

**CITATIONS:**

**Bluebook 21st ed.**

Derrick Bell, *Racism Is Here to Stay: Now What*, 35 HOWARD L.J. 79 (Fall 1991).

**ALWD 7th ed.**

Derrick Bell, *Racism Is Here to Stay: Now What*, 35 Howard L.J. 79 (1991).

**APA 7th ed.**

Bell, Derrick. (1991). *Racism is here to stay: now what*. *Howard Law Journal*, 35(1), 79-94.

**Chicago 17th ed.**

Derrick Bell, "Racism Is Here to Stay: Now What," *Howard Law Journal* 35, no. 1 (Fall 1991): 79-94

**McGill Guide 10th ed.**

Derrick Bell, "Racism Is Here to Stay: Now What" (1991) 35:1 *Howard LJ* 79.

**AGLC 4th ed.**

Derrick Bell, 'Racism Is Here to Stay: Now What' (1991) 35(1) *Howard Law Journal* 79

**MLA 9th ed.**

Bell, Derrick. "Racism Is Here to Stay: Now What." *Howard Law Journal*, vol. 35, no. 1, Fall 1991, pp. 79-94. HeinOnline.

**OSCOLA 4th ed.**

Derrick Bell, 'Racism Is Here to Stay: Now What' (1991) 35 *Howard LJ* 79

---

**Date Downloaded:** Sat Oct 11 22:31:50 2025

**Source:** <https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/howlj35&id=87>

**Terms, Conditions & Use of PDF Document:**

Please note, citations are provided as a general guideline. Users should consult their preferred citation format's style manual for proper formatting. Your use of this HeinOnline PDF indicates your acceptance of HeinOnline's Terms and Conditions of the license agreement available at: <https://heinonline.org/HOL/License>. The search text of this PDF is generated from uncorrected OCR text. To obtain permission to use this article beyond the scope of your license, please use: <https://www.copyright.com>.

**AI SUMMARY:**

**Racism Is Here to Stay: Now What**

*Howard Law Journal, Vol. 35, Issue 1 (Fall 1991), pp. 79-94*

Bell, Derrick (Cited 5140 times)

35 Howard L.J. 79 (1991-1992)

**Central Thesis:**

The article argues that racism is a permanent and integral part of American society, and that Black people will never achieve full equality. It contends that acknowledging this reality, termed "Racial Realism," is essential for developing effective strategies to navigate and resist systemic racism. The author emphasizes that civil rights progress is often temporary and symbolic, as racial patterns adapt to maintain white dominance.

**Legal/Academic Issues Addressed:**

- The permanence of racism in American society.
- The cyclical nature of civil rights progress and regression.
- The role of law in perpetuating racial inequality.
- The impact of Black spokespersons who undermine civil rights efforts.
- The psychological and societal mechanisms that maintain white dominance.

**Methodologies/Data Sources:**

- Historical analysis of racial patterns and civil rights movements.
- Case studies of key figures like Booker T. Washington and Clarence Thomas.
- References to scholarly work by Kimberle Crenshaw and Robert L. Allen.
- Literary and psychological insights from authors like Toni Morrison and Ernest Becker.

**Findings/Analysis:**

- Civil rights progress is often temporary and dependent on white interests.
- Symbolic changes in racial equality do not lead to substantive improvements.
- Black spokespersons who blame Black people for their circumstances undermine civil rights efforts.
- Economic disparities and racial discrimination persist despite legal reforms.
- The legal system inherently supports white dominance.

**Recommendations/Implications:**

- Adopt a "first do no harm" approach to civil rights advocacy.
- Focus on resistance and defiance rather than false hope for equality.
- Recognize the limitations of traditional civil rights strategies.
- Prioritize survival and meaningful engagement over unrealistic goals.

# Racism Is Here To Stay: Now What?

DERRICK BELL\*

You cannot possibly wish more than I that current events give less vivid legitimacy to my seemingly gloomy title. Unfortunately, it will not require great skill to show that the current status of black people, considered in the light of our history, more than justifies a conclusion that: Racism Is Here To Stay.

