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Loury's Dilemma

by Edward S. Shapiro

Late Admissions: Confessions of a Black Conservative, Glenn C. Loury, W. W. Norton, 2024, pp. xii + 428, $32.50 hardcover.

Glenn C. Loury set out in his revealing autobiography to settle a host of scores, none more important than the one he carries within himself for his many failures as a husband, parent, Christian, scholar, and advocate for the moral life. Autobiography, George Orwell said, "is only to be trusted when it reveals something disgraceful. A man who gives a good account of himself is probably lying, since any life when viewed from the inside is simply a series of defeats." Measured by this criteria, *Late Admissions* can be trusted.

It discusses at length Loury's numerous extramarital dalliances, his fondness for marijuana and addiction to crack cocaine, his cruising urban neighborhoods in search of excitement and prostitutes, and the lies he repeatedly told his spouse regarding where he had been during his frequent absences from home. Among his five children was a son out of wedlock with whom he had no contact until the young man's college graduation. If there is a hero in the book it is Linda, Loury's long-suffering wife, who knew of his extracurricular activities, and yet made a loving home for him and their two children. Loury's chief regret was the pain he caused her, and he attempted to make amends by conscientiously caring for her during her last year of life as she fought off cancer.

As Loury repeatedly notes, there was the private Loury struggling with his inner demons and the public Loury familiar to the populace as one of the country's leading black conservative intellectuals. His conservatism can be traced back to his early years growing up on the South Side of Chicago, the country's largest black ghetto. His parents, extended relatives, and neighbors had been part of the Great Migration of millions of blacks fleeing the South after World War I in search of better social and economic opportunities. Among them were ambitious and optimistic strivers who believed in bourgeois vir-

tues, established businesses, regularly attended church, and disdained the lazy and irresponsible.

Loury remembers "well-kept lawns, respectable folks inching their way toward prosperity, values instilled and sustained by church, the family, and common sense." "How you presented yourself in public mattered to them," he recalls.

> A man might work in a stockyard, but before he went out for the evening, he knew to bathe, shave, shine his shoes, and dress in a way that reflected his aspirations for himself and for those around him.... There was a line, after all. A line between those moving upward and those sliding back into a sordid condition from which one might never break free. A line between nascent bourgeois respectability and hopeless poverty.

Loury emphasizes the contrast between the South Side of his youth and that of today with its gangs, crime, broken families, ineffective schools, and hopelessness. "There are many such neighborhoods in America's cities, black neighborhoods that must have felt, seventy-five years ago, as though they were on the upswing and that now lay fallow and half abandoned." He is embarrassed as a black man by this fall into the abyss and wonders whether liberal government programs were partially to blame.

If Loury's family provided the launching pad for his rapid ascent within the American academy, this would not have been possible without his own talents: high intelligence, intellectual curiosity, capacity for hard work, and fierce ambition. He distinguished himself academically at the highly regarded John Marshall Harlan High School, named for the Supreme Court justice who uttered a celebrated dissent from the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision of 1896, which found racial segregation constitutional.

After high school, Loury attended the Illinois Institute of Technology and a junior college before transferring to Northwestern University where he discovered the joys of learning and graduated with honors, despite having to hold down a fulltime job. He recalls the feeling of "power and mastery" he experienced at Northwestern "at the blackboard or when breaking down a challenging philosophical concept. It was an intoxicating sensation, and I never wanted it to end."

His undergraduate major was economics which, he discovered, expressed "deep, profound truths about society and the way people interact with each other, truths with consequences that are in no way obvious once you tease out their implications."

While at Northwestern, Loury took graduate-level courses in both mathematics and economics, did well, and was encouraged by his professors to go on to graduate school in economics. He was accepted by Harvard, the University of Chicago, and the University of California at Berkeley, but chose to attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which had one of the world's most distinguished economics departments.

Loury was enthused at being on the cutting-edge of economic research in-

volving advanced mathematical analysis while at MIT. It was made clear to him that being black and from the inner city of Chicago was irrelevant, and that he would be expected to measure up to the university's high expectations. "They're not going to take it easy on anyone," he remembers, "and I thrive on the challenge."

