



Whose Fourth of July? Blacks and the ‘American project’

Glenn Loury | *1776 Unites* | February 2021

When we talk about race and American citizenship, we must ask whether the currently fashionable standoffishness characteristic of much elite thinking about blacks’ relationship to the “American project” — as exemplified, for example, by the *New York Times*’ [1619 Project](#) — truly serves the interests, rightly understood, of black Americans. I think not. Indeed, I think a case can be made for unabashed black patriotism, for a forthright embrace of American nationalism by black people. The “America ain’t all it’s cracked-up to be” posture that one hears so much of these days is, in my view, a sophomoric indulgence for blacks at this late date. In fact, our birthright citizenship in what is arguably history’s greatest republic is an inheritance of immense value.

Consider these four points:

First, what happened in 1776 — the founding of the United States — was vastly more significant for world history than what happened in 1619 — the first arrival in America of African slaves. The narrative we blacks settle upon about the American story, the American project, is fundamentally important. Is this, basically, a good country that affords boundless opportunity to all who are fortunate enough to enjoy the privileges and bear the responsibilities of American citizenship? Or, is this, basically, a venal, immoral and rapacious bandit-society of plundering white supremacists founded in genocide and slavery, and propelled by capitalist greed and unrepentant racism?

Of course, there is some warrant in the historical record for both sentiments, but the weight of the evidence overwhelmingly favors the former. [The founding](#) of the United States of America — 1776-1787 — was a world-historic event by means of which enlightenment ideals about the rights of individual persons and the legitimacy of state power got instantiated for the first time in real institutions. African slavery flourished at the time of the founding, true enough. And yet, within a century of the founding slavery was gone and people who had been chattel became citizens of the United States. Not equal citizens, not at first. That took another century — far too long, I agree. But African descended Americans became, in the fullness of time, equal citizens of this republic.

The United States [fought fascism](#) in the Pacific and Europe in the mid-20th century and thereby helped to save the world. Our democracy, flawed as it most surely is, nevertheless became a beacon to billions of people throughout what came to be known as “the free world.” We [stood down](#), under the threat of nuclear annihilation, the horror that was the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Moreover, we have witnessed here in America, since the end of the Civil War, the greatest transformation in the status of a serfdom people — which was what the [Emancipation](#) of the slaves affected in the creation of what used to be called the American Negro — that you can find anywhere in



world history. [Forty million strong](#), we have become the richest people of African descent on the planet, by far.

The issue, then, is a question of narrative. Are we going to look through the dark lens of the U.S. as a racist, genocidal, white supremacist, illegitimate force? Or, are you going to see it for what it has been over the past 300 years, which is the greatest force for human liberty on the planet? That's worth fighting about — with the [Black Lives Matter](#) activists; with [Colin Kaepernick](#) and his cohorts; with the editorial staff of the New York Times; and with officials who will exercise power in the presidential administration of Joseph R. Biden.

Second, consider the freedom legacy of the Civil War.

With [600,000 dead](#), the war brought incredible trauma. Now, people will say the war wasn't fought to end slavery; it was fought to preserve the Union. Abraham Lincoln, they say, would have been happy to see the Union preserved even if slavery had persisted. I expect that this is correct, although Lincoln surely abhorred slavery. But the fact of the matter is that the consequence of that war was — together with the [13th](#), [14th](#), and [15th](#) amendments to the U.S. Constitution, enacted just after the war — to make the chattel, the African slaves and their descendants, into citizens.

They weren't equal citizens, that's true. They were made into citizens of the country and, in the fullness of time, another 100 years, were granted equal citizenship. Should it have taken 100 years? No. Should they have been slaves in the first place? No, they ought not to have been enslaved. But the thing is, while slavery has been a commonplace human experience going back to antiquity, emancipation — the freeing of slaves en masse, the movement for abolition — is a relatively new idea. It's a Western idea; an "enlightenment" idea. It is an idea that was brought to fruition here in the United States over a century-and-a-half ago, liberating many hundreds of thousands of people and creating the foundation for the world that we now inhabit.

This great achievement surely would not have been possible without philosophical insights cultivated in the 17th and 18th centuries in the West — ideas about the dignity of human persons, about the limitations of government, and about what legitimates the exercise of government power over people. Something new was created here at the end of the 18th century. Slavery was a holocaust out of which emerged something that actually advanced the morality and dignity of humankind. In other words, the abolition of slavery and the incorporation of African-descended people into the body politic of the United States of America was a world historic achievement.

Third, consider the astonishing transformation of status for black Americans in the 20th century.



To those who pooh-pooh [The American Dream](#) as irrelevant to blacks, I wish to say the following: “Have you even bothered to notice what’s happened here in the United States in the last century?” When Gunnar Myrdal — a Swedish economist brought here by the Carnegie Endowment to survey the condition of “The Negro” in mid-20th century America — published “[An American Dilemma](#)” in the 1940s, the modal occupation for African American men was farm laborer and the typical occupation of African American women was domestic servant. The median family income of blacks, relative to whites, was about 50 percent. The status of African American education, of African American voting rights and citizenship, of African American access to the professions was abysmal. This is within my lifetime.

