly say, "I am a member of a race who is the first race in the 150,000 years of this species' history that can only succeed under ideal or even close to ideal conditions?" Can you imagine a group of people in the past -- I'm right now sitting through *Ben Hur*, the 1959 with Charlton Heston. I've never wanted to see it, and I'm on sabbatical and I'm watching

all these movies that I don't want to see because I have time and one of them is *Ben Hur*. There are Jews in it and as stupid as that movie is there is nobody in *Ben Hur* who is saying that because we're having problems we are not going to succeed. It's as simple as that. I don't mean modern Jews. I'm not making some tired argument about people living on the Lower East Side. I'm talking about just people in the desert on a movie set. And yet we're taught today I am a middle class black person, and yet I'm going to say on behalf of myself in terms of some slightly racist comment I may have heard somebody make and on behalf of my cousins who are working class or poor that they will not be able to succeed until white people are completely devoid of any vestige of racism. That in itself makes no logical sense. So many people have succeeded despite the dominant class not precisely seeing them as equals. In fact, if you think about it, all people have done that. That's all people. But for some reason the descendants of slaves in something called the United States of America, starting in the late 20th century and extending into this one, can't do that. Something's different. Nobody explains why it's different, because human beings aren't historians, but that is the dialogue. It won't do. It isn't true. It's not that it doesn't taste good to me,

it's illogical. And yet we're stuck with these convictions. So I'm done, but to review, one, the white person who thinks that it's their job to atone for their inner racist and that that somehow makes poor black people less poor, it's fake, it's idle, it's insincere, it needs to go, but I don't see how it can be fixed. There are some of you in here who are white who are probably angry at me for putting it this way so directly. I can't fix that. Two, the black idea that racism, even when it's subtle, is something that we must obsess about because we can't succeed unless all racism is gone, that makes no sense. I don't even have to defend that it makes no sense because if I put it that way, it's quite clear to you. Nevertheless, to a great many black people I'm bad for saying that because I'm distracting white people from their guilt. Over the 20 years that I have been commenting about race I have noticed that you run up against these two things, and you're told that you're an asshole and you are told that you're not really an intellectual, you're told that you just don't understand, and I've gotten tired. And I'm only 52. (laughter) And so it's at the point where I'm being happy linguist and I am sitting out the race debate because I'm trying to be happy and my children are small. But that

is what Glenn and I are discussing. You know what? I'm done. Thank you. (laughter) (applause)

MANSFIELD: Well, all right. Let's get started with a question. Yes, right here.

Q: As a longtime huge fan of your work I have the impression that the best single essay that I was lucky enough to read by you in the last decade was your takedown of this ridiculous term, white privilege. Perhaps you might consider repeating it for this audience?

MCWHORTER: This is sincere. What essay was that? I don't like that term, but I don't remember writing about it. Where did that appear, do you remember?

Q: Hmm. Three or four years ago.

MCWHORTER: *The Daily Beast*, yes. White privilege is real. Yes, if you walk around white there are things that will not happen to you that happen when you are black. Sure, yeah. My problem is the idea that young white people need to be indoctrinated into the idea that they are privileged. My problem with the idea of white privilege is the idea that it's not about you. The idea is that you learn that you're privileged but you're not allowed to have anything contradictory to say. You're just supposed to listen to any black claim that's made and anybody that says anything about being black cannot be questioned. And frankly, no

human being is that smart. You know, black people are not always right because no human beings are always right, but it's often said that it's not about you. And the idea is that it's a stain that never goes away which I think is very much analogous to original sin. I think that the way white privilege is dealt with in the society is because of the Christian inheritance. I actually suppose that because educated people tend, not always but tend to be ever less religious in that way, there's a replacement. It gives somebody a sense of purpose, but it doesn't solve any problems and, more to the point, to focus on white privilege as a kind of original sin detracts from some solutions for black community problems that don't lend themselves to that paradigm. And so, to give one example, and then I'll shut up, Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, cops killing blacks for no real reason, that is a real problem, but if you are a black person in a troubled community the enraged white cop is one of the least of your problems. There are so many things going on. In terms of who's going to kill you it's not going to be Darren Wilson. It's much more likely to be the other Trayvon down the street. Because of this white privilege focus we focus on these cops and we think of Black Lives Matter as the new great society. I've noticed all over Cambridge that these Black

Lives Matter signs pasted up and I don't even know how they got that high, but clearly something is going on. Black Lives Matter. Great, and black lives do matter. I get it.

Q: (inaudible)

MCWHORTER: Yeah. Is that what it is? There are some major ladders that they've gone up. Which is fine, but that's not what people in those communities' problems really consist of. So, yes, white privilege encourages us to focus on things that aren't really problems and too many black people stay poor. Yeah, that's what I meant by that.

LOURY: Let me add something to that. I didn't write a piece criticizing the term white privilege, but I can think of an argument that might be worthy of considering in the context of discussing it. Which is about fetishizing race. There's a lot of different kinds of privilege. The whiteness of the person, we're going to make that the touchstone for a disquisition on relative power, advantage, and inheritance status and prerogative? Surely, it's more complicated than that. I'm reading -- just finished reading Matt Desmond, the sociologist Matthew Desmond's book, *Evicted*. It's about Milwaukee and it's about poor people who get kicked out of their residences because they can't pay their rent, about the moving companies that come to get their stuff and set the stuff on the curb, about the

storage companies that make space for their stuff to be put away for \$100 a month, about the landlords who are rapacious but also hardscrabble business men and women trying to make a buck in a tough market and so on. It's about Milwaukee. There's two sides of town in Milwaukee, north side and the south side, blacks on one and whites on the other. As far as I can tell the disadvantages, the pathos, the loss, the sense of helplessness, the marginality, the poverty, the impoverished lives, the abandoned children, the irresponsibility, the drug addiction, the violence, domestic violence, doesn't know any color in Milwaukee. As far as I can tell those tenements on the black side of town where the black people are getting evicted are just as miserable and those people are just as desperate as those trailer parks on the white side of town where the white people are being evicted. When I look at the *Washington Post* publication of the -- as best they can tell from searching records -- universe of cop killings in the United States, that's all of them, all 1,252 in the year 2016 -- I make that number up, but it's something like that, something like a little bit over 1,000 -- and they enumerate every single one that they could find searching all the sources, they tell us about the conditions. They tell us whether or not the person who was

shot was armed, they tell us about the race of the person killed, about the race of the police officer, etc., etc. Were they fleeing, whatever. How did the officer get called to the scene? There's a lot of comprehensive data there. As far as I can tell three times as many whites as blacks are killed by police officers in this country in a given year. If there's a problem with the cops it's a problem with the cops. How did it get to be white privilege when you've got white unarmed Tamir Rices getting gunned down by cops? Yes, that has happened. Yesterday, not yesterday, three days ago in Chicago a police commander was gunned down in a stairwell across the street from City Hall. It happens that the police commander, high level officer in the Chicago police department, was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. He got a radio call, he ran down a stairwell. It happens that that man was white, and it happens that the multiple felon who was fleeing police and was armed and who ran down into that stairwell and was chased by this police commander and who shot him dead was black. Now, there will be no news reports, and there shouldn't be, in which it is trumpeted that black former frequent offending felon let out too early by a judge has gunned down a decent white cop. You're not going to read that story. Had the cop gotten the drop on the felon and

