



A Conversation on Black Leadership With Eddie Glaude Jr.

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[00:00:02.1] Lana Ulrich: Welcome to live at the National Constitution Center, the podcast sharing live, constitutional conversations and debates hosted by the Center in person and online. I'm Lana Ulrich, the Vice President of Content. In celebration of Juneteenth, author and political commentator, Eddie Glaude Jr. Discusses his newest book, *We are the Leaders* we have been looking for, that explores how ordinary people through the examples of leading black Americans like Martin Luther King Jr. Malcolm X and Ella Baker, have the capacity to achieve a more just, and more perfect democracy. Tom Donnelly, chief content officer at the National Constitution Center, hosts the discussion. Here's Tom to get the conversation started.

[00:00:45.5] Thomas Donnelly: Hello friends, and welcome to the National Constitution Center and to today's convening of America's Town Hall. And, of course, happy Juneteenth to all of you. I'm Tom Donnelly, the Chief Content Officer at the National Constitution Center, and I'm so excited to be with you here today. I can't wait for this discussion. Dr. Eddie Glaude Jr. Is the James S. McDonald Distinguished University Professor of African American Studies at Princeton University. He's a New York Times bestselling author and a former president of the American Academy of Religion. He's also on the Morehouse College Board of Trustees and frequently appears in the media as a columnist for Time Magazine and as an MSNBC contributor. His most recent and, might I add, magnificent, inspiring, challenging book is *We Are the Leaders We Have Been Looking For*. Thank you so much for joining us, Dr. Eddie Glaude Jr.

[00:01:38.1] Eddie Glaude Jr.: Thank you so much, Tom. I'm so looking forward to the conversation, and please call me Eddie.

[00:01:45.2] Thomas Donnelly: Oh, excellent. Well, Eddie, thank you. Today, as I said, today is obviously Juneteenth. So maybe before we turn to your powerful new book, let's begin there. Can you just tell us a little bit about the importance of this day?

[00:01:55.1] Eddie Glaude Jr.: Well, I think it's an extraordinary day on the nation's celebratory calendar in the fact that it allows us to focus on the history of slavery and our very vexed and complicated journey around the issue of freedom. And so here we have this moment, what you might describe as delayed freedom, right? Where you have the enslaved in Texas and Galveston, Texas, hearing general order number three from General Gordon Granger, realizing that they are free, although many probably knew, Texas was still in open rebellion as it were, even in 1865, even though it's a couple of months after Appomattox, there is still this sense that the south is still trying to hold on in the face of this. And so what we have here is this emancipation proclamation, January of 1863, 2 years later, we have these folk experiencing the notion of freedom.

[00:02:50.4] Eddie Glaude Jr.: And so it leads us to, it leads me to believe that freedom isn't an end. It's not something that is accomplished once and for all, and then we can wash our hands of it. Freedom is a practice, it's a practice in this country. It's an ongoing effort to instantiate in our lived relations. And so Juneteenth affords us an opportunity not only to think about the institution of slavery in relation to our democracy, but also to think about freedom and what it means for us in this moment. So it's not just a national holiday for black people, it's a national holiday for the country at large, to think about democracy itself. So it's in a wonderful moment, particularly in these vex times that we're experiencing now.

[00:03:31.2] Thomas Donnelly: Absolutely. I mean, you write so powerfully about the legacy and the wounds of slavery in your new book, and one of my favorite passages is near the end, and it features James, WC Pennington, the first known black student to attend Yale. Can you talk a little bit about his experience with enslavement, his critique and what it tells us about the broader legacy of slavery?

[00:03:55.2] Eddie Glaude Jr.: I mean, James WC Pennington becomes such an important figure for me because he's Frederick Douglass before Frederick Douglass, right? He's the first African American to receive an honorary doctorate, the first black person to receive an honorary doctorate from the University of Heidelberg or Heidelberg University, right? And so he's writing and he's thinking, he publishes his slave narrative, the fugitive blacksmith. And there we see him struggling with what the institution of slavery has done to him. And there's this extraordinary moment in the text where he's saying that there's one thing that he could never forgive the institution of slavery for, and that it deprived him of education. It deprived him of the means to engage in what I would call this kind of self cultivation, right? And why is that important? He says, all that I've wanted to do is to make myself more efficient for good.

[00:04:51.7] Eddie Glaude Jr.: I mean, it's just an extraordinary formulation. But slavery robbed him of the tools in some ways, right? He said, I spent a lifetime trying to rid my tongue of the sound of the institution, but there's certain things that I cannot replace because I was not

exposed to them as a young person. So for me, what Pennington reveals in that moment is that self-cultivation is not just simply an attention to reaching for higher forms of excellences, right? It's not just simply an individualized effort. The world as its organized matters. Because if the world is organized in such a way that prevents you from reaching for higher forms of excellences, it becomes a very difficult and daunting task. So, Pennington who came out of slavery, who could not read or write, who had skill sets, but was not, shall we say formed, by way of exposure to ideas in text, right? Makes himself into this figure. But he has to work against the tide of slavery itself. And so he becomes this extraordinary example for me of the power of the human will and the evil of slavery itself.

[00:06:07.5] Thomas Donnelly: Absolutely. But I mean, it makes me think about the fact we're coming upon the 250th anniversary of America. I mean, on Juneteenth. How do we begin to think about that anniversary in light of the history of enslavement in America?