Yet look at what has happened in the past 75 years for African Americans: A huge middle class has developed. There are black billionaires. The influence of black people on the culture of America is stunning and has global resonance. Black Americans are the richest, most powerful people in large numbers of African descent on the planet. It’s not even close. For example, there are 200 million Nigerians and the [gross national product of Nigeria](#) is just about \$1 trillion per year. [America’s GNP](#), by contrast, is over \$20 trillion a year and we 40 million African Americans have claim to roughly 8 or 9 or 10 percent of it. Do the arithmetic: We have access to more than five times the income of the typical Nigerian.

Indeed, the very fact that the cultural barons of America — those who run the New York Times and the Washington Post, who give out the Pulitzer Prizes and the National Book Awards, who are at the MacArthur Foundation and who run the human resource departments of corporate America — have bought into the new woke racial sensibility hook, line and sinker gives the lie to such pessimism about how The American Dream doesn’t apply to blacks. It most certainly and emphatically does apply, and it is coming to fruition daily.

Who thinks The American Dream is a fraud? Tens of millions of people have come to this country from every corner of the world in the past half-century, within my lifetime, most of them from non-European points of origin. When you take a look at what has happened for these immigrant populations, you can see that they are realizing The American Dream. This is an open and free society. So, to dismiss The Dream is to tell our children a lie. The narrative that “white supremacy” has put a knee on the neck of black America is simply false. The idea that, as a black person, I dare not step from my door for fear that the police would round me up or gun me down or bludgeon me to death, because of my race, is simply ridiculous. That’s like me not going outdoors for fear of being struck by lightning. The tendentious interpretation of every one of these incidents where conflict emerges between the police and an African American, such that it is read as if it were the latter-day instantiation of the [lynching of Emmett Till](#) — that posture is clearly postposterous.

And fourth, consider what achieving “true equality” for black Americans actually entails.



I am reminded, amid the contemporary turmoil, of the period after Emancipation. There was then a moment of pro-freedmen sentiment during Reconstruction. But it washed away, and was followed by the long, dark night of [Jim Crow](#). We blacks were set back. Notwithstanding this, the early decades after Emancipation witnessed some of the greatest achievements of African American history. Consider that [the freedmen](#) who were liberated in 1863 were also almost universally illiterate. And yet, within a half century, their increased literacy rate came to rival anything that has been seen, by way of impoverished mass populations acquiring the capacity to read. This was of enormous significance, because it brought them into the modern world.

Today we look at the black family lamenting, perhaps, the [high rate of births](#) to mothers who are not married, and so forth — but that is a modern, post-1960 phenomenon. In fact, the health of the African American social fiber coming out of slavery was remarkable. Books have been written about this. Businesses were built. People acquired land. People educated their children. People acquired skills. They constantly faced opposition at every step along the way — “No Blacks need apply,” “White only,” this and that and the other — and nevertheless, they built a foundation from which could be launched a [civil rights movement](#) in the mid-20th century that completely transformed the politics of the country. As my friend Robert Woodson is fond of saying, “When whites were at their worst, blacks were at our best.”

Such potentiality seems now to have been forgotten, as we throw ourselves on the mercy of the court, so to speak. “There’s nothing we can do until America repents of its racism. Our kids and communities are troubled, and we demand that you white supremacists save us.” This is the very same population about which such a history of extraordinary accomplishment under unimaginably adverse conditions can be told. So, I say now that “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” is more than a cliché; it is an imperative!

People will laugh and roll their eyes. But I say to fellow black Americans, “We must take responsibility for our lives.” No one’s coming to save us. It’s not anybody else’s job to raise our children, or to pick the trash up from in front of our home, etc., etc.

We must take responsibility for our lives. This is not fair. Life is full of tragedy and atrocity and barbarity, and so on. This is not right. But such is the way of the world. If you want to walk with dignity, if you want to be truly equal, then recognize that white people cannot give black people equality. Black people have to actually earn equal status. Please don’t get angry with me, because I’m on the side of black people here, but I’m saying equality of dignity, equality of standing and respect, equality of feeling secure in your position in society, equality of being able to command the respect of others — these are not things that can be handed over to us. These are things that we have to wrest for ourselves with hard work. With our bare hands, we have to make ourselves equal. No one, no matter how well-intended, can do it for us.



Fortunately, although black Americans must confront this profound, existential challenge, we have the benefit of doing so while residing in a free, prosperous, decent and open democratic society, which is why there is nothing contradictory or oxymoronic about, at one and the same time, being willing to declare oneself a black freedom fighter and an American patriot.

Discussion Questions

- How would you define “patriotism”? Is it a feeling, a belief, or something else? Should it be considered a virtue?
- Is the Fourth of July an important holiday for you? Why or why not? What symbols or celebrations do you associate the holiday with? Which other important events in American history, besides the signing of the Declaration of Independence, are associated with the Fourth of July in your mind?
- Do you find Loury’s narrative of American history convincing? What’s compelling and persuasive about the story he tells? What are some possible gaps in his account? How would you tell the American story differently?
- What’s meant by the expression “pull yourself up by your bootstraps”? Where have you heard it before? Why does Loury consider it an “imperative” today?