shot him before he was murdered by him the headline would be, "Yet another young black man -- I don't know how old -- gunned down by a racist white cop." Okay, privilege including the privilege of exercising the prerogatives of citizenship without undue violent interference from agents of the state doesn't know any color. Do you think that race card playing kids at these liberal venues who -- newsrooms where they can define the debate simply by demonstrating their anger at, how dare you white people write a story like that? Lecture halls where they can set the temper of what is going to be said and what can't be said based upon claims of privilege. You don't know how my ancestors have suffered. You don't know what it's like to be black. You think that's not power? You think the ability to shut down a conversation, to shut people up, is not power? Do you think the people who exercise that prerogative don't know that they have power? So, no, my argument with white privilege is why are you racial, why are you fetishizing race? In fact, I thought that the nails in the coffin of Jim Crow were driven by a completely different moral argument. I thought the nails in the coffin of Jim Crow in the late 1950s and through the 1960s were driven by the compelling force of the argument that our humanity transcends the narrowness and historical

accident of our racial categories. We are not the color of our skin. That's not who we are as people. Now, if you want to get run out of town on a rail try saying that. Try saying, quote, we should be colorblind, close quote, in any progressive venue. Try saying we should look past the color of people's skin. That's the idea. No, we haven't achieved the ideal. That's the appropriate ideal. So that would be the -- I've talked too long about this. That would be the content of my rebuttal of the white privilege thing. It's a narrow -- it's an ethically inadequate, not very deep -- well, Amartya Sen, our colleague here at Harvard, the great -- is he still here?

Q: Yes.

LOURY: -- philosopher and economist has a book out called *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* which is very interesting, and it starts out with him telling an anecdote about being a boy growing up in post-independence India and watching a communal violence act in which some Muslim is hunted down by some Hindu mob and hacked to death. And he runs to his father, wants to know what's going on, and his father explains to him that they killed him because he's a Muslim. And Sen is recollecting this and he's saying how could the identity of Muslimness or Hinduness take on such salience in people's minds that it

would transcend the constraints that they ought to willfully embrace about their behavior that attends to their and others' humanity? How could that be? And he goes on to develop an argument. He says yes, we are Muslim and Hindu, yes, we are black, and we are white and Chinese and Jewish and such, these things are true, but they're not the only things that are true about us. We love poetry, we are conservative in our disposition, we are gay or straight. There are many things. That we are, properly described, a long vector of descriptors. There are a lot of different things that are there and that the moral challenge that we face is knowing when and how to emphasize what dimensions of our identity within a given social and political situation. Race is not the only thing that's going on here. It is often not the main thing that's going on here. Reducing it to that black and white template to my mind is both intellectually and morally superficial in ways that should be critiqued.

MCWHORTER: And I want to add something. This is the teaching moment on this. What Glenn is saying, I think, is clearly logically true. Nobody has been sitting and shaking their heads at what Glenn is saying. It's true. You're speaking the truth. And yet there's a way of hearing what he's saying where we think well, I get that

but then there are other things that I want to think about too. That's part of the conversation, but really also racism, racism, racism, racism. So, let's try it. I've been getting -- I'm 52. I've had bursitis in my shoulder. The [couch?] of the joint swells. It just happens when you're over 50 apparently. So, I'm going to this joint doctor, I forget what he's called. So, I'm in there two weeks ago and the receptionist, who is white, takes care of some guy in front of me and then he goes off to get fixed. Then the white guy in front of me, what do you want, and then he goes off and gets fixed. And I'm there and she looks down and she just keeps looking. Just, you know. And I cleared my throat. I pulled my phone out [clears throat] and she looked up and looked down. I was dressed precisely in this sweater. So I wasn't in a suit, but I wasn't naked either. And I'm just standing there, and she didn't seem to understand that I was there to have my shoulder fixed. I think she thought I was a delivery man. And so, I said, "Miss, excuse me, could you please help me?" And she said, "Oh, sure." That was because I was black. That was a little racism there. Now, then the guy went and fixed my shoulder, but that was it. That was what I've had in 2018. In 2017 I was at a linguistics talk and the linguist was white. They usually are. And he's giving

a talk about some obscure language and I raised my hand and I said, "You know, I've never seen X, Y, and Z in a language before." And what I meant was something very specific about what he was talking about. He thought that I was talking about the grammatical aspect itself. So, I was talking about I've never seen a language where the plural is indicated in this way, that way or that way. He thought I was saying I've never seen a language that distinguishes singular from plural before. That was the equivalent. (laughter) Now, the reason that he thought I don't know anything about grammar is because, frankly, most black linguists are sociolinguists and so they're more interested in society and they don't do grammar and also frankly I think that deep, deep, deep down, and I'm sure this person was a Bernie bro, he's an anthropologist, he's further from the left than me, but deep, deep, deep down he thinks black people aren't quite as bright as white people. So, when I raised my hand he thought that I was asking about the plural. It didn't occur to him that I know how the languages of the world mark the plural because I have a PhD in linguistics. That was a little bit of racism. That was 2017. I could go back. Those things to me don't matter. They don't matter. That's not enough to complain about. But I think that many people are taught that my

having experienced those things cancels out what Glenn just said. It doesn't. There's an issue of degree. I feel great. I was not insulted by this man. If anything, I feel superior to him that he doesn't understand. And as far as that receptionist, I'm not a receptionist and I'm glad. So, it doesn't hurt me. The guy fixed my shoulder. Glenn's right. That's all.

LOURY: Thanks, John. (laughter)

Q: Thank you. I lived in the US between 1987 and '95 or '91 and then I left for 25 years and I came back two years ago. And I have to say that what I was most struck by coming back was the degree to which the racial problem had gotten more serious over those 25 years. And by that, I mean what I perceive to be the kind of communal sense of lack of progress that has been more acute. To me I went to a seminar that Harvard put on for a group of donors. They called it the inequality seminar and they kind of talked about inequality. And one almost got the feeling that Harvard didn't feel like they could talk about black/white inequality without having to talk about every other kind of inequality. So, you've got like 16 different kinds of inequality and you're supposed to perceive them all as bad. I walked away from that thinking -- I mean most of the people organizing the seminar were black professors. And I

walked away from that thinking that there seemed to be a problem with the leadership, intellectual and perhaps moral and political leadership in the sense that it seems to me like people are not really willing to call the problem by its name or they maybe think that they have more power if they mix it in with other problems. Sure, there is maybe a problem with the way the racial problem is presented, but here we are. This is a society with huge racial inequality. Why -- and we've had a black president. Why hasn't this issue been -- why is -- or how -- maybe there is and I'm just not aware. What is the debate within the black community and the leadership about how this problem has to be handled and addressed? Which I think it is your point because nobody's denying that the inequality exists, but like how do we deal with it and why aren't there louder voices? Or at least more militant voices on the other side?

