

Why I Am Still Black*

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Good Morning, President Johnson**, guests, students, faculty, and my niece, Treyonde Allen, who sits there among you somewhere. I am very happy to be with you. I am especially happy because I have long admired your president for the courageous battle he has waged against the NCAA [National collegiate Athletic Association] and, more importantly, in defense of us. For we do have to remember those who defend us, both because they inspire us to defend ourselves and because we owe them a continuing debt of gratitude for pointing the way that we are able to follow.

I spent time this morning with Dr. Jones touring Grambling State. It was [an] enormous pleasure because this beautiful plant speaks so well of all your efforts and the seriousness with which you-pursue the educational enterprise.

I am encouraged this morning to think that, as a consequence of what has happened here these—I was going to say these last fourteen years, President Johnson, but you will excuse me, and I will say these—last ninety-one years, that this entire country will be the better as we move into the twenty-first century.

This morning I want to speak to you about a special topic, one that relates to the broad theme of Black History Month. My title is, “Why I Am Still Black.” I thought I should talk about that because today it’s a question today for so many of us—what we should call ourselves. I have continued to call myself black. I think from time to time I ought to explain why, to let people know what’s going on.

Let us remember, as you doubtless do, how Carter G. Woodson originally created Negro History Month. It is not insignificant for us to bear in mind, the changes we’ve lived through as the decades unfold. Negro History Month has become for us Black History Month, and it wasn’t by accident that it became so. Certain victories were achieved when Negro History Month became Black History Month—certain victories that I am very reluctant to give up—and, because of which, I think we all stand better off

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** The "President Johnson" to whom William Allen refers in the presentation is Joseph Johnson, then president of Grambling State University. The reference to Proposition 48 addresses the controversy over whether the NCAA should establish minimum academic standards for incoming college athletes. If those standards (ACT or SAT scores plus high school GPA) were not met, the students were prohibited from athletic participation in the freshman year.

today, better able to present our case and to speak to the necessities of the United States at the end of the twentieth century.

We usually gather in February to celebrate Black History by going through the list of our heroes, and the list is long, happily—the distinguished names that we can recall, or who can fill our breasts with pride as we look back. But I've been reflecting in recent years that perhaps we need to do a little more than just to remember those distinguished names. In fact, I have had a personal experience that persuaded me of this.

One of the courses that I'm teaching this spring is Euclid's Geometry, at Harvey Mudd College. And, of course, Euclid's Geometry is just plain, old geometry. It's kind of hard to give it special political and moral significance in our time; nevertheless, Euclid was quite probably black, and he was, of course, an Alexandrian, living in that original and most successful of all multi-cultural societies. I reflected that, in this course which I at least think is an exciting course, I did not have a single black student enrolled. And that led me to remember that when I have taught my course in moral fables, in which the major reference is Aesop, who was arguably black, I also did not have a single, black student enrolled, and I tried to come to terms with what that meant. And I thought, perhaps it means this—perhaps it means that we don't have to consult a long list of proved, or arguably black geniuses in order to establish a curriculum to follow. Perhaps it's totally irrelevant who signs up for what course. Perhaps it is far more important to know that we have entered into a path of education that is leading forward, not backwards.

Next, I thought back to a historical event that persuaded me still more of this, and encouraged me to adopt the theme I want to talk about this morning. I remember something about Benjamin Banneker that we don't often talk about. In fact, I've never heard anyone remind us of it, perhaps because it's, in some ways, a painful story. But, since Benjamin Banneker could be said to have been the first to initiate the struggle for civil rights for blacks in the United States, I think we ought to remember him.

Benjamin Banneker wrote a letter to Thomas Jefferson in 1791, just after Jefferson had become the first Secretary of State under the Constitution. In the letter to Jefferson, Banneker pleaded for his race. He asked the author of the Declaration of Independence to exert his influence, not only to remove slavery, but to remove all those indignities that black people undeservedly suffered in the United States. He held up the standard of the Declaration to Jefferson and said,

If you really believe, now is the time to prove it.

