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ADDRESSING STRUCTURAL RACISM IN AMERICA'S PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTIONS
A FIRESIDE CHAT WITH REPRESENTATIVE HAKEEM JEFFRIES (D-NY)

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Welcoming Remarks:

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Conversation:

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REPRESENTATIVE HAKEEM JEFFRIES (D-NY)
Chairman, House Democratic Caucus
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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. GAYER: Good morning, everybody.

AUDIENCE: Good morning.

MR. GAYER: For those who don't know, my name is Ted Gayer. I am the executive vice president here at Brookings and I'm delighted to see all of you here. I also want to give a special welcome to some students that we have here from the Richard Wright Public Charter School for Journalism and Media Arts, which is located here in D.C. And if you get a chance after the event, we have an exhibition of some of their art in our cafeteria right down the front hall of the building, so I would encourage you to go take a look. And thank you for those students for their contributions and for being here today.

It's February. It hasn't felt like that the last few days necessarily, but February means Black History Month and we at Brookings are very proud to be celebrating Black History Month. Throughout this month and, indeed, throughout the year our scholars will explore the intersection of race and public policy from a whole host of issues, including banking and housing, education, social mobility, and the list goes on.

I am particularly honored today to welcome Congressman Hakeem Jeffries, a man who needs no introduction. Among other reasons, he's achieved a little bit of superstar status for reciting lyrics from the Notorious B.I.G. on the Senate floor during the impeachment proceedings. Just as an aside, I tried to win credibility with my teenaged son yesterday by saying I am going to be referencing Notorious B.I.G. (Laughter) His immediate response, without skipping a beat, I hope nobody takes offense to this, was, oh, that's the rapper from a long time ago. (Laughter) I'm like, I can't win.

Anyway, Congressman Jeffries is currently serving his fourth term in the House of Representatives, representing the Eighth District of New York; I'm also proud to say my birth home place, Brooklyn, New York. He is the chairman of the House Democratic Caucus where he is the fifth highest ranking Democrat in the House. He is also a member of the Judiciary and Budget Committees.

He has been a tireless advocate for social and economic justice. Since arriving in Congress, he has been at the forefront of a wide range of important issues, such as combatting voter suppression, developing meaningful police reform, and expanding economic opportunity for all

Americans.

He has also been committed to working in a bipartisan manner. In 2018, he worked across the aisle as the lead Democratic sponsor, partnering with Republican Congressman Doug Collins and working with the White House, to help pass the First Step Act, considered the most far-reaching criminal justice reform passed in at least a decade.

I'm also delighted this morning to welcome my colleague Rashawn Ray, who is the moderator for today's conversation. Rashawn is a member of our newest class of Rubenstein fellows. He's also an associate professor of sociology and the executive director of the Lab for Applied Social Science Research at the University of Maryland. He, before the event, promised me a tour, so I'm going to take you up on that.

In preparing my remarks, we also have something else in common. Rashawn and I were both Robert Wood Johnson scholars as the same place, at the University of California, although I think mine was probably 20 years before, but that's okay.

Rashawn is also one of the co-editors of Contexts magazine. His research addresses the mechanisms that manufacture and maintain racial and social inequality with a particular focus on police-civilian relations and men's treatment of women.

So with those introductions, I would ask that you please join me in welcoming Congressman Hakeem Jeffries and Rashawn Ray to the stage. Thank you again for being here. (Applause)

MR. RAY: All right. So thank you, Ted, for that warm introduction. Thank everyone for being here this morning. We especially thank the congressman. Of course, as people know, everything that he's been doing over the past several weeks, we were talking about running on adrenaline and not having a lot of sleep. So we definitely appreciate the time.

We definitely appreciate Richard Wright Public Charter School being here. Thank you all for being here to support this event.

We're going to try and cover about five topics and then we're going to have time to open it up for Q&A. So I want to start with actually some commonalities we have that we were talking about

earlier.

So we both have sons that's named Jeremiah. We have a love for hip-hop. We are members of Black Greek letter organizations. We obviously think about focusing on criminal justice reform. We're both Leos. (Laughter) All these things kind of in common. Talk about our zodiac signs a bit. And then you have a brother that's a professor and I have an uncle who's a professor and I'm a professor, so obviously you have this care and concern for academic research and rigor, and we were talking about that.

So I'm kind of curious in thinking about that, given this legacy and how do we think about Black civic organizations with kind of the kickoff of Black History Month of 2020, 401 years after kind of the key pinnacle point that Africans were brought over as enslaved people? How do you kind of think about the legacy of Black civic organizations, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and kind of the legacy of Black Americans for the world?