[00:06:22.8] Eddie Glaude Jr.: You know, I'm working on a book right now, tentatively entitled America USA. And what it is, I'm looking at all of the major anniversaries of the country, right? So of course we have 1776. And then think about the centennial. It's 1876, the symbolic end of radical reconstruction, the contradiction of the country in full view. Think about 1926, the 150th, right? And what was happening in 1926 around immigration coming out of the horrors of the red summer of 1919. And you know, the Johnson Immigration Act, what it represented in terms of the nations grappling with its own ghost as it were. Think about 1976, right? And what was happening at that moment? You get that horrible scene in Boston, as children are being abused, and you get the scene of the flag, the American flag, as folk are engaged in this pitched battle over how do we educate, will we educate all of our children? And so as we get to 2026, here we are finding ourselves still grappling with the contradiction, the contradiction that's haunted the country since its founding. Frederick Douglass put it this way on July 5th, 1852, right? He said that there was a reptile in the bosom of the nation that we desperately needed to remove. And here we are still dealing with that reptile coiled tightly in the heart of the country. So 2026 represents 250 years of us grappling with the contradiction that has shadowed, right? This fragile experiment in democracy.

[00:08:06.9] Thomas Donnelly: Powerfully put. I mean, I think that's actually just a great transition to get into your new book. *We Are the Leaders We Have Been Looking For*. And maybe just start for us with, what's your central claim here? If you wanted to, it's a very, as I said, very rich, very challenging book in many ways. But if you wanted to encapsulate what you'd want the audience to take home about it upfront at the beginning, what would it be?

[00:08:31.7] Eddie Glaude Jr.: That we can no longer afford to outsource our responsibility for democracy to others. That we cannot look to leaders or profits or politicians or heroes apart from ourselves. That if democracy is going to be saved, if American democracy is going to be saved,

we're gonna have to do it. And we're gonna have to understand our power in that regard. Now, that's the broader claim. And I try to get to that broader claim by way of my own specific journey through the African American political tradition. And it's at the heart of the book, Tom is a kind of cliché formulation, right? That if we are the leaders that we've been looking for, we have to become better people, right? We have to become better people. And I get this formulation in some ways from James Baldwin. Baldwin put forward the claim that the messiness of the world is in fact a reflection and part of the messiness of our interior lives.

[00:09:26.2] Eddie Glaude Jr.: It's an Emersonian claim, right? We have to reach for higher forms of excellences. We have to become better people by leaving old selves behind climbing that ladder, as it were. And so I'm suggesting that if we don't, if we cannot leave the country in the hands of politicians or so-called prophets and heroes, that our capacity, that we have the capacity to do the necessary work to put us on a right path, on a just path. In order to do that, we have to fight, we have to struggle, but we also have to work on ourselves because the ugliness of our current times, I think, is in part a reflection of the ugliness that's in us.

[00:10:07.5] Thomas Donnelly: I love that point 'cause I do think there is a tendency to try to look at our current moment and think about what sort of structural institutional reform can we make? 'Cause it feels like those are things we can control. But in a way, you're going back to an insight that goes all the way back to Madison. If not well before that. But the idea that virtue and character matters, not just checks and balances, not just separation of powers, but it's the virtue of the people within a republic, which are essential. I'm wondering, what are some of the qualities that you look at that are essential for us to become the sort of people that are worthy of a flourishing democracy and actually capable of creating it?

[00:10:44.3] Eddie Glaude Jr.: Well, I mean, I think we have to cultivate, first of all, you're absolutely right that Madison is at the heart of this, the idea that democracies cannot work if we don't have certain kinds of virtuous people, right? And one of the interesting points about, one of the interesting features of our current malaise is that our characters have been compromised because we're all too often willing to cast democracy into the trash bin, in defense of the belief that some people, because of the color of their skin, ought to matter more than others. So even President Lincoln couldn't be the kind of man that his version of democracy required, because he was all too willing to compromise his soul when it came to the question of slavery, when it came to the question of race in some ways, and it seems to me that that reptile that we mentioned early on, coiled in the rest of the nation, right? It's really about how it corrupts our characters, how it gets in the way of us becoming the kinds of people that democracies require.

[00:11:47.8] Eddie Glaude Jr.: So what are the characteristics? Well, I think beyond basic decency, we have to cultivate the cognitive virtues of being open to deliberation, of being willing to understand when we're wrong, to engage in a kind of experimentation with regards to matters,

right? So cognitive virtues that allow us to be open to growth, right? As well as kind of emphasizing notions of courage. Of being caring and tending towards others, right? So it seems to me, right, let me say it, let me put it differently, Tom, that we have to exhibit the virtues that could give substance and content to a notion of the public good. That means we have to hold back the vice of selfishness, the vice of greed. And that to me involves a kind of other, regarding right, a kind of, as Baldwin put it, salvation is a going towards, but in order for that to happen, we have to cultivate, I think, the value of openness and loving and being loving, it seems to be indecent. Yeah.