MCWHORTER: Because leadership is considered to be teaching black people to fetishize their victimhood and that is something that's been the case since about 1966. And there was a tipping point around 1990. That is when the focus became less bringing people up than exaggerating about the nature of inequalities and what can be done about them. And so, a leader is somebody who is talented at identifying

locuses of racism. That's considered the smartest thing to do. That's considered the important thing to do. And this is by people who are good people. There's no such thing as a poverty pimp. These people aren't doing this sort of thing in order to make a buck. They are living their lives, but that's what we're stuck in. And what makes it hard is that none of this is over. Nobody says it. But that's the problem. And so, the leader is not somebody who makes people less poor. The leader is somebody who enlightens America to the fact that racism exists. With that being the standing task in itself. It's interesting, I've spoken here on race twice over the past 20 years and I'm just thinking right now, at both events I was lit into viciously by people with that particular agenda. It was undergraduates the first time. Boy, they were smart and, boy, they were mean. They had learned that the idea is to identify that racism exists. Well, good for you. But to them that was like identifying a new item on the table of the elements. And then the next time, I'm sorry, but it was with Charles Ogletree and he wrote to me and he said, "I enjoyed your performance on *Meet the Press*," as if I had been performing, and he invited me to speak to his class. And once again somebody literally was spitting as they were talking, just screaming, because I wasn't acknowledging

that racism exists. Well, if I had what would that have done? That's the problem. Glenn, what do you think?

LOURY: Let me mention Steven Teles. He's a political scientist at Hopkins. He's got a book out there called *Prison Break* that's coauthored with an associate whose name I don't recall. The reason I'm mentioning that is the question has been raised, what is the character of leadership and why hasn't it adapted better to the circumstances of the African American population, the American polity?

Q: Is there a debate over the question?

LOURY: I want to come to that, but Steven makes a point, I think it's very interesting in this book. The book is about how conservatives have brought themselves around, some, many, to a position of recognizing that we're overincarcerated in the United States, that it's not only not a good use of public funds but it's also morally problematic and have wanted to do something about it. So right on crime, there's a double entendre in the right. There's a kind of we're correct and there's also we're right of center and our position is not what you might have thought it might be, lock them up and throw away the key, but our position is that we need to think about nonpenal sanctions, that we need to think about rehabilitation.

Sentences are too long, that our drug policy might not make sense, that the racial disparity in the incidence of incarceration, notwithstanding the differences in offending, is not healthy for us over the longer term and we need to try to get out of this. Steve's argument deals with how is it that a movement or a group can bring itself to shift and turn its position on important political issues? Who can be the people who will speak and be heard credibly? How is it possible that the huge investment that the institutions of a movement or a population may have in a particular way of looking at things can be unsettled, unseated, ultimately uprooted and made different than what it had been? This happened on the right with respect to the issue of crime and punishment for a great many conservatives Steven chronicles in this book. And one could ask the same kind of analytical political theoretic question about African American society and the character of our leadership. I was struck when Donald Trump in the State of the Union points out, correctly, that African American unemployment is at historic lows and just about everybody in the chamber stands and applauds. A whole lot of people do because it's a good thing regardless who's president that African American unemployment is at historic lows. And the Congressional Black Caucus, they sat on

their hands and you can almost feel the enmity that was kind of emanating off of them at the idea that this president would take credit for black unemployment being so low. Why is there no counterpoint to that? Why is there no politician who's prepared to run for office again -- well, John Conyers just isn't there anymore, but he was there for a very, very long time. Maxine Waters is still there. You might think she could somehow be primaried or challenged in some effective way by a young, committed African American activist person who was left of center to be sure but who had a different view than the one that has reigned for the last half century about what to do about these problems. And it hasn't happened. And I think the answer has to be found somewhere in an analysis of institutions, of vested interests, of -- think about Bill Cosby. Ta-Nehisi Coates got his start writing about Bill Cosby. Bill Cosby the comedian, Bill Cosby the sexual predator. Does it need to be said that I have no brief for Bill Cosby the sexual predator? Okay, I've said that. But Bill Cosby the comedian in 2004 at an event celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Brown versus Board of Education decision stood up and gave something that became famous.

MCWHORTER: Pound cake.

LOURY: The pound cake speech he gave where he basically said that the lower socio-economic types -- that's almost a quote from Cosby in this speech -- the poor people in the black community are not pulling their own weight in the civil rights era. The Brown decision in the decade and a half afterwards brought about a transformation of American institutions that opened things up for blacks. Not perfectly so, but quite substantially so, but that many of us are not pulling our own weight. We're not raising our kids, we're not developing our talents, we're not disciplined, we're not working as hard -- this is Bill Cosby. He mounted a campaign going around the country filling up auditoriums giving this same kind of speech. In Detroit, in Philadelphia, in Chicago, in Los Angeles, in Oakland, California, and so forth and so on, which was attracting crowds and filling up these auditoriums. This is Bill Cosby exercising leadership trying to change the tone of the discussion about African American disadvantage so as to impute greater responsibility to we black people ourselves for what we're doing with such opportunities as exist. I mentioned that Ta-Nehisi Coates got his start because this became the fattest possible target. Cosby made himself into a target. He ought to have known, given the patterns of behavior that we have come to learn about

him, that he had way too much baggage to be the front person to make this kind of an argument. And in some sense the rest is history. Again, the Cosby case is complicated, and I want to just reiterate that in no way do I endorse the predatory behavior that he apparently engaged in vis-a-vis women. But I think Bill Cosby had something useful and -- he and Alvin Poussaint even wrote a book.

MCWHORTER: *Come on People.*

LOURY: *Come on People.* Like come on. Come on, people. Come on, let's get busy. Let's do what needs to be done here. Anyway, and the year that that was published -- I'm going to be very brief.

Q: Two thousand four?

LOURY: This is 2004 and Michael Eric Dyson wrote a whole book against Bill Cosby called *Is Bill Cosby Right?* A whole book against him. There's a black leader. And so, Bill Cosby is trying to be a different kind of leader and one of the leading black intellectuals writes a whole book about him. Ta-Nehisi Coates, who nobody had ever heard of then, wrote a very cynical article in *The Atlantic* basically saying that Cosby was full of shit --

MCWHORTER: And engaged in the politics of respectability.

LOURY: And who would want to be respectable?

MCWHORTER: And that was the beginning of Ta-Nehisi Coates becoming treated by all educated people in this country as Jesus. That was the beginning of his career. And that year the NAACP gave an award -- the year that *Come On People* was published the NAACP gave their image award for books to Michael Eric Dyson's book about Hurricane Katrina. That was the situation as far back as 13 years ago. That's where we are.

LOURY: Can I just reiterate this thing about the politics of respectability? Because that's exactly what we're talking about. We're talking about a debate over whether or not African Americans should be concerned about how it is that our community appears to the larger polity to whom we must appeal for anything that we want to get done. And the contempt for the idea that you would want to be respectable. The contempt for the idea that you'd want to uplift, that you'd want to point toward higher ground for, quote, people, the contempt for that idea captures to me a lot of what's wrong with the kind of intellectual circumstance that we've gotten ourselves into.