In writing the letter, Banneker had also sent to Thomas Jefferson a copy of the almanac that he had just completed. Almanacs were a very common production in the 18th century. That is to say, people who had the learning often devoted themselves to the task of producing almanacs which would then end up in people's homes. Folk would refer to them day by day in order to know what the weather was. They didn't get morning weather reports the way we do from comical weathermen on the television set. Their television was the almanac. And usually, in order to produce an almanac, you had to have sufficient mathematical ability, including trigonometry, among other things, in order to be able to perform astronomical calculations. Banneker had just finished such an almanac

and he enclosed that in the letter to Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson assumed that the almanac was sent by Banneker, along with his plea in behalf of Banneker's black brothers and sisters, in order to prove that black people were intelligent enough to be regarded as equals. So Jefferson looked at the evidence for Banneker's humanity, which was his almanac, his knowledge of trigonometry, his knowledge of history, and concluded that maybe, MAYBE this might be evidence of equality.

In the process, of course, what Jefferson was doing, was reminding himself and others of what he had done in his 1783 book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*. In that book Jefferson wondered out loud—whether, in fact, black people really were human—whether there might not be some scientific test by which we could prove, once and for all, whether black people were human. In doing that, Thomas Jefferson ran an enormous risk. He was very nearly seduced by the temptations of modern science, to abandon the moral ground on which the Declaration of Independence stood. For the Declaration of Independence does not admit any doubt about the question, who are human beings? It is our ability to recognize a human being as human, that gives the Declaration its value. To say that all men are created equal is also to say that every human being knows another human being when he sees one. When Jefferson started to flirt with the doubts of Rousseau, and of modern science, to entertain the notion that we can't be sure who is human and who is not, is to back away from the Declaration of Independence. Now, Jefferson was called on this by Joel Barlowe, the poet, who wrote to him and asked him to explain himself. In the course of his explanation he said about Benjamin Banneker, and Banneker's plea, and Banneker's almanac,

Well, it seems to me that that is not final proof; this almanac is the work of a mind of very common stature indeed.

What that story tells us is the extent to which Benjamin Banneker, in order to fight for his people, had to submit himself to the undignified treatment of being submitted to Thomas Jefferson's microscope—Thomas Jefferson's humanizing microscope, if I may put it so.

And that raises a question, "Why should anyone EVER have to place himself in that position?" Is it necessary to defend your rights to invite people to call into question your humanity? And the answer is "no."

It was "no" in 1791 and it is "no" two hundred years later. It was "no" for Benjamin Banneker as he confronted Thomas Jefferson, just as it was "no" for President Johnson as he confronted the NCAA and its Proposition 48.

Now these reflections point to a practical difficulty with which we must deal. And that is the continuing question of how to remain self confident, how to remain secure within the knowledge one has of one's own abilities, while nevertheless navigating in the political and the social seas of the United States—the continuing struggle for equal rights.

Well, that is why I am still black. For it seems to me that until one can raise the issue of color without having color become an issue, the battle is not done. The war is not finished. To run from the issue of color, to substitute euphemisms for color will not do. Nothing short of complete and total victory will suffice.

I was reminded of this as I was reading words of some of the original representatives to the Congress of the United States from this area, that is, the original representatives of color—those who, in the aftermath of the War of American Union, were elected in the Reconstruction period and, who confronted directly this question of color, as they raised the standard of equal rights as one law for all Americans. I was inspired by the reflection that they always spoke unhesitatingly about color. And they were able to set forth with pride, a sense of accomplishment. They avoided every impulse to pander. They specifically said they wanted no favors. They were confident that, left to their own devices, with nothing stronger than the protection of the law, granting them the same status everyone else enjoyed, that they would succeed. And I, by the way, have confirmed their attitudes by my own experience and the evidence I've collected.