[00:12:57.7] Thomas Donnelly: I love that. And I mean, reminds me of a passage that you have near the end of your book about this process of self cultivation. You say self cultivation on behalf of justice isn't about manners, decency, or civility, but about an idea of virtue that American democracy desperately needs because we are drowning among calloused hearts that refuse to change. And I think that's just such an interesting contrast between sort of manners, decency, and civility on the one hand, virtue on the other. Sometimes, if we think of a critique of discourse today, part of it is, it's the coarseness. And as you've said many times in your book, it's seeing the other as the enemy rather than as a fellow human being. But how do we sort of balance, how do we sort of think of the relationship between things like manners, decency, and civility and virtue? It's hard to figure out exactly how we resolve that tension.

[00:13:46.5] Eddie Glaude Jr.: Well, part of what I was trying to do at that moment was to kind of hold off an easy appeal, right? To basic liberal notions, that allow us to tolerate difference, right? And so I don't think the value here that I'm trying to uphold is the value of toleration, right? You know, I teach at Princeton, and one of the interesting things about Princeton is that the central value is civility. Civility is equilibrium, right? So we want to, whenever there's conflict, we gotta get to civility, right? And by virtue of that, sometimes we don't deal with the underlying reasons for the conflict. We just want to be civil to each other, right? And manners and decency can also be tethered to a certain kind of class disposition, right? Particularly when we think about 18th and 19th century invocations of manners and decency, right?

[00:14:41.3] Eddie Glaude Jr.: Although decency has a different level of, a different valence for me, sometimes when I talk about the coalition of the decent, but virtue takes us deeper than toleration. Virtue takes us deeper than just simply talking to each other in a kind way, right? Or not being nasty or mean-spirited. Virtue has something to do with character formation. What are those elements that define who we take ourselves to be as persons, right? How can I put it? It reveals that the moral questions are at the beating heart of politics. And the moral question is, what kind of human being do you take yourselves to be? What kind of human being do you take yourself to be? And that moral question is the beating heart of politics, right? Shifts the center of gravity of our concern, right? Not just simply about maintaining equilibrium, keeping the ugliness underneath beneath the surface, but rather, right, actually reaching for reaching for

higher, as I've said, reaching for higher forms of excellences or to put it more poignantly, just trying to be a better person, right? And I think that's key if we're gonna finally turn a corner in this country, right? If that makes sense.

[00:16:10.8] Thomas Donnelly: Absolutely. And I mean, we have a question from the audience from Ralph Hendrickson. You know, broadly speaking, are you hopeful for the near future?

[00:16:19.5] Eddie Glaude Jr.: I have to be hopeful because I have an abiding faith in the capacity of human beings to be otherwise. You know, one of the challenging aspects of this book is that its philosophical architecture is explicit. I'm gonna be engaging John Dewey and his American pragmatism. I'm going to be reading Ralph Waldo Emerson, and you're gonna see all of this stuff happening that you're gonna have to work your way through. But I think as a pragmatist of sorts, I have to have a fundamental faith in the capacity of human beings to change the world. You know, with William James, all is not settled. But at the same time, Tom, I'm not naive. I come out of a blues soaked tradition and that reminds me of that line from BB King. Nobody loves me but my mother. And she could be jivin' too, right? So even as I have faith in the capacity of human beings to be miraculous, I'm also not naive in their capacity for evil. And I think it's our understanding of those two things together that sets us on the right path forward for substantive and long lasting change.

[00:17:29.9] Thomas Donnelly: Excellent. And I'll work on another audience question here from Earl Mandel where he said was there a time when we citizens gave up our capacity to other leaders as opposed to ourselves? And can you give us basically some examples from history of people abdicating their democratic citizenship, as you're saying to elite leaders?

[00:17:48.0] Eddie Glaude Jr.: Well, I think there's always danger in representative democracy, right? That you think the only thing you have to do is to go vote, and then you can go back to your day-to-day lives, right? And so we can think about this in the context of the beginnings of the Vietnam War. You can think about it in the context of those critical moments when the nation seems on the cusp of just collapsing, I'm thinking particularly around 19th century debates around the fugitive slave law. Think about what happened in 1850, right? And how about that, so I'm thinking about a 20th century moment, and I'm thinking about a 19th century moment and what everyday ordinary people gave over, right? And then what they had to do in response to what they relinquished, right? And what was fascinating is that we saw everyday ordinary people, fighting, the implications of the fugitive slave law of 1850. You saw it in Boston, you saw it in New York, you see it, saw it in Philadelphia. But there are other examples that we could talk about. But the main thing is oftentimes we think of representative democracy as we just simply go, we vote, and then our responsibility is over and we give it over to our representatives. And that to my mind, is a form of abdication.

[00:19:06.0] Thomas Donnelly: Excellent. Another aspect of your book that I really love is sort of your recurrent grappling with the relationship between sort of historic, what I would like to say historical memory, heroes and social change that seems to be something you're obviously very interested in. What role do you see historical memory like in a healthy sense? How can historical memory serve a purpose as we're pushing towards a better democracy or a social change or whatever the goal is?

[00:19:35.2] Eddie Glaude Jr.: That's a wonderful question. I'm grappling with my own sense of indebtedness, right? The way in which tradition shadows so much of what I do and how I think. I say in the book that I think the greatest generation America's ever produced is the generation of the mid-20th century. And the leaders that came out of that moment for me are towering figures, right? They're godlike. And oftentimes, we're asked to supplicate to those figures oh, Dr. King, oh, these folks, the civil rights movement becomes the standard bearer of how we imagine struggle. So it's a vexed relationship to the past, right? And what do I mean by that? Sometimes, the past can shackle our imaginations, as opposed to being the wind beneath our wings.