Q: Who's calling on people? Can I -- thank you so much. I'm probably the only person (inaudible) to say I'm very tickled and pleased by your remark on characteristics as a vector because now we can define victimization as a time

dependent projection matrix, right? (laughter) And that intersectionality becomes the [octagonal?] matrix coefficient. (laughter) You can actually --

LOURY: I didn't understand that at all. (laughter)

Q: But the thing, right, is that you have a set of characteristics, and I actually do have a point, but you project it down to basically a rank, right? Who is higher up on the victim hierarchy? And it changes over time, right? So, issues of gender or gender identity or whatever interact and intersect if you will with race. And then part of the reason I feel, I think, this is kind of relevant is as an Asian American you see some of this paradigm of victimhood saying we should have solidarity with this particular way of looking at the African American experience. And I mean the history, right? The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act where we're systematically excluded from the country. My relatives weren't able to come to America until after the reforms in 1965 and yet then you look at Harvard being investigated by the DOJ for say affirmative action type things. It doesn't make any sense to offset boat people from Cambodia as east Asians against African Americans when they -- as you say, it knows no race. And so, I think it's kind of interesting also in terms of my own experience with say tenured Harvard faculty

have said to me like, "You're not really Chinese" or "You're not really American." I have colleagues who come up to me and say, "Oh, your English is really good." Like I was born in Ohio, went to Princeton, and I got my PhD from Harvard, right? So, I usually just went, "Oh, we all look alike, don't we? Velly good, sank you." (laughter) Which is usually the way to end a discussion. I was once told by -- I said this once to a very well-meaning wife of a senior faculty member at MIT who was basically Nobel Prize worthy and I said, "Oh, we all look alike, don't we?" And she looked at me and said, "You're a very naughty boy. I've been confusing you with somebody else." (laughter) So I think you guys can appreciate that, but I think it's almost completely backward that we're supposed to on the one hand as Asian Americans -- this is sort of mission creep if you will. The expansion of this paradigm to other groups of victimhood defining paradigms. And it's totally bonkers and totally logically like utterly self-contradictory on the one hand to say we should be victims and on the other hand we should be penalized for our success through formalized quotas and affirmative action.

MCWHORTER: It feels good to be a victim, especially if you're not one. That is really a problem in modern thinking culture and it's not only America. It's something

that the ancients wouldn't have recognized, the idea that you derive your sense of purpose, your sense of place from being somebody who withstands the slings and arrows of discrimination rather than being proud of something that you actually did. But it's an easy thing to fall for if you've known other people who did it. I hate to say that the civil rights movement has had the unpleasant byproduct of teaching a lot of other people what too many black people have fallen into, actively supported by fellow traveler whites. And so, then you get these sorts of issues. Yeah, it's tough. And the business of language is interesting. I got racised twice in 2017. I had a TA, he was about 25. I was teaching the history of English and after the first lecture he said, "You're a very confident lecturer." Well, why wouldn't I be confident? I've been doing it for half of my life, it's my subject, why would I be shy in front of the class? That was a little bit of racism. What he meant was how are you so sure of yourself, you're supposed to be -- you're not in your world. I think that he was thinking that I should be teaching black history, but other than that when talking about old English, "You sure are confident." Yeah. But I don't base my sense of pride on the fact that that didn't hurt me. You know, it doesn't make any sense. I have a good life

otherwise. But it's a problem. The noble victim complex. It should be battled, but unfortunately, we're taught that that is an advanced way of being human. And it's at the point where only straight white men are exempt from it, but then of course then they try to jump onto the bandwagon because they're being discriminated against by everybody else. And the result is incoherence.

LOURY: Okay, I want to challenge you then, John. We're going to do a little bit of our back and forth that we do on Bloggingheads.

MCWHORTER: Oh, let's be like on the --

LOURY: The gentleman here, I don't know your name, but you asked about leadership.

Q: Matias.

LOURY: Matias asked about leadership. So, we have had a black president, Barack Hussein Obama. He served in office for eight years. He won comfortably two national elections. He was the leader not only of the racial thing, or even not particularly of the racial thing, but of the country.

MCWHORTER: The whole country.

LOURY: He ran for office -- I'm going to get to my point. He ran for office telling the country that he was both black and white. The fact that his grandmother and his mother

were white, that his father was a Kenyan, an African, [immigrant?] to the country who was black was very significant to the brand that he developed and sold to the country in that election. He promised us that we were not red America and blue America, we were one America. We were not white America or black America, we were one America. It was in his very DNA. I don't remember anyone objecting to Barack Hussein Obama reminding the country that in his very DNA he was both black and white as we Americans here are both black and white. So now my question to you, John, how did he do as a leader of the country, a transracial or biracial -- I don't quite even know how to put it, I don't know what the right words are, and I don't want to give offense, okay? But I'm saying that was there not an opportunity for a different narrative to be voiced out of the White House? Barack Hussein Obama ended up making Al Sharpton into a household name.

MCWHORTER: What do you mean?

LOURY: What I mean is Al Sharpton is not exactly it's in my very DNA we're black America, we're white America. He's a racial demagogue. That's what I mean. What I mean is if I have a son he'd look like Trayvon was not a random comment, okay? It was pointing out that the color of the skin of that kid who was shot in that altercation in Florida and

the color of the president's skin was pertinent, pertinent enough to be voiced out of the press room in the White House of the United States of America. What I'm saying is I'm asking you, yes, I'm suggesting an answer to the question. I don't think the president entirely succeeded in his mission. Now, it could be argued he could not have succeeded the birther movement, the racists, you lie shouted from the Florida house during the state of the union address, and sort of implacable racial opposition to a black family in the White House made it impossible for him to take any of it on. And I'm happy to have you try to defend that argument, but what I'm seeing is rioting in Baltimore, rioting in Ferguson, Missouri, I'm seeing the gunning down of police officers in Dallas. They were murdered in an act of domestic terrorism. I'm seeing a movement that is promoting a sort of set of ideas about how we approach these problems and I'm asking about leadership including leadership from the White House. Now, we're very quick to point out that Donald Trump fails along many dimensions to exercise the kind of sober, wise, deeply rooted leadership that the country needs in moments of crisis and I agree that that's true. I'm asking you about Barack Hussein Obama.

MCWHORTER: The answer to that question is not as interesting as it could be because his administration came at a time when there was a major technological change. Nobody quite seems to get this, and I imagine that it will seem more apparent in about 25 years. In 2008 Facebook became something that all of us would be on. That's the year that that happened. Twitter peaked in 2009. Now most of us could not imagine being without those two things, but before 2008 the internet had happened, but they hadn't. And that meant that sentiments, including unpleasant ones, were whipped up much faster after 2008 which is also when he began, such that there would not have been a Tea Party even if racism was a factor, which it was, before 2008 because the internet was different. Did racism impact how people perceived Barack Obama? Yeah, some. But the fact that we're supposed to focus on it as the thing to talk about is a symptom of our times and anybody who feels that racism did Barack Obama in is too young to remember how people hated the Clintons. It's as if people don't remember that the Clintons were despised when Bill was in office and it wasn't only because he was, quote, unquote, a hillbilly. It was because of various factors, but he was hated incoherently, as was FDR. With Obama race played a part in it. Was it decisive? Who knows? Who could say?

And so, I think that no, Barack Obama did not bring the country together racially, but I don't know how he could have when these new social media forms came in and whipped people up into stupidity in a way that he couldn't have anticipated. We would not have ever heard of Trayvon Martin if it weren't for Facebook.

LOURY: Let me try this on you. I wonder whether Donald Trump would be president today if, when looting and rioting in Baltimore or Ferguson, Missouri went on the president of the United States had stood up and said, "I'm for law and order. You people need to get yourselves off the street."

MCWHORTER: Doesn't matter.

LOURY: I mean to be provocative here. I mean to be provocative because we're talking about leadership.

MCWHORTER: Remember the mayor of Baltimore, the female black mayor of Baltimore, mentioned thugs and was basically run out of town? That's what happens to somebody who does something like that though. And so, people don't do such things. It didn't have the effect that you're mentioning. I mean she's just the mayor of Baltimore, but still, if Barack Obama had done it then it would have been so -- it would have been politically such a disaster for him that we understand why he didn't.