More difficult, but I think more importantly, I hope to show that acknowledgement of racism's permanence, far from an invitation to ultimate despair, can serve as an opportunity for new insight, more effective planning, and a more satisfying life for all of us condemned by color to a subordinate status. In this land where equality is the often-voiced ideal, property is equated with both wealth and power.

First, let me follow my stern title with an even more harsh principal theme. This thesis is based on history and replicated with great fidelity in current events. Are you ready?

Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary 'peaks of progress,' short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance. This is a hard-to-accept fact that all history verifies. We must acknowledge it and move on. Armed with a perspective on our society that I call: 'Racial Realism,' we can insulate ourselves from despair based on our subordinate status. We will then be free to imagine and implement racial strategies that can bring fulfillment and even triumph.

My thesis is jarring, I think, because for too long we have com-

---

\* Weld Professor of Law, Harvard University. Visiting Professor, 1991-92 school year, New York University Law School. This is a keynote address delivered by Professor Bell at the Clyde Ferguson Lecture, Howard University School of Law, 1991.

forted and consoled ourselves with the myth of "slow but steady" racial progress. In fact, our racial status in this country has been a cyclical phenomenon in which legal rights are gained, then lost, then gained again in response to economic and political developments in a country over which blacks exercise little or no control. Civil rights law has always been a part of rather than an exception to this cyclical phenomenon.

Because the dimensions of this phenomenon remain uncharted, we who advocate on behalf of the nation's colored people seem trapped in a giant, unseen gyroscope. Even our most powerful efforts are unable to divert it from its preplanned equilibrium, or alter its orientation toward dominance for whites over blacks. The symbols change and the society even accepts those symbols we civil rights advocates have urged on it, but our status remains fixed. Society's stability is enhanced rather than undermined by the movement up through the class ranks of the precious few who too quickly are deemed to have "made it."

The sense of having traveled this route before is perhaps not the worst emotion we may feel as the Clarence Thomas nomination builds to a new and unexpected dramatic dimension. Much has happened since President Bush surprised the nation and, in my view, added deep insult to what is likely a lasting injury to black people by his appointment of a black man whose views — whether right or wrong — are wildly at odds with those of most black people.

While George Bush has been more willing than some of his predecessors to stand up to the sometimes outrageous behavior of Israel, the President would never appoint to the Court a Jew who opposed Israel's right to exist or questioned whether the Holocaust had happened. This is why so many blacks were more outraged about the Clarence Thomas appointment to the U.S. Supreme Court than they would have been had the President appointed a conservative white. It is a principal motivating factor for black opposition to his confirmation. We have been this way before.

In 1895, Booker T. Washington, another black man who had risen from the bottom — in Washington's case that bottom was slavery itself — gained an instant and lasting status in white America by declaring in his now famous Atlanta Compromise speech, that black people should eschew racial equality and seek to gain accept-

ance in society by becoming useful through trades and work skills, developed through hard work, persistence, and sacrifice. Whites welcomed Washington's conciliatory, non-confrontative policy, and deemed it a sufficient self-acceptance for the society's involuntary subordination of blacks in every area of life. The historian, Louis R. Harlan, informs us that Booker T. Washington, in his own way, was a double agent. While preaching black humility to whites, Washington privately fought lynching, disenfranchisement, peonage, educational discrimination, and segregation. It is not even a close question that no amount of private support for black rights could undo the damage of Washington's public pronouncements.

In his biography, *Up From Slavery*, Washington wrote that whites greeted his speech with great jubilation. He could not leave the stage because there were so many who wished to shake his hand, to wish him well. Lerone Bennett tells us that black people in the audience did not cheer. They understood. They cried. Were they weeping because the tactics Washington urged on blacks were bad? Not in the abstract they weren't. Had blacks who produced twenty bushels of corn become the teachers of their white neighbors only able to produce ten, the progress Washington envisioned would have occurred. But too many whites needed blacks as lowly subordinates who had failed, not as models and teachers who excelled. Thus, countless blacks who out-produced whites were deemed threats, not models. They were lynched, their farms burned, their stock poisoned.