[00:20:29.1] Eddie Glaude Jr.: So we cannot forget, because forgetting allows the ghosts of the past to run rampant, unchecked, right? But we cannot be solely preoccupied with the past, because we literally become consumed by it. And so part of what I'm trying to do in the text is to understand the importance of tradition, right? The importance of owning it, possessing it for oneself, such that you and I can find our own voices, right? So that we can become part of the chorus, right? And as opposed to just simply engaging in what Ralph Waldo Emerson would say, it was a form of suicide, which remember he says imitation is a form of suicide, right? So history matters, memory matters, because if we forget, we're doomed to repeat it to echo George Santayana in that moment, right?

[00:21:23.1] Thomas Donnelly: Absolutely. And it reminds me of the Baldwin quote that you have, that it takes strength to remember. It takes another kind of strength to forget. It takes a hero to do both. And it seems like that kind of reflective equilibrium is just so, so difficult.

[00:21:36.3] Eddie Glaude Jr.: It is, and you see it in TS Eliot's reflections on tradition. You see it in Baldwin, as you rightly quote, you see it, right? I've been marinating, obsessed with TS Eliot's Four Quartets, right? Moving from Burnt Norton to The Dry Salvages, right? East Coker, I'm not quite there yet, but the way in which he's thinking about the relationship between time, present and time past, right? How do we sit in this moment where history swirls around us? It's all around us. It's speaking to us. But yet, we're here in our moment, in this moment, and we are unprecedented in so many ways. You, Tom, you are unprecedented because there wasn't a Tom Donnelly before you. So how do we speak to these particulars of our current moment, informed by what John Dewey would call funded experience, right? That funded experience allows us to

act in our current moment with a bit more than luck, right? Critical intelligence, informed by the past, the lessons of the past allows us to invade the present with a little bit more than luck, it seems to me. Yeah, indeed.

[00:22:54.2] Thomas Donnelly: Excellent. And Bonnie Zitek has a question, and she brings in another element, forgiveness and sort of how does forgiveness fit into this framework? Can we be too forgiving?

[00:23:06.5] Eddie Glaude Jr.: Yes, we can, but we have to understand how forgiveness works. There was that extraordinary moment after the massacre in South Carolina, in the church with Dylann Roof in Charleston. And the family members, some of the family members stood up in court and they forgave him. And oftentimes, that's read at least in relation to African Americans as somehow we have this superordinate moral gene that kicks in, that allows us to forgive all of the evil and the cruelty, when in fact, the forgiveness is not wasn't simply about Dylann Roof. The forgiveness was about how we release hatred such that it doesn't turn around and consume us. Baldwin, for example, learned a lesson from his stepfather, right? As his father was consumed with what the world said about him. And as tuberculosis ate up his body, the reality of racism contributed to his madness. And what Baldwin was saying is that if we don't release the anger, if the hatred is not held at arms length, we become the very thing we despise. We can easily become that. So forgiveness is working in both directions, right? It's a kind of soul maintenance, because if we allow the righteous indignation to morph into bitterness and hatred and all consuming anger, we can lose our souls.

[00:24:55.8] Thomas Donnelly: Absolutely. We have another question from Joseph Serritella about president Obama where he says, how did Barack Obama's presidency, about which many were so helpful, figure into the current state of our democracy?

[00:25:09.1] Eddie Glaude Jr.: Tom, I think it represents, and this book began as a series of lectures at Harvard in response to Obama's presidency. I was concerned that the excitement around the symbolic significance of his election would lead too many of us to abdicate our responsibility. Now that Obama's presidency was being read as the kind of culmination of the Civil Rights Movement, which is just wrongheaded on so many different levels for me. But on another level, Obama's election represented concretely, the threat of demographic shift, that the idea of the browning of America, that by 2050, America will be a majority minority nation, that it would no longer be a White nation in the vein of old Europe. And how that demographic reality generated all sorts of panic, and Obama's administration, this Black couple in the White House was a kind of crystallization of that fear.

[00:26:24.7] Eddie Glaude Jr.: And so it's not so much his policies, because he was a centrist Democrat in the vein of Clinton in so many ways. But his body represents and represents the

horror of, for some at least, of this coming shift, that America will no longer be the country that we recognize. The barbarians will have finally overrun the wall as it were. And so I think from that moment, from the moment in which Mitch McConnell said, we will make him a one-term president to the Tea Party, to the Supreme Court's gutting of the Voting Rights Act, there's been this attempt, as been the case throughout our history of reigning it back, of finding comfort once again in this idealized understanding of what America must always be, and that is a White nation in the vein of Old Europe.

[00:27:25.6] Thomas Donnelly: And part of what you also provide in your book is sort of a critique of, I would say, maybe like the last half century of American history, at least one phase of it. And sort of what that has done to us as a people in terms of shaping who we are, what we want, our capacity to find a common purpose, et cetera. Can you talk a little bit about what those years have done to us, and kind of how we have to change to kind of meet our moment?