I've reminded myself that this school was founded in 1901 and that it was not alone. There are historically black colleges and universities throughout the south particularly, which sprang to life from a supposedly illiterate and ignorant people in the aftermath of the war. I say "supposedly" ignorant and illiterate advisedly, because it is obvious the ex-slaves were not ignorant and not simply illiterate.

It is obvious that, in the immediate aftermath of slavery, there was enormous progress, economically and educationally. There was a spirit of entrepreneurship. There was a development of mechanical arts and liberal arts, to a degree unparalleled in human history. And I remind you, by the way, that when the war ended, there were somewhere between three million and five million ex-slaves. That is to say, as many people as were in the United States at the time of the Revolution from Great Britain, when the United States was founded. But there was, in that short period of thirty years after the end of the war, a greater explosion in the development of schools and universities and enterprises, among those ex-slaves, than there had been at the end of the 18th century in the aftermath of the Revolutionary War. In short, it is perfectly clear that there was no need for anyone to adopt the ex-slave as a helpless child. And if the direct evidence doesn't make it clear, the indirect evidence cannot fail to do so. Because it wasn't until after the direct evidence had come in, that all those laws of Jim Crow came to be placed on the books—to chop off at the knees the sturdy oak that was growing so rapidly. It was the law that halted the progress of black people in America. It was not custom and tradition, it was not the legacy of slavery, the hangover of illiteracy or poor education; it was law. Pure and simple. They had to go so far as even to create separate drinking fountains and bathrooms in order to deny equal opportunity. To hold the freed people in check.

It has been proved in this country that black people are sufficient unto themselves. Given untrammelled opportunities, the obstacles of law removed, there is no denying the capacity for progress. And when you take that evidence into account, then you realize that there is a false argument abroad in the land, which we need to confront. The false argument is that we have spent one hundred years seeking to recover from the effects of slavery and, if we could only have a hundred years more of patient concern, of tutelage, then maybe we'll succeed.

The only thing from which black people of America have ever suffered is tutelage. The one thing from which black people of America most need to be free is tutelage. We are not children in their nonage, barbarians waiting to be introduced to

civilization. By the same token, we are not aliens, we are not foreigners. We belong in these United States.

I want to share with you the perspective of one South Carolina member of the House of Representatives, speaking in 1874 in response to the request from another member of the House of Representatives that, instead of passing the Civil Rights Bill, the United States should simply help the ex-slaves to return to Africa. I want to share with you his response to that request to return to Africa because I think it speaks immediately to us today. This is what Richard H. Caine had to say. He said,

The gentleman wishes that we should prepare ourselves to go to Africa, or to the West Indies, or anywhere else. I want to enunciate this doctrine upon this floor. You have brought us here and here we are going to stay. We are not going one foot, or one inch from this land. Our mothers and our fathers and our grandfathers, and our great grandfathers have died here. Here we have sweated, here have toiled, here we have made this country great and rich by our labor and toil. It is the aim of you now to want to drive us away after having taken all our toil for 200 years. Just think of the magnitude of these gentlemen's hearts, after having taken all our toil for 200 years, after having sold our wives and children like so many cattle in the shambles, after having raised cotton on our labors, after we have made their rice fields wave with abundant harvest, while they were fighting against the government and keeping us in bondage, now we are free, they want us to go away. Shame on you.

There is no escaping, it seems to me, the reality that what defines the black presence in the United States is precisely that it is present in the United States. There have been dark, dark days in the history of our people. But I want to tell you I see far greater triumphs in that history. The darkness is dark enough to be sure, but my mind's eye settles upon the nobility, the dignity, and the triumphs.

I am still black. I don't perceive a need to be otherwise. Most American blacks agree with me, according to a new poll from the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. Only 15 percent of persons interviewed chose "African-American" as a preferred designation, while 72 percent preferred "black." I am very much aware of what kind of victory it was in the 1960s when I became black, I hadn't been black before that, you see. Before then, I was Negro. And when I became black, I became black in the context of crying out, "Black is Beautiful." I became black in the context of calling for, demanding, black pride.