Q: By whites and blacks both?

MCWHORTER: With black people and white fellow travelers. In other words, everybody who writes for the mainstream media.

Q: (inaudible) reelection to run for.

MCWHORTER: So why didn't he do it then? Yeah. I don't think it would have kept Trump out though. That's the thing.

Q: So, I'm going to tell a little story about what happened to me on Twitter last night. I got berated by a white feminist for daring to say that I as a Japanese-American did not need an apology from Bari Weiss who, if you're not familiar, is a *New York Times* --

MCWHORTER: This debate.

Q: Yeah, is a *New York Times* editor and opinion writer who's been making a lot of waves because I guess she's a neoconservative and she's expressed a lot of views that people don't like to hear from a young woman. Anyway, she tweeted the other day after Mirai Nagasu, I believe is her name, she's one of our Olympic champions in figure skating who did the first triple axel ever done by a female figure skater. She is the daughter of Japanese immigrants to the United States and so she was born here, she's not an immigrant herself, but I guess Bari tweeted a tweet that was a quote from *Hamilton* which I've never seen, but it was something like, "Immigrants, we get the job done." Sort of

as an homage basically to saying that if Mirai's parents hadn't come to the United States --

MCWHORTER: It was praising her.

Q: Yeah. That we wouldn't have her as part, you know, winning for the Americans and doing this amazing triple axel. Unfortunately, a lot of Asian Americans and other people of color decided to take it as a personal affront that she was basically saying well, Mirai's not American because she's Japanese, therefore she must not -- it's not possible, we're always othered as Japanese people.

MCWHORTER: Bari's gotten death threats because of that.

Q: Yes, she has. It's ridiculous. I follow Bari on Twitter. I don't know her personally. We've barely interacted, but I'm a Japanese immigrant, I don't need an apology from her. I don't want one. She's made it very clear that she doesn't believe that what she did was wrong. She didn't have any ill intent with the tweet, but people days later are still trying to get an apology out of her and trying to shame her for her so-called white privilege. She's Jewish, but that's another thing. Anyway, so this white woman was yelling at me on Twitter last night and putting words in my mouth because I dared to say that I didn't, that I just didn't see what the point of spending days beating Bari like she's a dead horse for making this, what was basically

just -- it was a mistweet. You know, it was misunderstood. She could have phrased it better. Maybe it was a little offensive, but like why are we still talking about this? And when I was going back and forth with this woman I was thinking how do we move this conversation forward if even when people of color who don't agree with the prevailing white zeitgeist of white privilege and the fact that whites should never say anything racist and if they say even a thing that's perceived -- misperceived as racist they should immediately apologize and atone and beat themselves on the streets. How can we possibly move the conversation forward, you know? I understand your choice to step back and not write as much or speak as much about race, although you know that I'm disappointed about that. But I don't know, sometimes I despair that we can ever move forward because I've seen increasingly more Asian Americans pick up on this Black Lives Matter type rhetoric and the victimhood narrative and even very privileged Asian Americans wanting to talk about how victimized we are by this tweet from the *New York Times* editor, never mind if we're professionals or well educated or anything else. It's somehow -- I don't know. The fetishization of wanting to dredge up things from the past troubles me and I don't know how to move the conversation forward when every time you say something to

try and do that people tell you that you're wrong, you're not able to express those opinions without being told that you're somehow racist or anti-black or anti-immigrant or what have you. Anyway, I guess I just wondered, do you have any thoughts about whether or not it's truly possible for us to proactively move the conversation forward? Or do we just have to sit it out for five years and wait?

MCWHORTER: To be honest, it's something that's hard to say because it sounds disgustingly arrogant, but if you're talking about say the people who've been jumping on Bari -- and I happen to have met her. We have drunk together. She is a very nice person. She has all of the proper opinions. She's not a bad person. And yet she wrote that tweet. I don't even think it was clumsy. I mean, she's quoting *Hamilton*. Bari and I both love musicals. I get what she meant. And then she, you know. The people who are taking her as wrong -- I have to put this carefully -- you assume that this particular kind of social justice warrior is bright, that this is a higher kind of analysis --

LOURY: John, excuse me, will you just tell us what she said in short compos because I'm unfamiliar.

MCWHORTER: I don't do sports, but there's this Olympic skater, she's Japanese, she's female. And Bari wrote, she had to take down the tweet, but apparently, she wrote,

"Hurray for Mirai Okayasu [sic] or whatever. Immigrants, we get the job done." Which is a big line in the musical *Hamilton*. And her parents were immigrants, but she grew up here. Bari Weiss is now being skewered because she's implying that this skater was not born in America and therefore she should not be alive.

LOURY: Bari is herself a child of immigrants?

MCWHORTER: Bari Weiss is a northeastern Jewish female who went to Barnard who is about 32 years old and she is one of the new, quote, unquote, conservative columnists at the --

LOURY: No, I understand that. I'm saying the we, the antecedent of we. When she says, "We get the job done."

MCWHORTER: No, she meant we as in *Hamilton* there's a scene where people say Hamilton --

LOURY: Thank you.

MCWHORTER: So anyway, the people who are misinterpreting Bari are not being intelligent. That is people who otherwise, I suspect, would be trying to put a circular peg into a square hole. They are not the forefront of intelligence, frankly. It's at the point where I think a lot of people like that should just be ignored. I mean it's not that smart people are calling you out on something you didn't realize. It's people who are missing irony and layering and context because there are always such people.

We just didn't hear from them much before. I'm sorry but most of those people aren't good readers. And so, in a way I wish -- now, I avoid saying anything on Twitter. I just basically put my articles on it. I don't express opinions because I have children. I don't have time for that. But Bari should really just ignore them. I wish she hadn't taken the tweet down. And after a while if you ignore them for about 10 years I think maybe the fashion will change. I don't know, once I wrote on Twitter and somebody wrote, "Let's take down this pile of feces." They actually said, "Let's take him down." And then a bunch of people started writing about how I shouldn't be alive. And I thought this isn't smart. Who are these people? And you know, then life went on. So, I think they need to be ignored, but it's hard to do that. So, I don't know how we could do that as a people.

Q: You both said so much interesting, but what I don't understand because I'm 72 is (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) hasn't caught. Why everybody doesn't immediately recognize truth. But it usually works, I think, throughout history by osmosis. And I don't know why. You've been (inaudible) a long time, (inaudible) and others have too, and I don't know why. Maybe you've thought about that. My question really is, and I haven't

had the pleasure of following the dialogue between you two,
what do you most disagree on?

LOURY: (laughter)

MCWHORTER: (laughter)

LOURY: He thinks Trump is stupid.

MCWHORTER: That varies over the years.

LOURY: He thinks Trump is stupid. I think that's a really
stupid thing to think.

MCWHORTER: Well, he is.

LOURY: He's crazy like a fox.

MCWHORTER: Dumb as a box of hair.

LOURY: I think that's not maybe the only thing that we
disagree on, but it's definitely (overlapping dialogue;
inaudible).

MCWHORTER: -- not very important. It's not really very
important.

LOURY: You didn't like Obama. You liked Hillary, I liked
Obama in 2008.

MCWHORTER: That was 2008. Yeah, I came around. (laughter)

Q: I'd like to know your opinion of the work of William Julius
Wilson, who's another Harvard professor.

LOURY: Is he here?

Q: Is he?