CONGRESSMAN JEFFRIES: Yeah. Well, good morning, everyone. It's great to be here and thank you, Ted, for your opening remarks. It's good to be here at Brookings and, Rashawn, great to be with you on -- to participate in this discussion. And, of course, to the students from Richard Wright, good to see you here and appreciate all that you're doing.

So my view generally has been about the moment that we're in. And a lot of people, you know, have understandable anxiety within Black America, outside of Black America in terms of what's happening in this country, but putting it in the context of the journey that we've traveled. What's been interesting for me is the notion that whenever America has made meaningful progress, you know, on the question of racial social justice in particular, it's almost always been followed by an immediate backlash, and it seems to me that we're in a backlash moment right now.

And when you look at sort of America and its founding and you referenced, you know, 1619, of course, and we're still inside of the 400th year, which effectively started in August of 2019. But if you look at the founding of the republic, and, you know, it was founded on high ideals, incredible ideals -- separate and co-equal branches of government, the independent judiciary, the free and fair press, the preeminence of the rule of law, checks and balances, all men are created equally, things of this nature --

but, you know, the framers, who were brilliants individuals, of course, were also flawed individuals and human beings. All of us are flawed in a variety of different ways, and America was founded with a genetic birth defect on the question of race, manifested in chattel slavery. Right? One of the worst crimes ever committed in the history of the world.

And so we deal with chattel slavery beginning with emancipation and then the Reconstruction era. And that's significant progress for, you know, a republic that at that point still wasn't even 100 years old. And the Thirteenth Amendment outlawed the slavery; Fourteenth Amendment, equal protection under the law; Fifteenth Amendment guaranteeing the right to vote, at least theoretically for African American men, regardless of race. And that Reconstruction period, I think, 1865 to 1878, significant progress.

But then the North pulls out of the South and immediately, right, Jim Crow descends on the land. Plessy v. Ferguson is decided, effectively legalizing separate and unequal. You've got the rise of the KKK, a lynching epidemic, the imposition of the Black Codes. So progress that was meaningful coming out of a period of enslavement, followed by immediate backlash that almost lasted 100 years.

And then a new generation rises up, Thurgood Marshall, Rosa Parks, Dr. King, John Lewis, so many people of different races, religions, ethnicities come together to try to move America forward. And so you have obviously Brown v. Board of Education that reverses Plessy v. Ferguson, I think in 1954, and, you know, started the civil rights movement. Rosa Parks sits down, the rest of us can stand up into the civil rights era. The Civil Rights Act, Voting Rights Act, Medicare, Medicaid, Great Society, Head Start, all of this tremendous progress culminating with the 1968 Fair Housing Act.

And then all, of a sudden, in '68, everything changes. Right? In April, King is assassinated. In June, after winning the California primary, probably on his way to the White House, Robert F. Kennedy is assassinated. And then in November, Richard Nixon is elected, running in part on the anxiety in some parts of America to the progress that had just been made. Progress followed by an immediate backlash.

And then you have, you know, rise of anti-government, anti-affirmative action, anti-busing, and of course, in 1971, the start of mass incarceration when Richard Nixon declares drug abuse

public enemy number 1. At the time I think there were less than 350,000 people incarcerated in America; today, 2.2 million disproportionately Black and Latino. And you've got that accentuated with, you know, the election of Ronald Reagan, doubling and tripling down on anti-government activity, disproportionately impacting communities of color.

And then a new hope emerges with the election of Barack Obama, right, 44th president. That's my new favorite number, by the way. (Laughter) And so he gets elected and then some people say this is the beginning of a post-racial America. You all remember that, a post-racial America? That was the thought. But had you put it all in context, you would have realized, no, no, this is the beginning of a backlash moment. And immediately you saw that in 2010, the rise of the so-called Tea Party movement, we want our country back. Who took it away? But that's what they were saying, we want our country back.

And in 2013, you had the Supreme Court decimate the Voting Rights Act in Holder v. Shelby County, Shelby v. Holder, and, you know, reverse in significant measure the progress that had been made in 1965 with the Voting Rights Act, which was designed to correct the flaws in the Fifteenth Amendment. And then, of course, the backlash, many would argue, was complete in 2016 with the election of the current president, diametrically opposed to the previous one and someone who basically jumpstarted his campaign, you know, arguing or perpetrating the racist line that Barack Obama was not born in the United States of America. So progress followed by backlash.

So when I talk to African Americans throughout the country, I say you have to put our moment in that context. But the hope of it all is that every time we've been in a backlash moment, a new generation of Americans has always risen up to keep pushing the country forward. And that's what's required now for people of good will, African American, white, Latino, Asian, Native American, you know, the gorgeous mosaic of the American people.

MR. RAY: Yeah, I really appreciate that important history and the way you put it. It was very profound. I mean, in fact, one of the statement you said, you said America was born with a genetic birth defect. I mean, I think that is a great way to think about it.