It was an exhilarating feeling to know, finally, that I was not to be defined by someone inimical to my happiness. It was also exhilarating to recognize that my color was not a stigma. Not a matter of shame. When I became black, I became black for good. And it occurred to me, what a wonderful liberating experience it was.

In my studies I have recognized how long in America there has been ambivalence about the question of color. I remember the famous Louisianan, Homer Adolphus Plessy, to whom we owe a great deal for participating in manufacturing that case, *Plessy vs. Ferguson*. Now we, of course, are not grateful for the results in the case. The result was the law "separate but equal." But the case did give us something to which we have clung

ever since and which remains a beacon to us. And that was an extraordinary dissenting opinion by Justice Harlan. That was the dissenting opinion in which one found the expression, “The Constitution is color blind.”

Now I want to tell you what Harlan meant by that because I think there has been some misunderstanding. There have been some people today who say, this language, “the Constitution is color blind,” is just conservative symbols, it’s conservative code words for a new racism. It’s meant to deny black people having their say, having access to governmental remedies for all kinds of deprivations.”

That is not what Justice Harlan meant. Justice Harlan had never heard of affirmative action, so he cannot be accused of being opposed to it. Here’s what he said, this is what he did. He wrote an opinion about relationships between the races that was opposed to the majority opinion. And we can go back and read them and see how these people thought about these large questions. We can count in the opinions the very words that they used. We can see in the majority opinion, for example, that when reference to the ex-slaves is made, the language that is used most of the time is the word “colored.” A few times it’s the word “Negro.” Never the word “black.” Whereas in Justice Harlan’s opinion, the one that says “the Constitution is color blind,” you’ll find that the word Justice Harlan used most often was “black.” A few times, “negro,” never “colored.” That gives us reason to wonder—what does this man mean? He says the Constitution is color blind, but the first thing he sees about us is black. Well, here’s what I think it means. I think it means Justice Harlan could see black without seeing a problem. I think that is what we have been trying to get to. We need to live in a country where people can see black without seeing a problem. And I mean by that all people, by the way, not only white people.

We need to live in a time and in a nation where the expression “black” is not a symbol for tensions, is not a code word or shorthand for deprivations, and where it does not mean poverty; where it does not come to be identified with all kinds of social disorder; where it is, in fact, nothing other than full recognition of the humanity of our fellows. That is acceptance. Some of us present ourselves through varying accidents. We all do. We all come in one shape or form or the other. We all have a look. But what is that look other than the spiritual embrace of humanity?

No, we cannot run from our look. Neither is there any ideological victory to be gained for substituting for our look, some other name.

Black History Month is not meant to be a month in which we dwell upon history. It is meant to be a month in which we learn how to shape the future. That is what I believe Carter G. Woodson wished. That is what I invite you to seek. And nowhere do we work so earnestly to shape the future as in our universities, as through our education. We all are differently talented, but there is not one of us whose talent cannot be perfected. To encourage the perfecting of our differing talents is the one thing we can give each other today that is of the greatest value.

Yet, to be sure, there are continuing legal struggles. You all are doubtlessly informed that the 1990 Civil Rights Act did not pass, but has been proposed anew in the form of the 1991 Civil Rights Act, and you probably wonder to some degree what

meaning this has for you. I will tell you in all candor that I think some of it is overplayed. If you knew how many Civil Rights laws there were, it would probably bore you just to hear them listed. If you had to deal with the reality that most of us don't have the foggiest idea what we're entitled to, simply because there are so many laws that are contradictory, conflicting among themselves and that, by this point in history, offer general confusion. But it's possible to cut through the confusion. We can consult broad aims, broad principles in order to structure our expectations. One of the things we ought to bear in mind, in looking at these Civil Rights laws, is the question, "What really works?" I can say that what really works is to leave people unopposed—unopposed in the attempt to perfect their talents. I think that is the most important thing we have to give.