LOURY: No, I mean is he in the room?

Q: So that means you can really speak your mind?

MCWHORTER: Yes. You go first.

Q: I'm so (inaudible).

LOURY: No, Bill is a great sociologist. *The Declining Significance of Race* was an important book. That was, what, 1978? It's a neo-Marxian -- let me just talk about Bill Wilson. I've been asked about Bill Wilson, William Julius Wilson. It's a neo-Marxian theoretical account of the transition within the United States during various phases of the structure of production and economic relations of race relations. So, he's got these three periods. He's got the slavery period, he's got the antebellum period, and then he's got this period of post-industrial whatever. I can't remember the names that he uses, but he's got these three epochs. And he makes a case that the character of the race problem ought to be understood in light of the structure of economic and social relations, organization of production, manufacturing, how urban areas are organized, and so forth and so on. It's empirical and it's theoretically innovative. He called the book *The Declining Significance of Race*. He got flak because people don't want to say that race is declining in significance. That's not what he meant. He meant that the character of impediment to African American full

participation in society, which had heretofore been primarily about a racial restriction and definition, had through the middle of the 20th century become largely about a structural economic and social organization problem. He was willing to talk about African American family breakdown. He was willing to talk about pathology in the community, crime and the impediments to that, but he never lost his social democratic vision, which I don't necessarily share myself but which I think is a perfectly respectable political stance. That was 1978. *The Truly Disadvantaged*, this is the book that makes concentrated ghetto poverty a thing in the social sciences. This is William Julius Wilson who almost singlehandedly does this. He runs this urban poverty and family life survey at the University of Chicago for a decade with an army of graduate students, some of whom are now household names because they got their start in Bill's project, they got their data in Bill's project and so forth and so on. And he produced *When Work Disappears* which is a kind of magnum opus book. This is a macro sociological, theoretical, attention to detail nested within a tradition of inquiry. He's a great man.

Q: (inaudible)

LOURY: Pardon?

MANSFIELD: His analysis is valid in the context of what this conversation is, but you're saying no.

MCWHORTER: Here's a disagreement.

LOURY: I was speaking of him as a sociologist. I don't necessarily endorse everything, but go ahead, John.

MCWHORTER: He is a great man, but his work has created some major ideological detours in how we think about the black condition because what one learns as the takeaway from those three books is that what did in poor black communities was when low skilled factory jobs moved away, either to the suburbs or overseas, and left people without a means to make a living, especially uneducated black men, and therefore women were less likely to marry them and that ended up leading to the family breakdown that was talked about more 20 years ago than it is today. And as reasonable as that sounds, that's a meme now, that's a *New York Times* op-ed page other than what Bari Weiss writes. That's a *New York Times* op-ed page meme that the factory moves away and therefore of course black men in Chicago start shooting each other over sneakers. The factory moves away, of course people start shooting each other. Now, notice that if I isolate it that way it sounds like I'm saying that you mix red and blue and you get yellow. But that is what Wilson's has encouraged. And if you actually

read the books, especially *When Work Disappears*, he's subtler than his legacy implies.

LOURY: Correct.

MCWHORTER: He writes about all sorts of --

Q: I'm thinking about him because of what other people have taken it and done with it.

MCWHORTER: Although also (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

But no, there's a little more because he -- and he is a great man and I am a deeply flawed man (laughter) but he in public tends to pull back from frankly the more logical implications of his work. He likes it when people praise him for being an anti-racist and he refuses to talk about the cultural parts of his books. I don't admire that in him and I've seen him do that often, although I can see why. It's nice to have an audience like you. But you know, mainly his work is misinterpreted. So, there's something that we disagree on a little bit.

LOURY: Yeah, we could pursue it but there are other questions.

MCWHORTER: I think you agree with me.

LOURY: I agree with you in part.

Q: So, if either one of you were president and you had Congress on your side -- let's go there, let's go to some of the practical things. Because they're saying there's no

-- I mean there's actually kind of too much talking going on anyway. What would you start doing in the (inaudible)? Because you can't preach to, I don't know, people and say, "You've got to get your families together, you've got to read books to your children," whatever. What would you do?

LOURY: The president just proposed, if I'm not mistaken, a \$1.5 trillion infrastructure project over an extended period of time. Some of the money would come from the federal [fisc?], but most of it would come from state and local governments and private investment. That's \$1.5 trillion. If I were the secretary of housing and urban development and not Ben Carson (laughter) and I got to get into the Oval Office and talk to the President of the United States about his domestic policy I would say, "Mr. President, let's take \$10 billion. It's chicken feed in the federal budget. Let's find 100 urban areas in the United States with significant minority populations, not only black. Let's spend \$100 million in each of those 100 urban areas in an organized and concerted manner to try to boost the infrastructure of human development for disadvantaged people in those communities." I'm talking about nurses that can go to the home of a mother of a newborn and help her know how to take good care of that kid and maybe not get pregnant again if she doesn't want to.

I'm talking about pre-kindergarten education for children whose neurological development begins before they're even born and who very often in the hardscrabble parts of our society don't really have a chance to realize their full human potential for a variety of reasons. I'm talking about, I don't know, I'd be willing to consider midnight basketball without a smirk if I thought that it was going to reduce the murder rate in Chicago by giving these kids some place to go and something to do. I would definitely want to try to change the educational -- the structure of educational opportunities for young people in some of these cities where the public schools are not working so well. We can think of a lot of other things. We can talk about health care including mental health care, etc. And I would say to the president, "Do that, A, because it's the right thing to do, B, because it's politically smart. Do you remember back during the campaign when you were running around the country telling black people that they had nothing to lose, why don't I give you a shot because the communities were bad and you've got a lot of enmity rained down upon you for having said so, but you were basically right about that. And that's something that you could follow. And they say you're a racist because of this, that, and the other and you say no, I'm not, no, I'm not,

you know what the best way to answer the charge that you are racist is? Do this. And then point to the fact that it's been done. Not everything is going to work out perfectly. You're going to get some complaint from your right wing about throwing money at a problem and so forth. It's only \$10 billion. Do this." Something like that.

Q: If he's as smart as you say he'll do it.

MCWHORTER: But he's not.

LOURY: He's not. I don't think he's going to do it, no. I'm not secretary of housing and urban development either.

Q: I also have John (inaudible). Fixing up schools, that's utterly vague. I think that there have been so many attempts, but how do you do that?

MCWHORTER: No, there are three things that I think --

LOURY: I'm sorry. We know something about fixing schools. We just can't get it done politically for -- sorry.

MCWHORTER: That's all right.

LOURY: I think we do know what to do about schools.

MCWHORTER: There are three things. I think if three things were done tomorrow the whole race question would be utterly transformed in 10 years. One, no war on drugs including hard drugs. You should be able to get heroin at the supermarket. Yes, that would take care of the relationship between young black men and the cops and that would change

the whole ideology that we have about race. It would pull the rug out from under the whole discussion. That. Two, long term reversible contraceptives should be available to all women of all colors for no money. That should just happen. That would solve a lot of the problems that we have with family and child rearing. You shouldn't have kids until you're ready and too many births are accidents. And then third and finally, with schools, how to fix a school, it's too mysterious and a lot of it is based on local subcultures that you can't fix. Kids aren't taught to read right. A lot of the reasons that somebody in sixth grade is having trouble is because they weren't taught to read right. Phonics should be imposed on every single pre-K and kindergarten system in the United States. Nobody should be taught through any other method. I taught my daughter how to read when she was three and a half years old with a phonics book because they weren't doing it at her school. It worked like that. It's not because she has good genes, it's because it works. And so, she could read before everybody in her class because I taught her to read. That should happen for everybody. Those three things would take care of it. I really do -- that would be what I would do as president. Please don't make me president.

