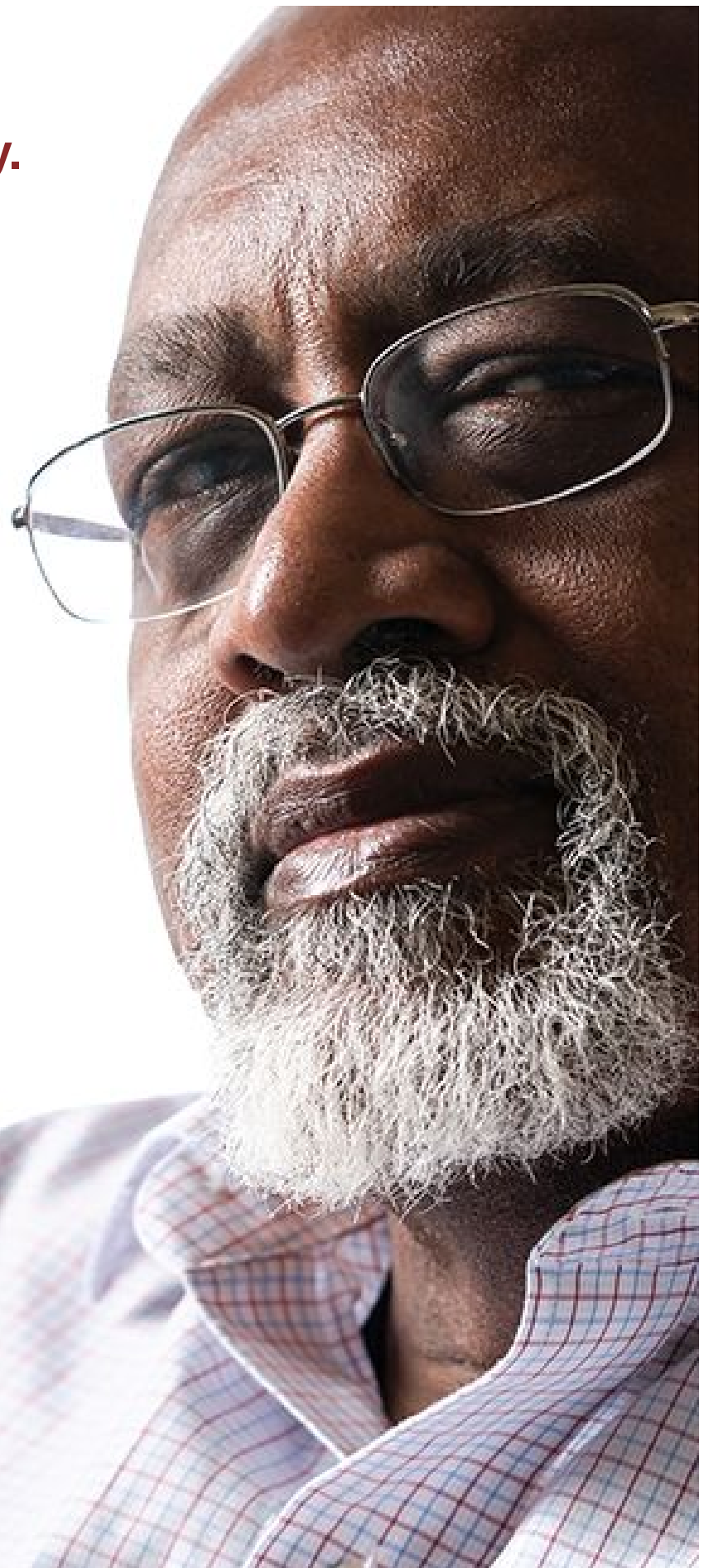


## **'Affirmative Action Is Not About Equality. It's About Covering Ass.'**

Glenn Loury on race,  
surviving public humiliation,  
and being willing  
to change his mind.