And thinking about 2016, at the University of Maryland I taught a course, graded a course

called “Why Are We Still Talking About Race When Obama Was Elected?” And then when we finally got around to teaching the course in 2016, everybody was like we need to change the title. Like everybody knows. That’s why we’re sitting up here having this particular conversation.

So I’m curious in this context, given this history, one of the ways I’ve always thought about it is the progress that Black Americans have made in such a short period of time given this history is remarkable. But yet, we don’t necessarily talk about it that way. And we also know that Black Americans are the only group to have been systematically discriminated against by the federal government’s backing to have not received some type of atonement or what we call reparations for that.

I mean, Jews in the Holocaust did; Jewish Americans are still receiving payments. We have Native Americans who receive payments. We have Japanese Americans who were interned during World War II who have. African Americans were promised their 40 acres and a mule, never received it. And, of course, we can talk about the Freedmen’s Bureau. I mean, we can talk about the Homestead Act. We can talk about a series of things.

I’m curious how you think about reparations. And one of the ways that my colleague here at Brookings, Andre Perry and I have been talking about it is really thinking about education and housing to kind of build wealth opportunities. And I’m curious what your thoughts are on reparations for Black Americans.

CONGRESSMAN JEFFRIES: Well, I think, you know, Sheila Jackson Lee is currently carrying H.R. 40, which I think has maybe about 120 or so co-sponsors, myself included. And for the first time I think in the history of the Congress, there was actually a hearing that was held on H.R. 40 and the concept of reparations, which essentially would allow for, you know, a bipartisan commission to really study the question of the journey that African Americans have been on in this country, you know, from slavery through Jim Crow, institutional racism, the legacy of it. And to figure out how America can come together behind a solution and what that would look like, but to also make sure that the record, you know, is clear because for a lot of folks it’s not. And that’s slavery and it’s the legacy of slavery, as well.

You know, African Americans were largely carved out of the New Deal. So you had, you know, the Depression and a response to it, but a response to it that only applied to some Americans, not

all Americans in certain instances. And then you had the greatest middle class in the history of the world built as part of American exceptionalism in the aftermath of World War II. A large part of that was the G.I. Bill. African Americans fought in World War II. We know about the Tuskegee Airmen and others, just as courageously as others. I mean, you had the president parading the Tuskegee Airmen the other day. But African Americans, in large measure, were cut out of the G.I. Bill. And so part of what helped to build the greatest middle class in the history of the world didn't apply.

So you had this long journey that I think is part of the historical record. Nobody can factually dispute it. And then the question is, what does it all mean for the conditions that many communities still find themselves in right now? So I think that's part of the concept of H.R. 40.

But I would also suggest that part of what needs to happen is, you know, truth and reconciliation, similar to what was done in South Africa, where there was just -- so that it wasn't just a backward-looking examination. It was, okay, how do we move forward as a society?

Charles Schumer said something once to me that was very profound and I thought Chuck Schumer, my home state, lead senator in the Majority -- I should say soon to be Majority Leader perhaps in the United States Senate. (Laughter) I just spent a lot of time with those senators the last couple of weeks. (Laughter) But he once said to me -- and this was before the current president was elected. This was an analysis that he was making because of the backlash that we were seeing in American directed at Barack Obama, which is that, you know, he's concerned that just as anti-Semitism lives in the soil of Europe and is still in the soil of Europe to this day, and we have to deal with the rise of anti-Semitism here in America. And certainly many of us in New York City are working on that issue with all of the intensity that it deserves. But he said just as anti-Semitism for thousands of years lives in the soil of Europe, he's concerned that racism may live in the soil of America.

And that's connected to something that I brought up, which is that genetic birth defect. Now, that's not to say tremendous progress hasn't been made. You know, year after year, decade after decade, century after century, we've come a long way. But, you know, some notion of truth and reconciliation, how do we move forward toward a more perfect union, I think has got to be part of any conversation connected to H.R. 40.

MR. RAY: Yeah. I mean, you bring up some amazing points. I mean, first, what made me think about it, I spent -- I had the luxury to spend some time in Europe. I was teaching at the University of Mannheim and I went to underground bunkers where they held Jews against their will and you could still literally smell flesh.

And similarly, when I went to the lynching museum, that's what I call it, in Alabama, Bryan Stevenson's museum, and every single county that I have ever lived in -- and my mom and I, we were very mobile; we moved 14 times till my 18th birthday. She's a registered nurse. She's watching because she loves you. And, you know, a phenomenal woman.

CONGRESSMAN JEFFRIES: Hey, Mom. (Laughter)

MR. RAY: Appreciate that. That's going to get me that dinner I've been asking her to cook for me that she hasn't cooked since I was a kid. (Laughter) So I appreciate that.