(laughter)

Q: What about [natural things]?

MCWHORTER: I've never thought about that.

Q: (inaudible)

MCWHORTER: Yeah, like in the old days.

Q: Do either of you have any idea about what it is about your backgrounds enabled you to resist the consensus around you or was it not your background, but it was some immaculate logical conception? (laughter)

LOURY: So, I came up working class Chicago, south side. When I hit the east coast as a graduate student at MIT in 1972 I had my introduction to the governing class of this country. I'm talking about the pointy headed intellectuals on the coast. Including the African Americans who were among their number. This one who was the son of investment banker down in New York City, this one who was a graduate of Swarthmore College and was attending Harvard Law School, this one who was doing a psychology degree at Boston College who had come from upper middle-class backgrounds. I had a lot of class resentment as a young man coming along. I was a father at 18. I went to work in a printing factory when I was 18 years old to take care of my daughter who had been born to a teenage mother who subsequently became my wife. We had another child. I had two children. It was five years working in that factory, the night shift,

and going to classes at a community college and then Northwestern University during the day, before I got discovered as a talented potential social scientist and I got a scholarship to attend MIT's PhD program, the best program in the world at that time. But it was five years getting up at 3:00 in the morning. It was five years working 20-hour days. It was five years studying on the subway as I was trying to get myself from my job to my classes and whatnot. And when I encountered these very privileged and entitled and presumptuous elites here on the east coast who had it all figured out and thought that they could tell me about being black, I had a different opinion, I wasn't black. Now, my view about that was you can't tell me a damn thing about being black. You know what I'm saying? I was working a full-time job when I was 18 years old, okay? I did not get a penny from anybody. You can't tell me anything about struggle, you can't tell me anything about overcoming hardship. You're going to read me out of the race because I dared to think for myself? That was the genesis of a contrarian that I've since become. And it infuriates me even to this day. Even to this day these people who don't know -- well, let me stop. (laughter)

MCWHORTER: Mine isn't that interesting. (laughter) I mean I'm a post-civil rights person. I grew up upper middle

class. I don't have a working-class story. There was no struggle. My household was not a warm one and so I don't have the story of somebody telling me to keep my nose to the grindstone giving me a hug. My parents didn't like each other. It was very ordinary people, Steven Sondheim. But I knew no deprivation. I only went to private schools and I think the reason that I'm a contrarian -- I think I'm arrogant frankly. (laughter) When I was --

LOURY: (inaudible)

MCWHORTER: -- 25 I noticed that I was supposed to think that racism had not changed. It was around when Shelby Steele's first book came out and I liked it because it was the bible. And I tried to discuss it with other black people and I was told that he was wrong. And I just felt I'm not inclined to allow that what other people think of me is going to destroy my ego. That sounds like something somebody black would have said in 1905, unfortunately. But I just thought I'm not going to let them win. There are no water fountains. It's not the way it was for my parents. And to the extent that there are vestiges of it I kind of enjoy showing people that they're wrong and if they still look down me I don't care because I'm busy with my hobbies. That's it. And so basically, I just, I feel superior to things people tell me when they don't make sense. And I'm

not a joiner. I think a lot of black people feel a sense of warmth in thinking of themselves as victims of racism from the enemy and talking about it with one another. I'd rather read a book. I just, I'm not a joiner. So, in other words, I'm just weird and so I don't have anything to tell anybody and I'm just sorry. It's too bad. (laughter)

Q: I was wondering when you mentioned legalizing all drugs and how you think that would solve a lot of the problems between the police and the black community, the legalizing of all drugs has caused heroin epidemics, have destroyed communities and destroyed families, how would that not have the same effect of killing people and destroying families that sending people to prison does?

MCWHORTER: Oh, all of it would be a matter of determining what your priorities were. And so, to an extent legalizing the difficult drugs would create addictions that there weren't before. And so of course this legalization would have to come along with a concentrated effort at rehabilitation and fixing people and working on the biological nature of addiction. But, and this is where people might disagree quite reasonably with me, I think, that to the extent that legalizing drugs would make problems with addiction in some communities, especially today, worse than they are and might create addiction where

it didn't exist, if it would get rid of a black community and Latino community problem where men are tempted not to stay in school and not to seek legal employment because there's a way of keeping the wolf from the door, not getting rich but keeping the wolf from the door, by working on the black market, I think that the benefit of that after about 10 years would outweigh the fact that we would still have to deal with the fact that drugs were a little bit easier to get for some people. I would rather see this because I think that America would be a better place without that black community problem as opposed to what you're talking about. I don't think, based on the evidence, including international, that it would create the catastrophe that one might think. But yeah, some people would become addicted who hadn't, but it would make the race question different. That's my priority. It would not be everybody's priority.

MANSFIELD: Andy has a question.

ANDY: I'd like to return to Glenn's provocative remark about President Obama. I wanted to ask you both the extent to which you think that Barack Obama's presidency created the Donald Trump phenomenon.

LOURY: You know, that is Ta-Nehisi Coates' argument in this most recent book, *We Were Eight Years in Power*, that he

starts the book by -- I know you haven't read it, John.

John doesn't read --

MCWHORTER: I'm not going to read it.

LOURY: -- Ta-Nehisi Coates. He starts the book by recalling the collapse of reconstruction in the decades immediately after the Civil War. Black governments in southern jurisdictions like South Carolina and other places who were eight years in power and did a pretty good job and he quotes -- the title comes from a quote of an African American state legislator who had served eight years in power in the postbellum period but had then been -- there was a constitutional convention that kind of rewrote the rules. They disqualified the African Americans' eligibility to vote and, you know, Jim Crow in South Carolina came into being. And the guy was saying, "You know, we weren't that bad. eight years in power, we ran the state pretty well," he was saying. And Coates' point by analogy to the present day is the fear of bad Negro government is not the thing that people were really afraid of, it's the fear of good Negro government that they are most afraid of because good Negro government would prove the -- would show the lie of their stereotypes and tropes about the incapacities of African Americans to govern ourselves. And he alleges that Barack Obama was that, he

was a good -- he was good Negro government and that just made a lot of people really very angry.

MCWHORTER: That is horseshit. (laughter)

LOURY: And that Donald Trump is the first white president.

He's the first white president, president in virtue of being white, president whose whiteness is essential to the function that he's playing by ascending to the presidency because he negates the eight years of good Negro government. That's his argument.