One of the things I most regret about the 1990 Civil Rights Act was the compromise that put a limitation, a cap, a maximum, on compensatory and punitive damages for discrimination complaints. I hope the new Act will reintroduce damages without a limitation. I have long believed that allowing people to take their case to court, and to win in court full monetary justice for the injuries they suffer, is the best way to put a short end to discrimination in our society. I still believe that.

When the president vetoed the 1990 Civil Rights Act, he rejected compensatory and punitive damages, saying,

I oppose these because it is a tort-like approach that I do not want to encourage, and I would rather encourage the administrative procedures in agencies like the EEOC, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

And I'm here to tell you that the administrative procedures that we have become familiar with for twenty-five years have served mainly to retard justice, to delay justice, to impede people being properly recompensed for the injuries they have suffered. And I've always thought it ironic that those who seek to persuade us that they act in our interest do so by denying to us the opportunity—the opportunities I should say—that for over a thousand years have always been characteristic of Anglo-American jurisprudence.

I'll give you one example of what I mean by this and I think it will, for you, serve to explain the whole subject. In the twentieth century, there has not been a single lawsuit over segregation in schools that has produced, for the winning plaintiff, a monetary settlement, wherever the plaintiff has been black. Not one. There have been countless lawsuits, thousands of lawsuits, a great many of them won by the black plaintiffs. They've all resulted in various administrative orders—busing, consolidation, faculty exchanges, courts taking over the schools and administering them. Not one has simply written out a check and turned it over to the winning plaintiff.

By contrast, three years ago, in the state of Florida, there were three young children, the Ray children, who had been impermissibly segregated in the public schools. They sued. The school district settled their suit for \$1.1 million. Now those children weren't black. Those children were infected with the human immunodeficiency virus, the AIDS virus. They received \$1.1 million because they were segregated. And do you know what? Nowhere in the country since, have there been any complaints of children with AIDS being segregated in public schools. I wonder why!

I ask you, then, to reflect what would have happened if instead of having busing orders, people like Linda Brown had received checks for one million dollars. It is clear that some of the remedies for discrimination complaints in our society, while pretending, paternalistically, to aim for the good of black people have, rather, simply served to delay justice. And one of the reasons I insist we remain black, is because we have to insist that justice not be delayed. We must remove the various remedies which serve only as obstacles and which, therefore, by permitting people to hide behind race, to use race, to use special categories, refuse to acknowledge that what we really are, are individual, American citizens with just complaints, who ought to have the same kinds of settlements everybody else gets.

Justice Warren, when he wrote the 1954 decision in the case, *Brown vs. Board of Education*, explained himself by saying, “that in the aftermath of slavery, practically all the ex-slaves were illiterate and uneducated.” That became the reason for Justice Warren deciding that what we had to do was to educate these people before they could meaningfully receive equality.

What I’m suggesting to you is that there is no way to turn over to someone else the task of preparing people for equality. What you see being accomplished here at Grambling State University can be accomplished here only to the extent that it’s not left for someone else to do. What we have to learn to do then, is to return into ourselves, and we have to use the examples from our past to encourage us to return into ourselves. To gather anew the moral strength, the courage, the will to persist on our own and to triumph by our just efforts.

It is no longer open to us, it seems to me, to expect some day in the future, when the past will look different. We no longer have title to expect from ourselves a change. Identifying with other folk outside of the United States is not going to resolve for us the problem in coming to terms with who we are, where we are

Like Representative Caine, I am resolved that I am not going to move one inch from here. And what that means is not that I’m not going to travel. I like to travel like everyone else, and I fly around the world and love to visit places and see the ancient roots of all kinds of civilizations, but I am not going to move one inch from here in my consciousness.

We’ve discovered something in these United States which is invaluable. We’ve discovered how to defend the claim of humanity. And, having discovered that, we now have to proceed to that defense. I don’t think we can accomplish that defense until we can accomplish the victory I’ve laid out this morning, namely, the victory of knowing that we live in a world, in a country, where people can see black, white and anything at all, without seeing a problem. Where people can refer to color because color is no longer an issue.

The reason I remain black is because I insist on being all-American.