He met the challenge in spades. After earning his Ph.D. Loury taught at several of the America's most distinguished universities, including Northwestern, the University of Michigan, Princeton, Columbia, Harvard, and Brown, and he published extensively in both specialized economic journals and popular magazines.[1]

The term "black conservative" will strike many in the U.S. as an oxymoron, and yet there is a distinguished group of contemporary conservative black intellectuals who have strongly dissented from the prevailing left-of-center ethos among black scholars, politicians, and media personalities. Besides Loury they include Stanley Crouch, Roland G. Fryer, Jr., Coleman Hughes, John McWhorter, Wilfred Reilly, Thomas Sowell, Shelby Steele, and Walter E. Williams. Loury makes clear in *Late Admissions* his aversion to black politicians who have prioritized their liberal *bona fides* to the detriment of the daily lives of their constituents. He strongly criticizes Congressman John Conyers of Detroit for attacking the city's police department for racism and brutality while ignoring the reality of what was actually occurring on the city's streets. "What about the people whose rights are being violated by muggers, thieves, and murderers?" he asks. "What about those little girls dodging rapists on their morning walks to school?"

Unfortunately, Loury believed, race hustlers such as Conyers were symptomatic of the decline of the modern civil rights movement into irrelevance. Its single-minded focus on the racism of whites diverted attention from what really mattered, the internal crisis afflicting black inner-city neighborhoods. He urged self-styled black leaders to stop hunting for racists and focus instead on the real causes and solutions to the pervasive problems afflicting their communities, namely single-parent families, illegitimacy, economic stagnation, high incarceration rates, and low academic ambitions.

By the 1980s, he had concluded that the major civil rights leaders offered "nothing more than their same old bromides about oppression.... Never mind that anybody who looked round could clearly see that their prescriptions no longer aligned with the situation on the ground."

Loury had only contempt for Barack Obama. For him, Obama was a political operator with little knowledge of and contact with black Americans and their history. He was admittedly a skilled "political operator," but the image he projected of being a product of Chicago's South Side and "an icon of American blackness" was absurd. "The dissonance between Obama's claim to represent 'the black experience' and his

actual life experience was just too grating for me to ignore."

Perhaps the most deleterious effect of the modern civil rights movement was on the psychology of its supposed beneficiaries. Blacks would succeed, Loury remarks, once they stopped "blaming the troubles in their communities on racism and start taking responsibility for their own lives rather than relying to such an extent on the largesse of welfare programs." But he feared that blacks had internalized this cult of victimization and had convinced themselves that they were shackled prisoners of outside forces. Loury condensed these thoughts in a December, 1994 *New Republic* essay titled "A New American Dilemma."

The title reflected Loury's belief that the essence of America's racial problems had evolved since the publication in 1944 of Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy.* Loury believed, nevertheless, that government had a role to play in alleviating the problems facing inner-city blacks, and he disdained those who believed that the predicament of America's inner-city blacks were so intractable that they were no longer a problem capable of resolution but rather a condition for which there was no solution. Loury knew that inner-city neighborhoods such as the South Side of Chicago had taken a serious turn for the worse in the latter half of the twentieth century, and he was unwilling to throw their residents under the bus. They were, after all, his people and worthy of respect and aid.

Loury's thinking on race relations was crystalized in the 1990s in response to the publication of three books: Charles Murray and Richard J. Herrnstein's *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (1994), Dinesh D'Souza's *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multiracial Society* (1995), and Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom's *America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible* (1997).

Murray was a political scientist and fellow at the conservative American Enterprise Institute and Herrnstein was a controversial Harvard psychologist. Their book argued that heredity was more important than environmental factors such as poverty and the socioeconomic status of parents in determining cognitive ability and one's eventual place in the social and economic pecking order, and that efforts to boost the conditions of lagging groups would likely not succeed.

While on its face, *The Bell Curve* was not racist. But it could be read in ways that comforted racists. Loury notes that if the book's conclusions were correct, then "the epidemic of black underperformance we were then experiencing may be a permanent and ineradicable feature of the American social landscape." He initially strongly questioned the book's eugenicist overtones, its assumption that efforts to improve educational levels among blacks were doomed to fail, and its empirical methodology. In *Late Admissions* Loury asks forgive-

ness for his initial response to *The Bell Curve*. The book, he now claims, had raised "legitimate questions and we're only beginning to grapple with them."

There would be no backing down, however, when it came to *The End of Racism.* Loury had admired D'Souza's 1991 volume *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* for its attack on political correctness in academia, and he welcomed the critique of liberal welfare and civil rights policies in *The End of Racism*. But he found other parts of the book to be dishonest, historically illiterate, and contemptible. In one place the book said that American slaves were treated like property, "which is to say, pretty well."

Loury was particularly offended by its inflammatory description of inner-city blacks. He believed it portrayed them as "barbarians" existing "in a state of squalid, crime-ridden ignorance." The book, Loury believed, was an embarrassment to American conservatism. D'Souza was a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, and when the AEI refused to repudiate his book, Loury broke his own ties with the organization, claiming that D'Souza had "violated canons of civility and commonality" and was "determined to place poor, urban blacks outside the orbit of American civilization."