And when I went to that museum, every county we had lived in had names from hanging caskets. And I remember the sand from the soil from people who had been lynched are housed there. And I kind of think about the legacy of kind of racism being embedded in the soul of America.

And so you mentioned Senator Schumer, so I want to pivot to a question that I know people want to know about and then we'll come back to talking about voting and criminal justice reform before we open it up.

I think many people appreciated the role that you played in the impeachment hearing. I think obviously people know the B.I.G. quote. But the stuff that you said on the floor was extremely compelling. And I think for a lot of people it was accurate; for others, maybe not.

So I'm curious, for a lot of people they think, well, the impeachment was a wash. You know, it happened in the House; didn't happen in the Senate; Trump is still in office. What are the key takeaways for people after the vote yesterday? And your time, spending so much time at the Senate, what are the key things that Americans should take away, and even the world for that matter, in contextualizing what this moment meant for American history and world history?

CONGRESSMAN JEFFRIES: Yeah. No, it's important question. It was definitely, you know, quite a journey and an honor to work with so many distinguished House members led by Adam

Schiff, who did a phenomenal job on behalf of the House of Representatives, of course, led by Speaker Pelosi. And our view from the very beginning was that our job was to defend our democracy at a moment of great peril in the context of the president that we believe had crossed all constitutional norms and in a manner that struck at the very fabric of our democracy and effectively threatened to poison our democracy in the context of, you know, soliciting foreign interference in the American election as part of an effort to cheat. And the having been caught, trying to cover it up.

And if you look at the framers, what they were effectively most concerned about, and Sylvia Garcia said this well on the floor of the Senate, is, you know, it was abuse of power, right -- the ABCs of the highest of constitutional crimes, abuse of power -- betrayal of one's oath for personal gain and the corruption of our free and fair elections. And that's what this was all about as far as we were concerned. We had a president who abused his power, betrayed his oath of office, elevated his own personal political interests, tried to pressure a foreign government to target an American citizen, subordinated America's national security interests which is a betrayal of the oath, and then tried to corrupt the integrity of the upcoming election.

And so to us as House managers, as Democrats led by Speaker Pelosi, this constitutional crime struck at the heart of what the framers were concerned about and is the very reason for the impeachment provision in Article 1 of the Constitution. And we had a role and we believe that we executed that role.

And the Senate has a role and that was to try the case. And, you know, they made whatever decision they felt was best in terms of the Senate. I will say that I found both sides of the aisle to be respectfully listening, even though we knew a significant number of them were predisposed to ultimately go in a different direction than what we thought was best for the country. But in that sense, there was a fair hearing of the presentation.

But in another sense, the absence of witnesses, which is the first time in the history of impeachment trials, of which there have been 15 prior to the one that we just concluded, and in every single impeachment trial throughout the history of the country there have always been live witnesses except for this current one. In fact, the average number of witnesses was 33. Here it was zero. Didn't

subpoena a single document, didn't hear the witness. And so the American people ultimately will have to decide was that a fair trial? And does that result in an acquittal that can be deemed as legitimate for the broadest number of Americans? And our view, at least at the moment, is now it's in the hands of the American people.

And we always had two audiences. We're going to make our case to the senators. And by the way, when I first walked into the Senate chamber I was like, wow, this is much smaller than the House. (Laughter) And literally, we'd be speaking and Mitch McConnell was right there and Chuck Schumer was right there. But they were gracious in how they received us. But it was the Senate, but it was also the American people. And now it's in the hands of the American people to decide what's best in November.

MR. RAY: Okay. So kind of thinking about November, we're currently in a Democratic primary. Earlier this week we had Iowa, and people are still waiting for these votes to come in. So I'm kind of curious what are some of the key ways that voters should disentangle candidates and how should we think about issues? And I'm really thinking about this in the context I've done a lot of analysis on Black voter turnout. And one of the narratives that we always here is that Black people don't vote, which research shows that's completely not the truth. I mean, in fact, Black people have been one of the most stable voting blocs ever since they were allowed to vote, particularly since Black women have been allowed to vote, which you can look at 2016 and look at Doug Jones' outcome. If you look at local elections, I mean, Black women have been coming out in droves. And that's something that we don't necessarily talk about.

And I'm couching this in the context of when you talk to people, and, you know, you talk to a lot of people, I talk to a lot of people who do the research I do, there is a racial gap in how people talk about politics. Typically, when white people talk about it, if they want to be truthful with you, they'll tell you who they're voting for and tell you why. Black people, on the other hand, say, well, if this person wins or if that person wins, well, you know, I'll just go ahead and support them. And it suggests how that narrative has kind of seeped into Black communities to oftentimes make everyone think that Black people's vote isn't powerful.