[00:27:52.2] Eddie Glaude Jr.: Sure. And I know this would be controversial for some folks, but you think about it. The mid 20th century Black freedom struggle has been described by historians, Tom, as a kind of second reconstruction, an attempt to fulfill the broken promises of the first. And you think about the Civil Rights Act of '64 and the Voting Rights Act of '65 as the kind of the legislative culmination of that effort. But imagine just 15 years later, Ronald Reagan is elected with the mandate to undo it all. In 1981, we saw the reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act as part of a debate. And there's an intense debate whether or not we should do it. And Ronald Reagan finally concedes that he will reauthorize the VRA, but he says, we must gut Section Five eventually, which is what the Roberts Court eventually did.

[00:28:51.5] Eddie Glaude Jr.: And so what we saw in 1980, the last major piece of legislation of the Great Society is the Fair Housing Act of 1968. 12 years later, Reagan was elected to undo it. And what we get with the ascendancy of Reagan, and I'm not just simply blaming him, but we can call it Thatcherism, or we can call it neoliberalism or however we wanna describe it, is that we get an economic philosophy and a political ideology in my view. And we can debate this in my view, that transforms us from citizens and communion with each other, to self-interested persons in competition and rivalry with each other. And that shift eviscerates any robust notion of the public good. So you have for a moment the communist threat that could be a basis for a kind of patriotic zeal, but it's running up against this intensifying selfishness, in which you see people abdicating responsibility for any notion of the public good, so much so that we get to a moment in 2020, '21, and you have covid, right? Devastating our communities, and we can't muster, right? A sense of a common purpose, a sense of mutuality to respond to it as a nation. Instead, we fragment, we move into our silos.

[00:30:29.3] Eddie Glaude Jr.: So I think, and of course in the 1990s, Tom, you have Robert Putnam writing *Bowling Alone*, where he uses the end of bowling leagues as an example of how

we've become siloed, selfish. We move only among our tribes. And so I think over the last 50 years, we have been saturated with a political and economic philosophy that has in some ways eviscerated a notion of responsibility to each other. I don't know what the social contract is, what our obligations to each other are in this current moment anymore. And I think once that happens alongside other developments, democracy stands on the precipice.

[00:31:20.3] Thomas Donnelly: Excellent. So, another feature here, the way you organize your book as a whole, we've gotten to sort of some of the big ideas, I think. But what's interesting to engage with the book in part is that in your substantive chapters, you focus on particular figures in African-American history. We have roughly a half hour left. Maybe drill down and talk about those figures and what we could learn from them and how they can challenge us, maybe beginning with the most familiar, which is Dr. King, and you call that chapter on Prophecy, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Why that particular frame?

[00:32:00.8] Eddie Glaude Jr.: Well, I wanted to bring the prophetic down to the ground, right? There's a sense in which we have Dr. King as this larger than life figure. And in my own life, and I should say this, that I'm trying to enact something that I'm commending. Self cultivation in the pursuit of a more just world, requires us to kind of reach for higher forms of excellences, which means that we have to deal with our own wounds. Try to figure out how we can muster the courage to become the leaders that we need, right? So I'm trying to do that work in the book. And so King and Malcolm X are critical figures in my own development.

[00:32:40.9] Eddie Glaude Jr.: So, King is this larger than life figure. I remember in the eighth grade, my eighth grade history class, Ms. Mitchell, who stood about 5 '1 with a microphone because she had lost her voice as a singer earlier when she was a younger woman, teaching us civil war history and then, of course, getting to the mid 20th century. And she asked me to recite Dr. King's I have a dream speech. And back then, I had to go to the library and get the vinyl, 'cause I wanted to hear the speech, and I would stop it on the record player as I learned it and memorized it. And King became this larger than life figure for me at that moment, right? And then I went to Morehouse College, King's alma mater. And there, there's a large lifelike statue of King, pointing at the campus. So we were socialized in Kingian philosophy, but what I wanted to do in the chapter was to bring him down to the ground, right? Not as this larger than life figure, to which we're supposed to engage in supplication, but a fragile fallen figure.

[00:33:43.0] Eddie Glaude Jr.: The prophetic isn't someone called by God, who has the authority of God's law in his or her voice. Rather, the prophetic has to be understood as our ability to see beyond the opacity of now, to spy the future. And insofar as we can spy our future, we can use that future as a basis to critique the present. If that's true, we all have the capacity through our moral imaginations to be prophetic, just like King was. And remember, King was a young man straight out of seminary, who had his first church in Montgomery. And the only

reason why those folks chose him was because he had not been touched by the powers that be. History chose him, and he demonstrated in that moment capacities that each of us have, that each of us has, it seems to me and I wanna insist upon that. And that's what I tried to do in that chapter.

[00:34:45.9] Thomas Donnelly: Yeah. I think there's a way in which we often think of the traditional prophet as, on the one hand, a truth teller. On the other hand, it can be inspirational, so it can inspire us to want to be great. But you also note that the prophetic, when it's given to just a select few, could also be what you say, "a conversation stopper". And that this is difficult for democratic deliberation. Can you talk a little bit about that sort of obstacle?