Loury's response to Stephan Thernstrom's and Abigail Thernstrom's volume *America in Black and White* was by far more painful to him than his reactions to the Herrnstein/Murray and D'Souza books. Stephan Thernstrom was the Winthrop Professor of History at Harvard and his wife was an adjunct instructor in the government department. They had befriended Loury when he joined the Harvard faculty, but after he harshly eviscerated their book in the November 1997 number of the *Atlantic Monthly* they severed all ties and no longer even spoke to him.

Loury's "The Conservative Line on Race" admitted that *America in Black and White* was "important, learned, and searching," conveyed "mastery of the subject without lapsing into jargon," and was an effective counter to the liberal response to the race question which emphasized white racism and fostered a counter-productive sense of grievance among blacks.

"Racial preferences, minority set-asides, race norming of employment tests, and the like," Loury wrote, were clearly and rightfully on the way out. He agreed with the Thernstroms that white racism was not the real issue, but by implicitly asking, as the Thernstroms seemed to, why the black underclass can't be like Asian-Americans was not the issue either.

Loury faulted the Thernstroms for what he perceived as their apathy and indifference toward the plight of the one-third of the black population living in the inner-city who for one reason or another were unable to take advantage of the opportunities now available to them, as well as for their apparent assumption that government and the private sector could do little to rectify this situation. Their approach was "too

narrow, too inflexible, too ideological a way of thinking to ever produce genuine wisdom about our racial dilemma." He also questioned the methodology they used in coming to their conclusions. Finally, Loury argued that the Thernstroms seemed oblivious to the possibility that, despite the advances in race relations and the decline in white racism since World War II, blacks might actually have good reasons for being angry. The Thernstroms case for "racelessness," Loury said, was "abstract, divorced from the texture of social life in the country ... and ahistorical."

While agreeing with the Thernstroms that racial preferences had harmed blacks and the country, he believed that racism was so deeply imprinted in the nation's DNA that it was "simplistic" to blame blacks for their problems and to tell them "just get over it." Rather, the country desperately needed intellectuals and scholars who, "while keeping their moral balance" and avoiding "the ideological cant of either left or right," could provide a roadmap for alleviating the nation's racial crisis. Presumably Loury did not believe that the Thernstroms could be included among these.

Late Admissions frequently emphasizes Loury's opposition to affirmative action even though it had facilitated his admission to both Northwestern and MIT. It had allowed him to enter the door, he notes, and his high intelligence and strong work ethic enabled him to succeed. Racial preferences, he argues, actually hurt its targeted beneficiaries. They feel no pressure to improve their skills since they are being hired for other reasons, and if successful, they will always wonder whether this was due to their own talents or because of the favoritism bestowed on them by others.

In addition, there is the problem of mismatch. Students are admitted to educational institutions for which they are ill-suited academically, and many flunk or transfer out. Finally, affirmative action raises questions about well-qualified blacks. Did they succeed on their own merit, or because of the advantages accorded to them because of their race? Loury believed his critique of affirmative action would in the long run benefit blacks. "If affirmative action wasn't working," he wrote, "if it didn't eliminate negative racial stereotypes but instead exacerbated them, then we needed to find another path."

Loury saw himself as a conservative, and he opposed the major thrust of the liberal establishment when it came to race. But he does not discuss in depth in *Late Admissions* any conservative programs that might have alleviated the economic and social difficulties of inner-city blacks.

This is puzzling. One would think that such a highly talented and opinionated person as Loury would have been brimming with ideas. He does mention the shamefully high incarceration rate of young blacks as a result of the unsuccessful war on drugs, but he does not offer any suggestions regarding what should be done to blacks (and whites) caught up in the drug trade. Nor does he

examine the merits of school choice and other conservative proposals which are well known to Loury.

Loury's dilemma stemmed from the fact that he was a divided person. On the one hand he believed that seeing victimhood as the essence of being black "was to profoundly misconstrue what it meant to live free. Black American identity was forged in an attempt to overcome racism and to achieve the incompletely realized ideals of the nation that made us. To cling to the very prejudice that we were always meant to transcend, to make it the sine qua non of black selfhood was a horrific error."

Loury's criticisms of Black Lives Matter, the rioting in 2020 accompanying BLM protests, and other manifestations of what he called the "New Jim Crow" earned him the enmity of the black intellectual and political establishment. On the other hand, his belief that it was impossible to ignore race and racism and his condemnation of the "mass incarceration" of blacks won him accolades from the very same "Negro Cognoscenti" that had previously demeaned him. Loury's dilemma of being pulled in opposite directions is the same quandary that faces other black conservative intellectuals.

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1. The title of Loury's Ph.D. dissertation is "Essays in the Theory of the Distribution of Income."