So I'm kind of curious if you can kind of talk about, first, how people should think about the Democratic primaries and think about what happened in Iowa moving forward to New Hampshire, South Carolina, Super Tuesday. And then also thinking about the significance of the Black vote in America.

CONGRESSMAN JEFFRIES: Well, certainly, I mean, taking the second part of the question first that, you know, it's been empirically demonstrated certainly in the context of the Democratic primary that African-American women are clearly the most important voting bloc in that context and in a general election the most important voting bloc for any Democratic candidate in terms of that candidate prevailing. And that's been a constant strand running through the Obama years into the 2016 election and the election of Doug Jones in Alabama against great odds and many other instances across the country. So that, I think, is empirically indisputable.

And there have been a lot of conversations about whether given that reality there's a commensurate level of, you know, public policy alignment even amongst Democrats. And that's a discussion that is important, should be robust, and is ongoing.

In terms of thinking about the general dynamics related to the primary -- and I should say I haven't endorsed a candidate. I don't have any plans, at least as of the moment, to endorse anyone. First, I was waiting for the number of candidates to get below the number of people in this room. (Laughter) And so I think we're moving in that direction, but we've still got a little way to go.

But my take has always been in terms of successful Democratic candidates it's important to have a forward-looking vision for America. I think Bill Clinton may have once said that, you know, elections are about the future, not the past. And you've got to have a forward-looking vision for America.

At this moment, you've got topline economic numbers that seem to be moving in a positive direction, built on the foundation that -- the strong foundation that President Obama laid in terms of the economic recovery. And then -- but you still have underlying economic anxiety that exists. Not unemployment, but high underemployment, people working jobs that don't necessarily help them or where they struggle to make ends meet. You know, wage stagnation is still a problem. The high cost of a college education is still a problem. Healthcare costs spiraling out of control. Retirement insecurity as

we move from defined benefit plans, you know, pensions, to defined contribution plans, 401(k)'s, and the uncertainty that that creates.

So you have all of these challenges that still exist. And so I think our friends on the other side of the aisle, certainly the president risks overplaying his hand when he says this is the greatest economy in the history of the world. Obviously that's inaccurate. It's inaccurate even in terms of the economy that Clinton had in the 1990s.

But you have this economic anxiety and I think the strongest candidate for us moving forward is going to speak to it. And what's the vision of making sure that the American middle class dream for everybody can remain alive and well? You know, those who are in it and those who aspire to be part of it, you know, and for the poor, the least, the lost, and the left behind. How do you bring them into the American dream?

My thing is prosperity in every single ZIP Code and who can best speak to that. Right? Not in certain ZIP Codes, in every single ZIP Code. And who of our candidates can best speak to that?

And the only other thing I'd mention is that whenever we've been successful in the past, it's always been an unexpected change candidate. And so if you go back to 1960, everybody in this town thought that the Democratic nominee would be the Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Baines Johnson, not the relatively unknown Senator from Massachusetts John F. Kennedy, Jr. But it was John F. Kennedy, right, who -- John F. Kennedy, Sr., I should say. John F. Kennedy, who emerged as the nominee and emerged as the president.

And then in the '70s, you know, there were a lot of institutional senators who were running in the nomination in 1976, and yet the person who emerged was the one-term governor from Georgia, who was a peanut farmer and a Sunday School teacher, but whose message of and authenticity as it related to decency was the right change candidate in the aftermath of Watergate.

And, you know, Bill Clinton was thought to be and his critics called him a failed governor from a small state. But, you know, he was a breath of fresh air, who had a forward-looking vision, and emerged as a change candidate, though no one thought during the outset of his candidacy that he would be the one to be successful.

And then, of course, not many people thought that Barack Obama, the junior senator from Illinois, could defeat the mighty Clinton machine and then go on to become the first African-American president in the country.

So if you look at the moments that we've been successful as Democrats, it's always been a surprise change candidate who's emerged. And so the question is, at this moment, who's that candidate? Right? And that could cut different ways. Some people say -- you know, I think Mayor Pete is certainly trying to project that he's that candidate, and his victory in Iowa suggests that there are some -- or apparent victory in Iowa suggests that -- I don't know what's going on in Iowa now. (Laughter) But his apparent victory in Iowa suggests that at least some portion of the electorate may see him in that mold.

But, you know, Bernie Sanders represents dramatic systematic change. And Elizabeth Warren would represent change for obvious reasons. And, you know, Joe Biden could say, listen, normalcy is change. (Laughter) And I represent a return to normalcy.

So it's hard to see how that's going to play itself out. But we do know that in the context of our history, it's the change -- on the Democratic side it's always been the change candidate who can not just emerge, but win.