[00:35:14.5] Eddie Glaude Jr.: Yeah. Certain kinds of prophets, they know they have the truth, and so you have to be skeptical of how they function in democratic society, right? And then sometimes they're larger than life. I'm speaking the truth, and they're these charismatic figures. And so they call you and me to drop our current responsibilities and follow them. And so you must always be, and Sidney Hook helps with this and others, you must always be skeptical if you're committed to democracy, d, of the Prophet, P because they can, or that person can eviscerate the public domain in which we're all called to be responsible in some ways, not to abdicate, but to embrace.

[00:36:07.4] Eddie Glaude Jr.: And so part of what I try to do is to suggest that the larger than life figure can be dangerous. Remember, imitation is suicide and I don't want us to give ourselves over. I don't wanna give myself over to Dr. King. Instead, I wanna see him as an exemplar of what I'm capable of. That doesn't mean that all of us have the same capacities, no, no, no, no, no, no. I'm not trying to engage in that leveling practice. No, no. But what Dr. King reveals as an all too human example of the prophetic is that I can bring my talents to bear as well, and that's what we have to understand.

[00:36:47.2] Thomas Donnelly: And I've been interested in this. This chapter seems to be almost as much about wrestling, you wrestling with John Dewey as wrestling with Dr. King. And you also, you already, in your initial response here to this chapter, brought up the idea of the moral imagination, and its role here in democratizing the prophetic. What is the capacity of all of us to act as prophets? Can you talk a little bit more about that, how that process works? How could an ordinary person take on the prophetic?

[00:37:12.5] Eddie Glaude Jr.: So the thing is that, the moral imagination is that ability of us, of each of us to see beyond our current conditions, right? What does it mean? To think about a set of circumstances that have not yet come into existence or have not yet come into view. And how do we imagine it as a way to orient ourselves to the current moment, right? Okay, I just wanted to make sure I didn't freeze. How do we imagine it in relation to our current moment?

And so the moral imagination allows us to see not only ourselves as fallen and fragile and finite, but it also opens up space for the exercise of critical intelligence, right? John Dewey will locate the moral imagination. In the exercise of critical intelligence, he uses this term entitled dramatic rehearsal, right? As we begin to address problems in the environment, we test, we experiment, we tinker. And by virtue of that, we engage in a kind of dramatic rehearsal. What would happen if I did X or Y, right? What would happen if I did A, B, C, or D? And as I test and engage imaginatively in pursuing these outcomes, right? I orient myself differently to the moment. And I wanna say that, that particular practice is where the prophetic is actually located, right? And all of us, all of each of us can do it, it seems to me. Does that make sense?

[00:38:49.0] Thomas Donnelly: Absolutely. Absolutely. And it ends up being a sort of a challenge for all of us, which I think is one of the great things to reflect on in your book. I mean, one final thing I think to bring up about Dr. King before we move to Malcolm X and Ella Baker is, earlier we talked a little bit about the role of the past, the role of collective memory. And another thing that you bring out about Dr. King is that part of his push for reform is rooted in the American idea, it's rooted in the American founding principles. He's using the founding principles as a critique of the present to look towards a better future. Can you talk a little bit about that move and the power of that move? Also whether there are any limits when you're operating within that mode? I'm curious how you reflect on that use of history.

[00:39:33.6] Eddie Glaude Jr.: Oh absolutely. I mean, in some ways, by virtue of taking on the form of the American Jeremiah to invoke the late Sacvan Bercovitch, the Harvard scholar of early American literature and American studies, that particular form of exhortation, which has been so critical to American political speech. You find yourself caught within the framework of America's self understanding. We use its terms. And Audre Lorde would ask the question, can you dismantle the master's house with the master's tools? So what does it mean to invoke democracy, American democracy as the framework? What does it mean to appeal to the Declaration of Independence or to invoke Frederick Douglass again once he breaks from William Garrison to think about the Constitution, not as a slaveholding document, but as a document within which one can imagine the country anew.

[00:40:32.4] Eddie Glaude Jr.: How does that constrain and limit the scope of one's politics? I mean, we have to grapple with that. We're not gonna settle it in this conversation, but it certainly limits the scope or the field of battle in interesting sorts of ways. But Dr. King in that moment, he is engaged in a kind of what scholars call Tom, a kind of black Jeremiah, that the country cannot become what it can become. The promise of the nation cannot be fulfilled until it does right by its former slaves. And what's interesting is that ironically those formerly enslaved folk will redeem the principles that are sullied by those who are caught up in the idolatry of whiteness or racism or white supremacy and the like. So it's at this moment, it's a riff on what the late theologian Howard Thurman said about American Christendom. He said that the slave dared to

redeem the religion profaned in its midst. So the adjective black Christian, the adjective mattered in relation to the now white, Christian, black Christian. And so here you have a king taking hold of the principles of democracy as his own, and using them as a basis to critique the nation as is, and to imagine the nation as it could be. And I think that's just a powerful move, a tradition which I stand in.

[00:42:06.5] Thomas Donnelly: Absolutely. And I mean, we see it all the way at the beginning of the American story with petitions from Prince Hall and free African Americans. We see it in David Walker in the 19th Century.

[00:42:17.3] Eddie Glaude Jr.: Exactly.

[00:42:17.7] Thomas Donnelly: So like it is a powerful tradition and it is just a thing that we see recurrent in the American reform. And so I love that you bring that out in Dr. King. Obviously, you have wrestled quite a bit with Malcolm X in this book. It sounds like Malcolm X also was really important to your own sort of personal development, your own personal journey. Can you talk a little bit about, you have titled that chapter A Heroism in Malcolm X. Talk a little bit about Malcolm X's role in your life and how you've thought about him over time.