Significantly, the most sought-after black spokespersons today are those whose views, whether honestly held or opportunistically adopted, serve to undermine affirmative action and underestimate the effects of contemporary racism — while placing the blame for blacks' ever-worsening state on characteristics that are far more the result of condition than color. Again, their homilies of self-help are not bad in themselves. They are simply grossly unrealistic in an economy where millions, white as well as black, are unemployed. And, more importantly, where racial discrimination in the workplace is as vicious (if somewhat less obvious) than it was when employers posted signs, "no negroes need apply."

For white people whose rationalization for racism is based on its denial accompanied by a heavy dose of the Horatio Alger myth as the answer to blacks' problems, how sweet it must be for them when

a black person stands in a public place and condemns as slothful and unambitious those blacks who are less successful simply because they refused to get out there and make it as HE did — I use the masculine pronoun intentionally. As Professor Julianne Malveau has pointed out: there may be some sisters who think and write like Tom Sowell, Glenn Loury, Walter Williams and Shelby Steele, but they certainly are not getting their share of the limelight.

There is, of course, an explanation why black men dominate the “it ain’t racism, it’s us” crowd that goes beyond superior public relations. The need of whites for blacks who reassure them that they are not racist is equal to their determination to maintain their racism-based dominance. Because the black male as the “ultimate threat” is part of the mythology of racism, reassurance from black males willing to blame black victims for their victimization is diligently sought by whites and highly praised (and rewarded) when found.

Actually, I am reluctant to characterize these black, pseudo “Horatio Algers” as “conservatives.” Hell, I consider myself a conservative. I relied on the courts as a civil rights lawyer to teach the law to the next generation of lawyers, even as the number of black folk living in poverty and dying the same way, continued to mount. Poet Maya Angelou expresses our plight well when she writes:

In these bloody days and frightful nights when an urban warrior can find no face more despicable than his own, no ammunition more deadly than self-hate and no target more deserving of his true aim than his brother, we must wonder how we came so late and lonely to this place.<sup>1</sup>

It is not extravagant to suggest that, given the genocidal nature of our government’s racial policies, black people not committed to planning an armed rebellion are, by definition, conservative.

But the Booker T. Washington of yesteryear and his contemporary equivalents are a reflection of and not the cause of our racial malaise. They comfort whites but should not distract blacks from the real causes of our distress, the real sources of our subordination.

Stated simply, the seldom stated but deeply shared need in this nation to maintain blacks in a subordinate status serves to maintain stability and solidarity among whites whose own social and economic

---

1. Maya Angelou, *I Dare to Hope*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 25, 1991, at 15.

status varies widely. As a result, progress in our effort to gain racial equality is so hard to achieve and so easy to lose — precisely because rights for blacks are always vulnerable to sacrifice to further the needs of whites.

That is why the hard earned progress we make by enacting civil rights laws or winning cases in the courts is so transitory. Indeed, what we call “progress” in civil rights invariably depends more on the perceived benefits to whites of our proposed racial reforms than on the degree of injustice actually suffered by blacks or other people disadvantaged by color.

Lord knows we want progress, and we must work for it on both an individual and group level. There is, for some, improvement that is substantive and impressive. But we often define as progress, change that is more symbolic than real. In politics, it is tempting to look at the number of black mayors and overlook the fact that most preside over cities with horrendous social problems, eroded tax bases, departed businesses, and entrenched civil servants. The plight of black mayors reminds us that we, as black people, gain access to political positions the way we gain access to all white neighborhoods — when the housing stock is run down, maintenance is expensive, and there is every likelihood that past abuse and mismanagement by whites will make effective governance impossible for blacks who, of course, will be blamed for the failure, which is made even more inevitable by the past practices over which black people had no control.

In business, all but a few of our corporate executives are staff people with plenty of public exposure, little real authority, and always at risk when the need to cut budgets is high or the interest in maintaining a “minority presence” is low. We boast that we have black millionaires, but most made their money in entertainment and sports because their talents and skill entertained millions of whites and enabled some of those whites to earn billions.

Even so, we tend to interpret successful blacks as slight but important proof that this society eventually will recognize quality without regard to race, and that our “best and brightest” are in the vanguard of the long sought era of racial equality. Alas, in our hearts, we simply know that is not true. Optimism of this character is easily smothered by the realities of the job market at even professional levels where every institution seeks its tokens, and wants only those

few — and preferably a quiet, complacent and (if possible) an appreciative few at that.