MR. RAY: Yeah. So before we open it up I would be remiss if I didn't end with talking about criminal justice. There are several of my colleagues here -- Annelies Goger, Makada Henry, Nicol Turner Lee -- we've been doing a lot of work thinking about predictive policing and AI bias, as well as thinking about returning citizens in particular and their ability to try to find employment.

So as we kind of think about your role on the House Judiciary Committee and how we think about the First Step Act and reintegrating people back into society, we've been doing a lot of work here at Brookings on that particular topic. I think some very compelling and important work. And I'm curious what your thoughts are on the passage of that bill, the strengths, potentially some of weaknesses that can be filled by some people in this room, and then also better ways to create pathways to employment.

And I'm honestly thinking about people like Marcus Bullock who runs Flikshop, who he

tells this compelling story about how he applied to over 40 jobs before he got one. I think most people would have given up at that point. And that is the lives of people who are trying to reintegrate back into society. I know that you're passionate about that and I want to hear your thoughts on it.

CONGRESSMAN JEFFRIES: Yeah. Well, you know, the sort of mass incarceration epidemic is, you know, one of the great injustices. And I think we all have to collectively address in America, you know, the notion that we incarcerate more people in this country per capita than any other country in the world. Right? The leader of the free world is doing that. More people per capita than China and Russia combined. Those are authoritarian regimes.

Disproportionately African American, Latino, poor white, and a significant number of those people incarcerated, the 2.2 million, nonviolent drug offenders. That's part of the failed War on Drugs.

And so our view was that we needed to do something to begin to break that. A lot of work has been done at different states, some blue states, some red states, to begin to try to reverse engineer the damage that was done at the federal level. We thought it was important and important to do it in a bipartisan way was my view.

MR. RAY: Yeah.

CONGRESSMAN JEFFRIES: Even if it just meant taking a first step, a meaningful one, but just a first step. Because for too long criminal justice reform had been wrapped up into a toxic political environment where you had people reacting to single, often horrific incidents and then doubling and tripling down on lock them up, throw away the key, three strikes you're out, tough on crime type policies that have led to this mass incarceration epidemic. And some of it was being fueled by reactionary politics, Republicans and Democrats.

And if we're going to break that cycle, you have to break it together. So that way of the thousands of people who have been let out from the federal penitentiary within the last calendar year as a result of the First Step Act, folks who should be getting a second chance at society, it's not clear that every single one of them, particularly if the networks are not there, are going to be a success story. The overwhelming majority will, but every single one of them won't. Right?

MR. RAY: Yeah.

CONGRESSMAN JEFFRIES: And if you do this in a partisan way, if it's just one party doing it, and someone is let go, as was the case in Providence, as a result of the First Step Act, and then was subsequently accused of murdering someone else, what has happened in the past is that would be used as an example as to why we can't move in this direction, why that law was broken. One out of thousands, by the way. But that would have traditionally be used.

But if you do it together and the overwhelming majority of Democrats and Republicans, and this president signs it into law, who can politicize it? Now you can actually just look at it on the basis of the facts, the overwhelming majority successful reintegrating into society. One or two examples of mistakes perhaps having been made, but you can't, you know, throw the whole law out.

MR. RAY: Yeah.

CONGRESSMAN JEFFRIES: You can evaluate it on the facts as a success story and that's because it's done together.

MR. RAY: Yeah.

CONGRESSMAN JEFFRIES: And so that was, I think, part of what Cedric Richmond and Karen Bass and myself, you know, who were really involved, along with others, thought was important about taking an important meaningful step, but doing it together so you can remove criminal justice reform outside of the political lanes.

MR. RAY: Yeah. I think that's a great segue. We want to quickly get some questions. And what I want to ask of the audience is to ask direct questions. We're going to try and get three quickly.

We're going to start in the back on my right. Oh, okay. Yeah, go ahead.

MR. PERRY: My name is Ravi Perry. I am chair of the Department of Political Science at Howard University. I have a question for not my congressman, but my frat brother. Good to see you. Good morning.

I have a question about disillusionment. What do you say to the large number, at least as it appears on social media, of African-American young people who are so seemingly disillusioned with the

state of the Democratic Party in their view, that they don't view participating or voting as something that is in their interest? What do you say to them?

CONGRESSMAN JEFFRIES: Yeah.

MR. RAY: Hold on, hold on. Let's get three round robin. Dr. Turner Lee real quick and then we'll get one more and then we'll have you respond and then quickly collect them.

DR. TURNER LEE: Hi, congressman. Thanks for coming. Nicol Turner Lee back here.

CONGRESSMAN JEFFRIES: Good to see you.