[00:42:52.7] Eddie Glaude Jr.: That was a very hard chapter to write 'cause I began with a very painful moment in my own life with my own father. And trying to deal with a wounded masculinity, as it were. What does it mean for me to grow up on the coast, on the coast of Mississippi with this overbearing figure? I looked just like my father, and I love him to death. Today we have a wonderful relationship. But when I was a child I was definitely afraid of him. He could give me a glance and I would almost cry, shake in my skin as it were. And Malcolm became, for me, a resource to recapture a notion of manhood. He became that figure. When I got to Morehouse, I went to college at a very young age. I was 16, 15, 16 years old.

[00:43:48.1] Eddie Glaude Jr.: And I remember this Morehouse senior upperclassman saying, "You're incomplete. You don't know who you are." And he gave me Malcolm's autobiography, and I went back to my dorm room and I read it from cover to cover that night, and it was like a conversion experience. To this day, I have my goatee because of it. And so what happened is that Malcolm became a kind of heroic figure for me, because I found in him the language from my father's rage. I found in his witness my own discomfort coming from Mississippi, seeing all of the things that I saw, hearing the stories and of course knowing the stories that weren't told. So he helped me kind of fashion myself as a black man who's ready to engage in manly politics with other men, as it were.

[00:44:43.9] Eddie Glaude Jr.: And Ossie Davis has this wonderful, powerful formulation that you know of Malcolm as our shining dark prince. That's how he eulogized him. But as I became

older and read more about him, particularly in Manning Marable's, which is a Pulitzer Prize winning biography, Malcolm became more human. He's trying to figure himself out. He's engaged in the arduous task of self-creation. And how he comes to us matters. And so I say there's one way to read the biography in light of Augustine's confessions, or you could read the autobiography in light of Rousseau's confessions. But what does it mean to read him as a guy who had to use Imani Perry's language, who's flailing and failing all the time once he leaves the nation of Islam. And what we see and how I end up is that he is a wounded witness.

[00:45:42.1] Eddie Glaude Jr.: So just as I did with Dr. King, I brought him down to the ground. The man who doesn't wanna smoke in public, the man who doesn't want to seem as if he is as human as the rest of us. Malcolm is just as wounded as I am. And what does that mean for me? It releases me into a different way of imagining myself not as a sycophant, an imitator of Malcolm's posture and pose but rather to take the virtues of courage, his willingness to speak his mind, to speak truth as he understands it in the moment. And so for me it was an important journey, an important lesson. That I can do that, not that being him, but be me. And I think we all need to understand that in a moment when the giants seem to force us to cower, you know?

[00:46:41.3] Thomas Donnelly: For sure. And I mean, in this chapter, as you're obviously wrestling with Malcolm X, you're also, you have extended reflections just on the role of the hero in democratic life. You cite Sidney Hook for the idea that democracy should be deeply suspicious of heroes. And can you talk a little bit about sort of the role of the hero in a democracy, both sort of positive uses of heroism, but also sort of the challenging side.

[00:47:07.0] Eddie Glaude Jr.: Right. And at that moment I'm trying to think about the relationship between the hero coming out of Thomas Carlyle, where there's a disdain for ordinary people, and instead of using the heroic in the Carlylean sense, I'm more interested in the representativeness in the Emersonian sense. And that is that you have people who are doing extraordinary things. But the hero comes to us such that even better heroes can come. That's the point for Emerson. At the end of each chapter in those books, he's gonna find something that's not quite right about those figures. Because what he's, the aim is for their greatness to call forth something even greater.

[00:48:00.3] Eddie Glaude Jr.: But the hero can also, when it's malformed, deny us that insight, because they suck up all the oxygen, they become the center of gravity. And just like the prophet, they can shut down democratic deliberation. They can clean up the messiness of the democratic process. And that's always the temptation. When democracies become chaotic and messy, and we have to work our way through it, some of us long for clarity and certainty and order. And that's when we allow for the strong man to make his way, oftentimes as a heroic figure, as a prophetic figure. And they clean up matters. And insofar as they do it, democracy is lost at that moment. So I'm not denying the significance of prophets and heroes, I just don't like it when

they're capitalized like with capital P and capital H. I wanna see them as representative figures, examples of what we all are capable of, if we only try.

[00:49:16.9] Thomas Donnelly: I love that, and which is the perfect transition to your final figure who I can't help, but it just comes through in the writing, how much you admire her. And so this is Ella Baker. Can you just talk a little bit about Ella Baker herself, her vision and her contributions to the Civil Rights movement, just to sort of tee up our discussion of that chapter.

[00:49:36.2] Eddie Glaude Jr.: Sure. Tom, I think you're right. In the arc of the book, you have this wounded boy from Mississippi reaching for these male heroes only to end up in the lap, in the hands of this powerful black woman who offers an understanding of democratic politics that I think we all bet the nation should hear and embrace. So, Ms. Baker, without her in the 20th century, the mid 20th century Black Revolution doesn't make sense. She was a field secretary for the NAACP in the early '40s, going down into the deep south. And at a moment when the NAACP could have carrying an NAACP card, could get you lynched. So she's down there organizing. She's the first executive director of SCLC, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which is the organization that Dr. King founded after the Montgomery Movement.