But the evidence of racial retrogression is most obvious in the ever worsening condition of many black people. Their status can be seen in either the dire statistics of black unemployment, poverty, and drug and crime related despair, or, if we dare, we can view these conditions first hand by visiting any inner city area in this country.

Meanwhile, whites, as they did a century ago, are concluding that the country has done enough for black people. This conclusion is reached in the very face of horrendous, contrary evidence. It is motivated by whites' deepening concern about domestic conditions that they view as beyond their ability to control.

Millions of Americans, white as well as black, face steadily worsening conditions: poverty, unemployment, health care, housing, education, and the environment. The gap in national incomes has reached the point that those in the top fifth earn more than their counterparts in the bottom four-fifths combined. As conservative guru, Kevin Phillips put it, the top two million income earners in this country earn more than the next 100 million.

Shocking. And yet, conservative white politicians are able to gain and hold even the highest office despite their failure to address seriously any of these issues. They rely instead on the time tested formula of getting needy whites to identify on the basis of their shared skin color, suggesting with little or no subtlety that as "white people, we must stand together against the Willie Hortons, racial quotas, or affirmative action." The code words differ. The message is the same. Whites are rallied on the basis of racial pride and patriotism to accept their often lowly lot in life and vent their frustration by opposing any serious advancement by blacks.

It works every time. It worked when rich slave owners convinced the white working class to stand with them against the danger of slave revolts — even though the existence of slavery condemned white workers to a life of economic deprivation. It worked after the Civil War when poor whites fought social reforms and settled for segregation rather than see those formerly enslaved blacks get ahead. It worked when most labor unions preferred to allow the plant owners to break their strikes with black scab labor rather than allow blacks to join their unions.

It is working again as whites, disadvantaged by the high status entrance requirements of blacks, fight to end affirmative action policies that, in fact, have helped more whites than blacks.

The reasons for this "Caucasian Commitment" are likely both numerous and complex. But a crucial factor seems to be the unstated understanding by the mass of whites that they will accept large disparities in economic opportunity with other whites so long as they have a priority over blacks and other people of color for access to whatever opportunities are left.

Throughout American history, whites have acquiesced in — when they were not pressuring for — policy decisions that subordinated the rights of blacks in order to further some other interest. One might well ask, "what do the masses of working class and poor whites gain from this continued sacrifice of black rights that justifies their acquiescence when so often the policies limit their own opportunities as well as those of blacks?"

Even those whites who lack wealth and power are sustained in their sense of racial superiority by policy decisions that sacrifice black rights. The subordination of blacks seems to reassure whites of an unspoken but no less certain property right in their "whiteness." This right is recognized and upheld by the courts and society, like all property rights under a government created and sustained primarily for that purpose. Thus, from the beginning of slavery, the masses of whites have supported programs that were contrary to their economic interest as long as those policies provided them with a status superior to that of blacks.

Professor Kimberle Crenshaw suggests that race consciousness makes it difficult, at least for whites, to imagine the world differently.<sup>2</sup> It also creates the desire for identification with privileged elites. By focusing on a distinct, subordinate "other," whites include themselves in the dominant circle — an arena in which most hold no real power, but only their privileged racial identity. Consider the case of a dirt poor southern white, shown participating in a Ku Klux Klan rally in the movie *Resurgence*, who declared: "Every morning, I wake up and thank God I'm white." For this person, and for others

---

2. Kimberle Crenshaw, *Race, Reform, and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in AntiDiscrimination Law*, 101 HARV. L. REV. 1331, 1380-81 (1988).

like him, race consciousness, manifested by his refusal even to associate with blacks, provides a powerful explanation of why he fails to challenge the current social order.

Novelist Toni Morrison provides a more earthy but hardly less accurate assessment of how the presence of blacks enables a bonding by whites that occurs across vast socioeconomic divides. When Ms. Morrison was asked why blacks and whites can't bridge the abyss in race relations, she replied:

I feel personally sorrowful about black-white relations a lot of the time because black people have always been used as a buffer in this country between powers to prevent class war, to prevent other kinds of real conflagrations.