DR. TURNER LEE: I want to actually segue off of that question and would love for you to answer this. So the State of the Union essentially appealed to the Black vote in a very disappointing, unnerving, and insulting way. And what I would like to ask of you, particularly in your role in the party, is what do we do to get African-American voters to start re-valuating, right, their vote? Because obviously this is now a ping on the table and we matter probably more than ever. If Trump is actually asking for us, then we need to go back and revisit this. So I would love to get your feedback on how we actually increase the value of our vote in this upcoming election.

CONGRESSMAN JEFFRIES: Thank you.

MR. RAY: Well, let's go with those two real quickly and then we'll see if we can get -- oh, one more? Oh, sorry. Yes, go ahead. Here comes the mic.

MS. RISBROOK: Thank you. My name is Autumn Risbrook from Richard Wright Public Charter High School. You talked about how our challenges as Black people, how we still have these challenges today. How do you think structural racism has prevented and overshadowed our success in life? How you said we fought in the war, we basically built the country, but we never got recognized. How do you think that affected us?

CONGRESSMAN JEFFRIES: Yeah. No, that's an important question and I'll start with that and then deal with the first two questions. You know, they're sort of related, but -- and thank you for that observation. I think that is the premise behind H.R. 40 and this question generally of reparations, truth, and reconciliation.

And there's a moment in America now because we're -- you know, we just acknowledged

the 400th anniversary of the first moment when Africans were brought into bondage here in America. And from my standpoint and the standpoint of many of us, there's no better time now than to evaluate the impact of structural racism or, as my home state senator said, racism being in the soil of America and what's that meant, you know, from slavery to Jim Crow to institutional racism, mass incarceration, lynching epidemic, systematic exclusion from things like the New Deal and the G.I. Bill, and things of that nature. And to have that conversation as part of what an American future can look like for everybody and how do we create, again, prosperity in every single ZIP Code?

And that means large parts of urban America where African Americans are, large parts of rural America where African Americans are, but where others are living under tough conditions, as well, you know, whether that's white or Latino or Asian. So we have to do our best to make it clear to the American people we're not saying that this should be an exclusive conversation for just African Americans. But there is an exclusive experience that African Americans have had dating back to slavery that does require an analysis of its own as part of the broader idea for how to create prosperity for every American in every single ZIP Code. And structural racism has to be in the central part of that discussion.

In terms of the two questions about African American participation, you know, it was very interesting that President Trump made, I don't know, five or six explicit references to African Americans. You know, he talked about the First Step Act. Okay. Talked about -- you know, had the Tuskegee airman; had the young African-American student who was present; talked about Black unemployment, which has decreased modestly on his watch, decreased dramatically on Barack Obama's watch; and talked about Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Howard University amongst others. He didn't call it by name, but he called out Historically Black Colleges and Universities. That was an effort led by Alma Adams and Jim Clyburn and others, but he didn't mention them.

So he clearly was trying to create, in some sense, an optical illusion that he alone has been singularly focused on trying to help out African Americans, which was interesting. I mean, it got to a point where I think some of us on the Democratic side, when he said that we have a great American who's dealing with stage 4 cancer, we thought he was going to talk about John Lewis. And then he said Rush Limbaugh. We said, oh, no, he didn't. (Laughter) Right? But the direction that he was going in,

actually that would have probably been the most appropriate thing for him to do in that chamber.

MR. RAY: Yeah.

CONGRESSMAN JEFFRIES: If you're going to talk about a great American who's battling stage 4 cancer, it's John Lewis.

But I think it's going to be important for African Americans to take a step back, younger African Americans, as well, to question and say, you know, in the broader frame who is in office does matter. And we can take it away from the 2016 election for the moment and say we heard this same argument that there's no difference between -- our vote doesn't matter and there's no difference between the Democrat and the Republican.

This was the argument that was made in 2000 between Bush and Gore. And a lot of folks in Florida stayed home, didn't vote. And I think Florida came down to a couple of hundred votes. And whoever won Florida, won the presidency. Many of us still believe that Gore won Florida. But clearly, some folks stayed home persuaded by the notion that it didn't matter because the two of them were the same.

Now, President Bush, a decent man, but his policies failed America in many ways. And you've got two failed wars, one that's still going on in Afghanistan, trillions of dollars wasted, thousands of lives lost, resources that could have been spent in trying to create prosperity for everyday Americans that weren't. And, you know, the collapse of an economy because Wall Street, some elements, were allowed to run amuck in a way that led to the Great Recession, all of this happening on President Bush's watch. And it wouldn't have gone down that way had Al Gore been elected. So there is a different and we know there is a difference.

And it would have been a difference in emphasis and focus had Hillary Clinton been elected president, not just in tone, but in substance. And, you know, as much as President Trump went through a series of things designed to create the appearance that he's the best thing that has ever happened to Black America, he also is systematically trying to dismantle almost every single thing that Barack Obama had put in place, including a healthcare law that has significantly benefited all Americans, but communities of color who are disproportionately and adversely impacted by unaffordable,

inaccessible healthcare coverage, which is a kitchen table, pocketbook issue.