Q: As I recall, [it was not in the spirit of?] your remark so I was asking you guys to develop more -- you said that potentially if President Obama had responded differently to circumstances --

LOURY: I pretty much said what I think. I think a tremendous opportunity for the country and for African Americans was missed. I think that I was asked about leadership and how do you get out of this kind of cul de sac that we've wandered ourselves into where bad ideas and reflexes seem to be the rule of the day, and I thought that that logjam could have been broken by someone who was prepared to follow through on the implications. Remember during the campaign he goes to a black church and he says, "It's easy to make a baby, it's kind of hard to be a father. Come on, men, we need to measure up." And Jesse Jackson said he

wanted to, excuse me, cut his nuts off. That's a quote. Jesse Jackson on a hot mike after Barack Obama gave this speech in Chicago at a church, and maybe it was Father's Day 2008, was heard saying he wanted to emasculate, he wanted to castrate Barack Obama because how dare he talk down to black folks? Okay. This was the Bill Cosby kind of spirit that had crept into Obama's leadership. And you can find bits and pieces of it in his books, *Dreams from My Father* and the other one, *The Audacity of Hope*, you can find bits and pieces of that. But he, for reasons that I'm not sure I completely understand, and I'm sure that there are reasons, elected not to be that kind of disruptive force. He hewed a much more conventional way to navigate the rocky shoals, to be careful about exactly how he was handling these issues. I think he could have busted it wide open. He could have usurped the tired, octogenarian, hackneyed, cliché-ridden leadership that we saw sitting on their hands during the president's state of the union address. Maxine Waters? If I offend I apologize because it's not my intention to offend but let me just tell you I'm not impressed by that leadership. Not given the scale of the problems that we're confronting. He, I think, could have gone a long way toward breaking that logjam. Like I said, what the country needed when Baltimore was burning

was for the chief executive to say that the law must be respected. I'm sorry, I know that's not popular. That happens to be what I think, okay? That was the highest priority. Not a chummy reception to the forces in our society that were celebrating and lionizing the lawlessness. So, I think he failed. I think he was supposed to be a black and a white president. Coates says of Obama in this book, and I'll stop because it's not about Ta-Nehisi Coates, but it really -- *Claremont Review* has asked me to review this book and I've said, "Okay, so I'm going to just take the gloves off, okay?"

MCWHORTER: They asked me.

LOURY: They asked you first? Damn, we had to tell them?

(laughter)

MCWHORTER: I told them I didn't want to read it. (laughter)

LOURY: All right, all right.

MCWHORTER: I shouldn't have said that.

LOURY: He's 52, I'm 70, you get it?

MCWHORTER: That was terrible.

LOURY: No, it's all right. It's all good.

MCWHORTER: (inaudible)

LOURY: I'm glad they asked you. That was a smart move on their part.

MCWHORTER: You're going to do it much better than I would.

LOURY: I'm going to write back and tell them I'm not doing it. (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) No, no, he says Barack married Michelle, he married a sister. And you know, I'm all for that. My wife is black. (laughter)

MCWHORTER: Start with that. My wife is very -- she's very white.

LOURY: No, he says Barack broke the pattern because the pattern of success for a black man in America is to assimilate and that means marrying a white woman.

MCWHORTER: He's right about that.

LOURY: I think that's the most ridiculous thing I ever heard.

MCWHORTER: Oh, oops. Oh.

LOURY: What do you mean black people assimilate? I don't even know what that means. That's incoherent to me. My ancestors go back hundreds of years and --

MCWHORTER: Wouldn't you expect him to be married to somebody white, Obama? It wouldn't be surprising.

LOURY: If you're talking about the frequency of black men marrying white women in a certain strata of society (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) I don't know if it's point two or point four, but it's probably --

MCWHORTER: It wouldn't be surprising. It was a good thing about -- you're talking, go ahead. (laughter)

LOURY: I'm saying that the strategic move, if it was a strategic move on his part, I invite you to consider David [Gerald?], the historian's 1,000-page book about the young Obama, he never gets beyond, I don't know, when the guy's running for the senate.

MCWHORTER: Did you read that?

LOURY: Yeah, I read it.

MCWHORTER: That doorstep?

LOURY: The thing was big.

MCWHORTER: I own it, but -- anyway.

LOURY: I haven't read every page and there's a lot of notes. It's huge. But if you want to know the street address where Barack's mother was living in Honolulu when she delivered that baby in that hospital -- that birther stuff is nonsense. We know exactly what was going on. At least according to David Gerald, who's a first-rate historian. Anyway I'm --

MCWHORTER: Andy --

LOURY: I think a chance was missed for real leadership on the racial front that would have upset a lot of people and it would have been a good thing too. Instead, Al Sharpton was made the ambassador of the United States government to the black community. And I think that that's a travesty. Personal opinion, not everybody's going to share it.

MCWHORTER: Andy, if John Edwards had become president and he served two terms starting in 2008 and Facebook and Twitter came to rule like Donald Trump would be president now. There's no reason that the same thing wouldn't have happened. I think Coates is engaging in a kind of performance art. That would be a good movie, the idea that Donald Trump is the first white president. It's satisfying. We all like narrative, but that's not based on reasoned analysis of the way human beings actually think in political aggregations.

Q: (inaudible) Coates as opposed to Glenn.

MCWHORTER: Yes.

Q: No, I think Trump is president --

LOURY: They asked you first? Well, I (laughter).

MCWHORTER: I shouldn't have said that. I told them I didn't want to read it.

LOURY: I'm just kidding, John.

MCWHORTER: I am so sorry I said that. I'm glad that you -- you should do it.

LOURY: I'm --

MCWHORTER: You're erudite.

LOURY: I'm on it.

MANSFIELD: The lady.

LOURY: Susan.

SUSAN: Yes. This is really funny to me now. I became a lawyer in the beginning of the 1970s, '72, and I became -- it's a diversion from what you were talking about now because I wasn't thinking about black life. I was just thinking about male/female and I was the first woman township commissioner in Philadelphia. And outside of Philadelphia I'm a Philadelphia lawyer, not a Boston lawyer. I've never actually been to Boston until a year ago, but what is so shocking, was so amazing to me, is to see how slow even this male/female equality -- in position and professorships and everything like that. And I'm only going -- now, it may seem 50 years ago, but the 1970s are really not that far -- we're not that far beyond it in what we're accomplishing in any of these. You know, I'm not trying to digress, but these are issues, you know, both male/female -- how this country progresses, how we all work together. And I just thought I would say something because I'm here today and I've been a lawyer 50 years now and it's just amazing to me, you know, in some ways, in some respects and in certain groups, how slow it's been, how little we've accomplished.

MCWHORTER: Second wave feminism often is said to have made a certain sense that third wave feminism might to many people less so. And there was in a way a second wave anti-racism

that made sense from exactly that era which I think of as yesterday even though I was a kid. But yeah, that to me is last week. And then now there's third wave anti-racism which to me makes no sense at all. And it seems to me that third wave anti-racism is not progress. I don't know how you would feel about third wave feminism though.

SUSAN: Third?

MCWHORTER: Third wave feminism as opposed to second wave which is what you're talking about. You're talking about Gloria Steinem 1972 as opposed to the debates that we're having now. There's a nostalgia for that that I think in some ways is appropriate. There was a second wave anti-racism then that made sense to me, makes sense to me looking back at it, as opposed to third wave anti-racism. There's a nostalgia in a way for what activism meant 50 years ago versus what it means today.

SUSAN: Yes. I mean it's almost shocking to me, you know, to think I started in my career 50 years ago or more, 55 years ago, and I'm an old lady now and I'm here because I'm interested and I'm listening, and I still want to work. In other words, I still want to contribute in this country. You're not Philadelphia, you're not Pennsylvania, but I don't live there anymore. I live in the Boston area. I'm now a Massachusetts girl and I've been just delighted to be

here today, and I really would love to find out ways I can contribute in any way to the good of our society.

MANSFIELD: We've got to stop now, but let's give these guys a hand. (applause)

END OF AUDIO FILE