June 17, 2019

By EVAN GOLDSTEIN

**O**n a Thursday evening in April, Glenn Loury is talking about (<https://www.holycross.edu/faith-service/mcfarland-center-religion-ethics-and-culture/glenn-loury-ethics-affirmative-action-policies-higher-education>) race, ethics, and affirmative action. And he's getting emotional. "Don't patronize my people," he told an audience at the College of the Holy Cross, in Massachusetts. "Don't judge us by a different standard. Don't lower the bar! Why are you lowering the bar? What's going on there? Is that about guilt or pity?" He let the question hang in silence for a moment. "Tell me a pathway to equality that is rooted in either one of those things."

A month later, when I reach Loury at his office at Brown University, where he is a professor of the social sciences, he's genial and excitable. Ask him a question and you get a litany of names, dates, and book titles. These conversational chops are put to work on his internet chat program, *The Glenn Show* (<https://bloggingheads.tv/programs/glenn-show>), where academics and intellectuals discuss race, politics, economics, and whatever else is on Loury's mind.

He has spent decades studying the black experience in America. His books include *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality* (Harvard University Press, 2002) and *Race, Incarceration, and American Values* (MIT Press, 2008). He has migrated back and forth across the ideological spectrum, from foot soldier in the Reagan revolution to center-left apostate and back again, with the scars and fractured friendships to show for it. He's at work now on a memoir titled *Changing My Mind*.

I spoke with Loury about the closely watched legal challenge to affirmative action filed against Harvard, why becoming the first-ever tenured African-American in the Harvard economics department was a disaster, and how a crack addiction nearly killed him.

**Q: How would you characterize the quality of discourse on affirmative action?**

**A:** Dishonest.

We're sliding into a dispensation where we concede that blacks can't compete academically, so we configure things to achieve titular representation.

Equality is the only legitimate long-term goal — racial equality, not head-counting. I'm talking about equality of dignity, respect, standing, accomplishment, achievement, honor. People have to earn these things. What do I want to do? I want to reorient the discussion around the development of African-American capacities to compete.

**Q: During a talk at Harvard recently, you said: “Affirmative action is not about equality. It's about covering ass.”**

**A:** I'm impugning the motives of universities. We're content with representation as distinct from achievement. If we were talking about 60 percent of the institution, I believe there would be a very different posture in the ranks of administrators, because then the whole institution would be at stake.

**Q: You mean if 60 percent of students were admitted due to affirmative action?**

**A:** Yeah. If we were talking about integrating and achieving some kind of balance of representation in the physics department or in the student body, you'd be putting the entire institution's integrity on the table. Fundamental issues would be at stake.

So it's about covering ass. The university will accede to accommodating the presence of African-Americans by lowering its standards because the vitality of the institution is not at stake, but the reputation of the institution is. This is also an investment in the careers of administrators. If you're provost and want to be president someday, you don't want to be on the wrong side of a *New York Times* article.

**Q: What do you see as being at stake in the Harvard case (<https://www-chronicle-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/specialreport/Harvard-on-Trial/229?cid=RCPACKAGE>) **filed on behalf of Asian-American applicants?****

**A:** The story of Asian-American achievement in this country is extremely powerful, and a reflection of the openness of American institutions. Many of them are second-generation immigrants. You're going to pooh-pooh that? You're not going to recognize what that says about the country?

If the Harvard case gets to the Supreme Court, and I assume it will, the legal ramifications will be significant.

I should say that Peter Arcidiacono, a friend at Duke, was hired by the plaintiffs to do a brief. Eight or 10 economists were asked to endorse the brief, and I was one of them. What it lays out is striking.

If you're African-American and you're in the top 20 percent of the applicant pool, you have a more than 50-percent chance of getting admitted to Harvard. If you're Asian-American and in the top 20 percent, you have a 5-percent chance of getting admitted. The disparity is huge.

Harvard says the disparity can be accounted for by other measures, like student personality. To which I respond: If I can see African-American applicants with relatively high test scores but poor performance on these personality measures not be admitted, and I can see Asian-American applicants with relatively low test scores but high performance on these personality measures be admitted, I'll believe Harvard.