If there were no black people here in this country, it would have been Balkanized. The immigrants would have torn each other's throats out, as they have done everywhere else. But in becoming an American, from Europe, what one has in common with that other immigrant is contempt for me — it's nothing else but color. Wherever they were from, they would stand together. They could all say, "I am not that." So in that sense, becoming an American is based on an attitude: an exclusion of me.

It wasn't negative to them — it was unifying. When they got off the boat, the second word they learned was "nigger." Ask them — I grew up with them. I remember in the fifth grade a smart little boy who had just arrived and didn't speak any English. He sat next to me. I read well, and I taught him to read just by doing it. I remember the moment he found out that I was black — a nigger. It took him six months; he was told. And that's the moment when he belonged, that was his entrance. Every immigrant knew he would not come at the very bottom. He had to come above at least one group — and that was us.<sup>3</sup>

The significance of the Toni Morrison anecdote is its universality. Indeed, it is difficult to think of another characteristic of societal functioning that has retained its viability and its value to social stability from the very beginning of the American experience down to the present day. Slavery and segregation are gone, but most whites continue, as indicated earlier, to expect the society to recognize an unspoken but no less vested property right in their "whiteness."

---

3. Toni Morrison, *The Pain of Being Black*, TIME, May 22, 1989, at 120.

We need to know how whites function about race, but we also have to face up to the fact that those “fortunate few” blacks like your speaker — and many of you gathered here this evening — are unintentionally but no less critical components in the structure of racial subordination. This structure is not only resistant to civil rights laws but is actually strengthened by the presence of laws that enable some blacks to parlay their talent, enterprise, and good fortune, into a success that is both enviable and — many whites and some blacks think — attainable by all blacks.

“You made it despite being black and subject to discrimination,” the question goes, “so why can’t the rest of ‘them’ do the same?” For those who pose it, the question, “why can’t the rest of ‘them’ make it?” carries its own conclusion. It is a conclusion that justifies maintenance of the racial status quo, and opposition to affirmative action, and, for that matter, all civil rights protections offering remedies that might disadvantage or inconvenience any white less guilty of overt racism than Bull Connor or the head of the Ku Klux Klan.

Providing conservatives with the fodder for their anti-civil rights arguments, though, is not the only and is far from the most dangerous threat that the success of some blacks poses for real racial progress or even bare racial survival. Robert L. Allen in his 1969 book, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America*, reminds us that the growing gap in income and status between those blacks who are making it and those who are not, tracks developments in colonial countries where the colonizers maintained their control by establishing class divisions within the ranks of the colonized.

Allen views black America as a domestic colony of white America. Colonial rule, Allen claims, is predicated upon “an alliance between the occupying power and indigenous forces of conservatism and tradition.” Allen finds aspects of this policy in American slavery where divisions were created between field hands and house hands. “Uncle Tom” is the term used to describe the collaborator torn with conflicting loyalties between his people and the foreign rulers.

While his book was written prior to the affirmative action era, Allen would argue that such policies serve to co-opt a portion of the black middle class who, without their privileged positions, might provide leadership to rebellious activity by the black masses who are

now locked in poverty-stricken areas from which their potential leaders have been permitted to escape. Separated from their benighted brethren by social class and economic status, the black middle-class are often objects of deep suspicion rather than role models for those locked in poverty-based despair.

This is more than idle rhetoric. Last summer, a somewhat seedily dressed but quite articulate black man came to my office along with several other Harvard black faculty members seeking the real-life model for Geneva Crenshaw, the heroine of my book, *And We Are Not Saved*. He disbelieved my assurances that the Geneva Crenshaw character was purely fictional. "She thinks like I do," he told me seriously. "I will find her and together we will lead a racial revolution."

He warned, moreover, that his first act would be to return and blow my head off. When I questioned his priorities and suggested that to reach my office he would have to pass the offices of several of my white colleagues, he said that the revolution would have to deal first with all the "black tokens in high places."

Comparing the quite unlikely possibility of a black revolution with the even less likely possibility that real racial equality will ever render that revolution unnecessary, places both dreams of equality by blacks and progressive efforts by whites in a more enlightening (albeit a far more discouraging) context.

