

## **Black History Month 2021: Rejecting a 'New Normal'**

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The dawn of 2021 has brought forward the breaking of one of the highest glass ceilings and the simultaneous breaking of glass windows by rioting seditionists. The inauguration of Kamala Harris as Vice President gave us the first woman and the first Black and Asian American person to become Vice President of the United States. Senator Raphael Warnock attained a similar landmark by becoming the first Black Senator from the state of Georgia. Yet, this progress comes with a cost as we had to lose the only black woman in the United States Senate, forcing two steps backward for just one giant step forward.

2020 was a daunting year for everyone with the pandemic and the resultant economic insecurity. However, these challenges were only magnified for people of color with a flagrant disregard for black life at the hands of those sworn "to protect and serve." As black and brown people united together to demand change, they were routinely met with outrage and dismissal and even more police brutality.

Despite being well past 50 years of the civil rights movement, meaningful change has been both inert and incremental. A 2017 NPR/Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health/RWJF poll sought to ascertain an understanding of the discrimination experiences by members of different ethnic, racial, and LGBTQ groups. The resultant findings were alarming, but by no means surprising:

- Half or more of African-Americans say they have personally been discriminated against because they are black when interacting with police (60%); when applying for jobs (56%); and when it comes to being paid equally or considered for promotion (57%).
- Four in 10 African-Americans say people have acted afraid of them because of their race, and 42% have experienced racial violence.
- African-Americans also report attempting to avoid potential discrimination or to minimize their interactions with police. Nearly a third (31%) say they have avoided calling the police, and 22% say they have avoided seeking medical care, even when in need, both for fear of discrimination.
- Similarly, 27% of black Americans say they have avoided doing things they might do normally, like driving a car or going out socially, to avoid encounters with police.

These findings reinforce the need to demand equality and eradicate injustice and discrimination for black and brown populations. Sadly, however, the predominate media attention in America continues to focus on the Capitol Insurrection in Washington DC in early January of 2021. As a horrified nation watched these events unfold live on TV, black people received a stark reminder of the disparate treatment those rioters received by Capitol Police when contrasted to that of BLM protesters last summer. Worse yet, these seditious traitors proudly displayed symbols of racist hatred [up to and including] the Confederate Flag. For this reason, and many more, I seek to change the narrative and focus on the positive forces which shine as a beacon of change for our nation.

Each February we recognize Black History Month with a purposeful desire to honor people of color who made significant contributions to our Nation and World. We often do so by sharing stories of persistence and ingenuity are common throughout the Black story in America. Enter Amanda Gorman, National Youth Poet Laureate and the youngest inaugural poet in U.S. history. It is noteworthy and poignant to mention that Gorman stated that she finished her poem, titled "*The Hill We Climb*," the night after pro-Trump rioters sieged the Capitol building on January 06, 2021. Therefore, it is both fitting and warranted that I close with a [full, verbatim] transcript of her poem:

### **The Hill We Climb:**

*When day comes, we ask ourselves, where can we find light in this never-ending shade? The loss we carry, a sea we must wade. We've braved the belly of the beast, we've learned that quiet isn't always peace, and the norms and notions of what just is isn't always justice. And yet the dawn is ours before we knew it. Somehow, we do it. Somehow, we've weathered and witnessed a nation that isn't broken, but simply unfinished. We the successors of a country and a time where a skinny Black girl descended from slaves and raised by a single mother can dream of becoming president only to find herself reciting for one.*

*And yes, we are far from polished. Far from pristine. But that doesn't mean we are striving to form a union that is perfect. We are striving to forge a union with purpose, to compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters and conditions of man.*

*And so we lift our gazes not to what stands between us, but what stands before us. We close the divide because we know, to put our future first, we must first put our differences aside. We lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another. We seek harm to none and harmony for all. Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true, that even as we grieved, we grew, that even as we hurt, we hoped, that even as we tired, we tried, that we'll forever be tied together, victorious. Not because we will never again know defeat, but because we will never again sow division. Scripture tells us to envision that everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree and no one shall make them afraid. If we're to live up to our own time, then victory won't lie in the blade.*

*But in all the bridges we've made, that is the promise to glade, the hill we climb. If only we dare. It's because being American is more than a pride we inherit, it's the past we step into and how we repair it. We've seen a force that would shatter our nation rather than share it. Would destroy our country if it meant delaying democracy. And this effort very nearly succeeded.*

*But while democracy can be periodically delayed, it can never be permanently defeated. In this truth, in this faith we trust. For while we have our eyes on the future, history has its eyes on us. This is the era of just redemption we feared at its inception. We did not feel prepared to be the heirs of such a terrifying hour but within it we found the power to author a new chapter. To offer hope and laughter to ourselves.*

*So while once we asked, how could we possibly prevail over catastrophe? Now we assert, how could catastrophe possibly prevail over us? We will not march back to what was, but move to what shall be. A country that is bruised but whole, benevolent but bold, fierce and free. We will not be turned around or interrupted by intimidation, because we know our inaction and inertia will be the inheritance of the next generation. Our blunders become their burdens.*

*But one thing is certain, if we merge mercy with might, and might with right, then love becomes our legacy, and change our children's birthright. So, let us leave behind a country better than the one we were left with. Every breath from my bronze-pounded chest, we will raise this wounded world into a wondrous one. We will rise from the gold-limbed hills of the west. We will rise from the windswept northeast, where our forefathers first realized revolution. We will rise from the lake-rimmed cities of the midwestern states. We will rise from the sunbaked south. We will rebuild, reconcile and recover. And every known nook of our nation and every corner called our country, our people diverse and beautiful will emerge, battered and beautiful.*

*When day comes, we step out of the shade, aflame and unafraid, the new dawn blooms as we free it. For there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it. If only we're brave enough to be it.*

Respectfully Submitted,



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