**Q: In 2018, the Penn law professor Amy Wax appeared on your interview show and made some comments about the performance of her black students that ignited a controversy and ultimately got her removed from teaching an intro course. What did you take away from that affair?**

**A:** Amy Wax said that she rarely saw an African-American in the top half of her class, a required course on civil procedure that's taught to first-year law students. That created a firestorm of protest. The dean of Penn Law made a public statement and reassigned her. I thought it was reprehensible that the dean reassigned her.

I've only seen data from the 1990s put together by Richard Sander, at UCLA, so it's dated. But the bottom line of it is that the disparity in the LSAT and GPA index of African-Americans coming into elite law schools is pretty substantial. Amy Wax is reporting that in her experience, the disparities are still there and are manifest in the classroom performance of her students. That is either true or false. If it's false, Amy Wax deserves to be dealt with harshly, because she's misrepresenting the facts. If it's true, this is an alarm bell about legal education and race.

**Q: Is the academy intolerant of unpopular views?**

**A:** When I speak to conservative audiences, I tend to say the charge is overblown because it's not true as a broad and sweeping characterization. I'm at Brown — if it's true, it's going to be true here. And, of course, there is political correctness at Brown and various

impediments to a full, open, and honest discourse. Four or five years ago, the commissioner of police in New York City was not allowed to speak here. It was an outrage. How you govern a city is one of the most important questions of public policy we face. New York City is a prime laboratory, and here's the gentleman in charge of public safety. You don't want to hear from him? That's despicable.

But that's not the entirety of this community. I have a student, a classics major who reads Greek and Latin and is a wonderful pianist. We developed a relationship and have put together an independent-study course that will survey the role of open deliberation, discourse, and debate within the larger project of expanding human knowledge. Things like that are going on here every day. The life of the mind is not dead inside this university. I teach a course on race and inequality to 100 students, and I don't say anything different to them than what I'm saying to you right now.

"I was this conservative bad boy, and  
they looked askance at me for that.  
Now I'd fallen on my face."

Glenn Loury (*Photographs by Yoon S. Byun for The Chronicle*)

**Q: In 1982, at the age of 33, you became the first African-American to earn tenure in the Harvard economics department. What was that like?**

**A:** Pure agony.

**Q: Tell me more.**

**A:** I was in that position for only two years before Tom Schelling saved my life by inviting me over to the Kennedy School of Government. I resigned from the Faculty of Arts & Sciences. I don't know about now, but then it really meant a lot. The Faculty of Arts & Sciences was the center of intellectual life at Harvard. It *was* Harvard. And I resigned!

I had been at the University of Michigan when the offer came from Harvard, a joint appointment in economics and African-American studies, then called Afro-American studies. It's a career-making moment. I'm in my early 30s, I had published a half-dozen papers and, you know, I was respectable, to be sure. But there was no way I was going to be made a full professor at Harvard based on that record but for the fact that I was a fast-rising African-American technical economist.

So I took this joint appointment. It was a mistake. It was a mistake because I was only six years past my Ph.D. I wasn't yet fully established as a scientist.

When I went to my first faculty meeting, everybody at the table was famous. I didn't know if I belonged there. I choked. I'm not blaming affirmative action for this. I'm not trying to make a political statement. I choked. I lost my way. I was afraid that nothing I could do was going to be good enough.

It was a horrible ordeal, a crisis of confidence. It came to the point where I was almost afraid to go into my own office. It was a psychological black hole.

**Q: You say you don't blame affirmative action, but did it play a role?**

**A:** Of course it did. I was certainly among the very best economists of my generation, but usually an appointment to full professor at one of the top two or three departments in the world doesn't come six years after your Ph.D. And usually it comes after you've established a line of inquiry independent from your dissertation. I didn't feel like I had yet earned the respect of my colleagues. I was terrified I was going to fail in front of them. This might be entirely about Glenn Loury and have nothing to do with affirmative action or anything else. When I got to the Kennedy School, I relaxed and flourished.