History, I am afraid, will look at our freedom efforts as child-like, trusting, believing, and hopelessly naive. Growing up means coming to confess that many of those civil rights battles we thought we won, all too frequently were transformed before our eyes into new, more sophisticated barriers for the ever elusive equality.

All now acknowledge that hopes for *Brown v. Board of Education* and the civil rights laws and precedents that followed were too optimistic. Few here may agree with me that our racial equality goals may never be realized. While we must continue to work hard on individual issues of racial discrimination, we must address the reality that we live in a society in which racism has been internalized and institutionalized to the point of being an essential and inherently functioning component of that society — a culture from whose inception racial discrimination has been a regulating force for maintaining stability and growth and for maximizing other cultural

values.

Deep down, most of us working in civil rights know this is as true as is the seldom acknowledged fact that each of us is going to die. Indeed, there is a revealing similarity between how individuals deal with death and how civil rights activists deal with the minuscule possibility that "we shall overcome." Ernest Becker writes, "the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity — activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man."<sup>4</sup> Dr. Irvin Yalom, in his 1989 book, *Love's Executioner & Other Tales of Psychotherapy*,<sup>5</sup> reports that a principle given in psychotherapy is the inevitability of death for each of us and for those we love. Despite or because death is inevitable, we devise a myriad of ways to escape or deny death's terrible reality. In addition to denial, delusion, rationalization, and avoidance, we resort to humor. We chuckle and agree with Woody Allen when he says, "I'm not afraid of death. I just don't want to be there when it happens."<sup>6</sup>

The fact is, Yalom advises that "full awareness of death ripens our wisdom and enriches our life." He quotes a dying patient who recognized that "though the fact, the physicality of death destroys us, the idea of death may save us."<sup>7</sup>

There is a need for us to deal directly with American racism as Dr. Yalom urges we deal with death. Civil rights advocates and organizations must face the unavoidable truth that this nation's social stability is built on a belief in and a determination to maintain white dominance, that racism is the manifestation of this deeply entrenched determination, and that even a total reform of our economy would not erase and might intensify the need of whites to measure their self worth by maintaining blacks in a subordinate status.

This is neither a prescription of despair, nor a counsel of surrender. It is not an approach without risks, quite like those we must face as we seek the salvation in life that comes when we accept the

---

4. ERNEST BECKER, *THE DENIAL OF DEATH* ix (1973).

5. IRVIN YALOM, M.D., *LOVE'S EXECUTIONER & OTHER TALES OF PSYCHOTHERAPY* (1989).

6. *Id.* at 7.

7. *Id.*

reality of death. But, you may ask, if death and racial subordination are inevitable and unavoidable, if all our efforts and accomplishments will come to nothing, then what is the meaning of life and the worth of working for civil rights? As discouraging as that question sounds, it seems to me that when we ask that question aloud, we are dealing directly with the unstated question that has bedeviled us all along. Out in the open, we can forthrightly look at the dilemma of "meaning" and come to realize, as Dr. Yalom suggests, that "meaning ensues from meaningful activity. . . . In therapy, as in life, meaningfulness is a byproduct of engagement and commitment."<sup>8</sup>

Both engagement and commitment connote service. And genuine service requires humility. We must recognize and acknowledge (at least to ourselves) that our actions are neither likely to lead to transcendent change and, despite our best efforts, may be of more help to the system we despise than to the victims of that system we are trying to help. That realization and the dedication based on that realization can lead to policy positions and campaigns that are less likely to worsen conditions for those we are trying to help and more likely to remind the powers that be that out there are persons like you who are not on their side and are determined to stand in their way.

Here, at least, is a more realistic perspective from which to gauge the present and future worth of our race-related activities. Freed of the stifling rigidity of "live forever, we shall overcome" thinking, we may be less ready to continue blindly our faith in traditional, integration-oriented remedies as the ideal, despite the evidence accrued over the years that such policies seem to work only when it is in the interest of whites for them to work.