And so I think we just have to use the history that is recent to erase this notion that who's in office doesn't matter and that whether you come out or not doesn't matter. In Michigan, for instance, I think Hillary Clinton lost Michigan by 10,000 votes; 100,000 African Americans in Detroit stayed home. And whether you come out or not does make a difference and who's in office does make a difference.

MR. RAY: So, unfortunately, we are out of time.

CONGRESSMAN JEFFRIES: We can do one more, one or two.

MR. RAY: Oh, great. Oh, hold on, he said one more. See hands. Let's go over here up front, seeing this hand first. We appreciate that. Great conversation. I think people could listen to you for hours.

MS. CARTER: Good morning, sir.

CONGRESSMAN JEFFRIES: Good mooring.

MS. CARTER: Kimberly Carter speaking to you as a disabled American and as a proud Air Force veteran and as a Black woman in America.

CONGRESSMAN JEFFRIES: Thank you for your service.

MS. CARTER: Thank you, sir. I'm curious, in the context of institutionalized racism in the U.S. justice system I read recently that the current administration has put 158 federal judiciaries on the bench. Can you share with us how you look forward in your current roles, how do you look forward to the future with the work that you're doing and that you plan to do seeing that there are so many judiciaries currently sitting in lifetime appointments on the bench when it comes to institutionalized racism in our justice system?

CONGRESSMAN JEFFRIES: Yeah. No, that's a great question and a very important question. And that, when it's all said and done, that ties into, you know, the first two questions about the importance of participation and voting and things of that nature. Because in one of the areas where we can be certain there's a dramatic difference between a President Trump or a President Clinton is in the type of individuals that are being put on the federal bench with lifetime appointments, who ultimately decide a wide range of questions, such as the decimation of the Voting Rights Act, which has led to the

flood of voter suppression laws, many of which have been upheld because of the type of folks who are on the bench and the dynamics that exist.

We've got the question of diversity and so-called Affirmative Action in higher education that is likely to make its way to the Supreme Court and is working its way through the federal court system right now, you know. And the judge that replaced Kennedy, Kennedy was the fifth vote for diversity in higher education. And had Hillary Clinton been able to replace Kennedy, the likelihood is we could be assured that the concept of diversity in higher education would have been preserved, not declared unconstitutional based on some hyperconservative reading of, you know, the Equal Protection Clause. But because President Trump was allowed to replace Justice Kennedy with Justice Kavanaugh, that's in peril. And that's a difference that will impact the American people, certainly African Americans, based on who won in 2016.

And we can go down the line on issues, particularly of racial, social, and economic justice where, you know, there's real concern, and a lot of it will fall on Roberts and Roberts is a Bush appointee, under this climate. But Roberts is also someone who may be an institutionalist and at least in two instances that are recent, the Affordable Care Act where he voted, I believe even authored the opinion declaring it constitutional; and in the context of the citizenship question most recently that the Trump administration was trying to put on the census forms as part of an effort to suppress participation in the census, Roberts said he had problems with it and as a result the Supreme Court decision, it went away. So a lot of this may fall on Roberts.

But it didn't have to fall on Roberts because had a President Clinton been making those two appointments, one of which was to replace Justice Scalia, with a progressive justice, we'd be in an entirely different situation for generations to come than the one that we are in now. And it certainly is the case that if we -- if the president gets a second term and will likely have an opportunity to replace not just a Justice Thomas, but perhaps even a Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, god forbid, that's going to impact everybody in this room for the balance of your lifetime. And that really is what the stakes are.

But, again, to leave on an optimistic note (Laughter), my view has been that America, and the African American experience certainly suggests this, is a resilient country. And that whenever we

found ourselves in a tough spot, you know, we always somehow make it to the other side. And, you know, we've done that from the moment the Republic was founded all the way through to this moment of backlash. And I've got to believe, and I believe this is the case, that as we've always done, what the backlash leads to is a new generation rising up to confront the social, racial, and economic injustice of the moment to continue to move us forward as we march toward a more perfect union.

MR. RAY: You know, and on that note, this is why voting matters. So only 1 percent of prosecutors are minority women. Under Obama there were more federal judges turned down under him than the entire history of the United States. So voting matters for local, state, and federal elections. Oftentimes people just think about the presidency, but it matters for a lot of different ways.

So on that note, unfortunately, our time has come to an end. We thank you for your time. We thank you for your service. And let's give Congressman Jeffries a round of applause. (Applause)

CONGRESSMAN JEFFRIES: Thanks a lot.

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