**Q: In the 1980s, you were a prominent Reaganite, rare for a black public intellectual. This earned the ire of other black intellectuals. Did that take a toll?**

**A:** I was destined to have a toll exacted. My antipathy for and tension with the African-American elite goes way back. There's a class issue here. I come from a relatively modest background in working-class black Chicago. By the time I'm in graduate school, I'm meeting people who came from much more accomplished African-American roots. I thought I was more authentically black.

Their criticism of me as a traitor to the race because I entertained conservative ideas ignores other considerations: I'm an economist. I had the education that I had. I read the books I read and thought the thoughts I thought. It's perfectly conceivable that a person could be a conservative. I don't feel like I need to apologize. I don't think there's anything to explain, really.

*There's been a degradation of the quality of our intellectual life. To the extent that I've contributed to that, I regret it.*

**Q: Is an aversion to intellectual conformity too rare a quality in the academy today?**

**A:** Oh, yeah, definitely. There's much too much herd behavior. But I sometimes wonder if I'm the only one who thinks this.

**Q: Is the pressure to conform more acute for African-American scholars who write about race?**

**A:** Than among whom?

**Q: Than among, say, a white scholar writing about anything else.**

**A:** Maybe so. But do I want to hold African-American scholars solely responsible because there are also white scholars who write about race? Are black scholars more constrained than white scholars? It might be the opposite. But I don't know. This is not something I want to spout off about.

**Q: By the late 1990s, you'd broken with many former friends on the right. You'd undergone a political conversion. Where did you land?**

**A:** There's an arc to this thing, and it's odd. I describe myself today as right of center.

What happened is that I went through a trauma. I was accused of assaulting a woman with whom I was having an extramarital affair. I was publicly humiliated. I had to withdraw an appointment as undersecretary of education in the last years of Reagan's second term. I was a crack-cocaine addict; it almost killed me. My wife at the time, God bless her, stayed with me, and we subsequently had two fine sons. But at the time, I was dying.

I found Jesus. I got my life together. They stuck with me at the Kennedy School, but I just couldn't bear the feeling of condescension. I was this conservative bad boy, and they looked askance at me for that. Now I'd fallen on my face. They were going to be benevolent and take me back into the fold. But I didn't want their benevolence. So I let John Silber talk me into moving to Boston University, where he practically doubled my salary. I didn't need to stay at Harvard. I'm glad I didn't stay, to be honest with you.

**Q: Let me see if I understand the arc: You were right-of-center in the Reagan years. And though you danced with the center-left for a time, you've returned home to the right?**

**A:** That's basically it. I've come to regret some of the positions I took.

**Q: You mean during your center-left period?**

**A:** Yeah, yeah. I definitely regret some of it.

**Q: Were you just discombobulated from the personal crisis of the late '80s?**

**A:** That oversimplifies it, but that's part of it. There was this Hard Questions feature in *The New Republic* that I used to write. In a couple of them, I went after Charles Murray in an especially harsh way. I was mean. I regret it, because Murray has become this personification of evil. Murray might be wrong about the significance of intelligence — I'm prepared to say that he is — but you can't deny that he's an important social critic. He's written books that have had an enormous impact on the discourse of this country. Now he can't speak on a college campus because he's alt-right? Come on, that's ridiculous.

If you were to lead this story with "Glenn Loury Endorses Charles Murray," that would expose me to a whole lot of unnecessary aggravation.

**Q: I won't lead with it.**



**A:** All I'm saying is that there's been a degradation of the quality of our intellectual life. To the extent that I've contributed to that, I regret it.

**Q: What about your views on affirmative action?**

**A:** I became close with William Bowen, former president of Princeton and of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. In 1998, he and Derek Bok published *The Shape of the River*. It was part of a systematic effort to shore up affirmative action. You remember "Mend It, Don't End It"? In those years, I wrote pieces defending affirmative action. I wouldn't disavow those pieces now. Bowen and Bok say, with a lot of data backing them up, that we're gatekeepers to the elite of America, and there have to be some black people among that elite. We're good enough at managing the system to make sure that's so. Trust us.