It is time that we face up to just how difficult it will be to have a positive effect on this country's continuing racial struggle. Those difficulties need not deter but should give us reason for humility as we pursue programs that no matter what we do are likely to fail. It is the very antithesis of humility when civil rights groups go to court to halt efforts by black parents to experiment with all male schools as a means of addressing the factors that have placed young, poor, black males in a genocidal mode. The *Brown* precedent used to frus-

---

8. Yalom, *supra* note 5, at 12.

trate these efforts has always been meaningless to these young people. Now it has become an additional barrier, a new weapon in the hands, not of the enemy, but of those who should be our friends.

You may think, "it is easy to criticize, but what would you suggest?" At the least, I think we should adopt the medical professions' creed: "First, do no harm." We all know better than to think racial subordination can be ended tomorrow. We need to recognize that a yearning for racial equality is fantasy. Short of the extreme of a too-bloody revolution (we know who would suffer the most), history and personal experience tell us that any forward step is likely: 1) to drive blacks backward eventually, and 2) to contribute to the reinforcing myth many white and some black Americans embrace that theirs is an ultimately successful (read humane) existence.

You will note a seeming inconsistency that plagues my presentation. On the one hand, I urge you to give up the dream of real, permanent racial equality in this country. On the other hand, I urge you to continue the fight against racism. There is — for you, as for me — an understandable desire to choose one or the other as valid. Given the facts, it is difficult not to embrace pessimism, which like it or not, seems valid. But there is all manner of reason to prefer my tacit call to arms, which is also valid.

But it is not a question of pragmatism or idealism. Rather, as a former student discerned it, it is a question of both the recognition of the futility of action (where action is more civil rights strategies that are destined to fail) and the unbelievable conviction that something must be done, that action must be taken.

We must learn how to survive the unbearable landscape and climate of truth. We are challenged by racial conditions to extract solutions from our survival even as we suffer what is often bottomless despair. "Meaningfulness is a by-product of engagement and commitment."<sup>9</sup> This engagement and commitment is what our ancestors did for centuries — making something out of nothing. Carving out a humanity for oneself with absolutely nothing to help save imagination will require unbelievable strength and courage in beating the odds while firmly believing in, knowing as only they could know, the fact that all those odds were stacked against them.

---

9. Yalom, *supra* note 5, at 12.

My friends, I am convinced that there is something real out there in America for black people. It is not the romantic love of integration — though like romance, we may seek and sometimes experience it. It is surely not the long-sought goal of equality under the law — though we must maintain the struggle against racism to prevent the erosion of rights from becoming even worse than it now is.

The racial philosophy that we must seek is a hard-eyed view of racism as it is and our subordinate role in it. We must realize with our slave forbearers that the struggle for freedom is, at bottom, a manifestation of our humanity that survives and grows stronger through resistance to oppression even if that oppression is never overcome.

A final remembrance may help make my point:

The year was 1964. It was a quiet, heat-hushed evening in Harmony, a small black community near the Mississippi Delta. Some Harmony residents, in the face of increasing, white hostility, were organizing to insure the implementation of a court order mandating desegregation of their schools the next September. Walking with Mrs. Biona MacDonald, one of the organizers, up a dusty, unpaved road toward her modest home, I asked where she found the courage to continue working for civil rights in the face of intimidation that included her son losing his job in town, the local bank trying to foreclose on her mortgage, and shots fired through her living room window.

"Derrick," she said slowly, seriously. "I am an old woman. I lives to harass white folks."

You notice, Mrs. MacDonald didn't say she risked everything because she hoped or expected to win out over the whites who, as she well knew, held all the economic and political power, and the guns as well. Rather, she recognized that — powerless as she was — she had and intended to use courage and determination as a weapon, in her words: "to harass white folks." She did not even hint that her harassment would topple whites' well entrenched power. Rather, her goal was defiance and its harassing effect was likely more potent precisely because she placed herself in confrontation with her oppressors with full knowledge of both their power and their willingness to use it.

Mrs. MacDonald avoided discouragement and defeat because at the point that she determined to resist her oppression, she was trium-

phant. Nothing the all powerful whites could do to her would diminish her triumph. Mrs. MacDonald understood twenty-five years ago what I have been trying to convey to you today. If you will remember her story, you will have the essence of my message.