I wrote a foreword to the paperback edition  
(<https://www.bu.edu/irsd/articles/shape.htm>)

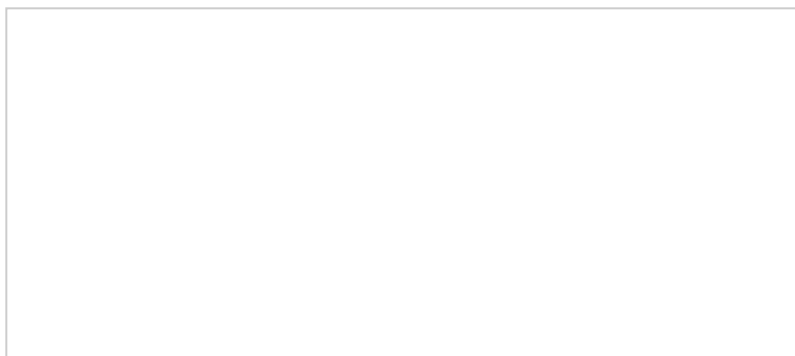
of *The Shape of the River* and pretty much endorsed that broad argument. And I stand by that, actually.

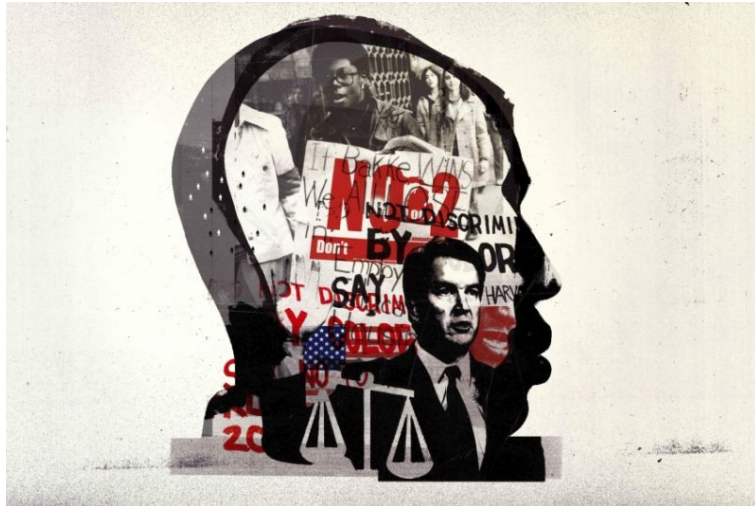
What I would say now, though, is we're 20-odd years further down the pike, and we're kind of stuck, and do we really want to bake this into the cake? I think that would be a mistake, because the long-term goal has got to be equality. If we bake affirmative action into the cake, we're almost by definition making it impossible to achieve that goal.

*Evan Goldstein is editor of The Chronicle Review.*

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

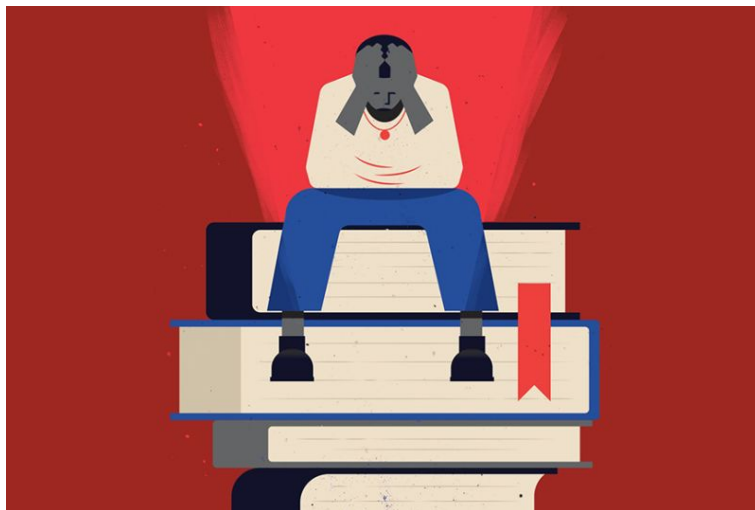
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