[00:50:35.4] Eddie Glaude Jr.: And he tries to organize all of these male preachers. I can only imagine what Ms. Baker went through trying to organize these very difficult men in certain ways. And then you think about 1960, those were those wildfire students sit-ins in Greensboro and in Nashville and Atlanta. And the students decided that they wanted to organize their efforts, and they met at Shaw University. Well, why are they at Shaw, Tom? Because Shaw is the alma mater of guess who, Ella Baker. And it's at that meeting that we get the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. And that organization becomes, in so many ways, the shock troops of the civil rights movement. They give us Mississippi, the Mississippi Freedom Summer and the like. And so Ms. Baker's philosophy is that a strong people does not need strong leaders, they do not need strong leaders.

[00:51:34.1] Eddie Glaude Jr.: I love that formulation. And she used to tell the SNCC organizers as they would go into the south, shut up and listen, you might learn something. Your task, she would intimate your task is to create the conditions under which indigenous leadership could flourish. Not to helicopter in and tell people to follow you, but to understand that those people, that those sharecroppers in Mississippi and in Alabama actually have the capacity to be the leaders that they need. And what you're charged to do is to create the conditions under which that leadership can emerge. And I think that model is so important to my own understanding of democracy, small d.

[00:52:20.9] Thomas Donnelly: And you and what, the phrase you use associated with Ella Baker is that of democratic perfectionism. Can you talk a little bit about what you mean by that?

[00:52:29.7] Eddie Glaude Jr.: Well, this is my attempt to bring that tradition across the tracks and let it be in conversation with the sage of Concord, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Remember, the through line of the book is self cultivation in the pursuit of a more just world. When we struggle together and we struggle with the idea that each of us has the capacity to exhibit a kind of courage, the virtues necessary for democracy to flourish. When we struggle in that way, we become better people. We become better people because it's in the going towards that salvation is found to use Baldwin's language. It's in that politics attending, which is local, close to the ground, that we can become better people in our association with others. And so perfectionism is this idea of reaching for higher forms of excellences, of leaving a particular self behind.

[00:53:25.9] Eddie Glaude Jr.: In order to leave that self behind Tom, we have to be honest with who we are. We have to tell the truth about who we are, because if we continue to lie, we're gonna be permanently doctoring the station. So we have to confront ourselves, and when we struggle together, we are confronting the ugliness of who we are in the midst of trying to build a more just world. And so part of what I'm suggesting is that she's saying to those young students, and she's saying to us. If we struggle in this way, we put ourselves on the path to becoming better people, which goes back to our first point. If we are the leaders we've been looking for, we have to become better people, which is my way of parsing the phrase democratic perfectionism. Doing the hard work to become better people, to reach for higher forms of excellences.

[00:54:18.6] Thomas Donnelly: Excellent. And I mean, so part of it is this self cultivation part of it is grassroots advocacy. We have a question from Reggie Ellis, and it makes me think about what are the roles of certain mediating institutions? And Reggie asks, will you speak to or share your thoughts regarding the continued relevance of the nation's historically black colleges and universities, and their continued impact on the full development of this liberal democracy?

[00:54:42.7] Eddie Glaude Jr.: Well, I'm a product of those institutions. I like to view them as barrier islands. And what I mean by that is that when you think about how barrier islands function, they break up the wind of the hurricane. So the hurricane isn't as strong. And so these institutions are places that allow a young country boy like me to understand himself in the most expensive of terms. But it also becomes the place where when the fever dream spikes, or when the winds of white supremacy are really ferocious, we are in these institutions and they fortify us in relation to those winds that allow us to emerge. Not only unscathed, but even better. So when you think about American history, you think about that period at the end of the 19th century, the turn of the 20th century, from Plessy v Ferguson to Brown v Board of 1954. Rayford Logan described a period that early period as the nadir, the lowest point in African American history.

[00:55:49.1] Eddie Glaude Jr.: But in fact when you look closer, it's one of the most vibrant moments in African American history. The creation of black institutions, black theater

institutions, black political organizations, were doing all of this work. So those institutions like HBCUs, many of which were created, were founded in the aftermath of the Civil War. We see those vibrant spaces that allow for people like me to cultivate that inner sensibility, to cultivate that capacity, to imagine myself in the most expansive of terms. And Lord, do we need them today given the vexed conditions that we face as a country.

[00:56:33.1] Thomas Donnelly: Absolutely. And so we probably have time for one more question, and I wanted to sort of end our conversation the same way you end your book, which is, you end with this just wonderful quote from Tony Morrison about the complexity of the world. And I'll read it and then just sort of ask why you ended your book there. Here's Morrison. Of course, there is cruelty. Cruelty is a mystery. But if we see the world as one long, brutal game, then we bump up into another mystery, the mystery of beauty, of light, the canary that sings on the skull, unless all ages and all races of man have been diluted, there seems to be such a thing as grace, such a thing as beauty, such a thing as harmony, all holy, free and available to us.

[00:57:15.1] Eddie Glaude Jr.: Yeah. And then the last two words of the book, now fly. So this is the whole back pessimism. This is the whole back, the view that the world as it is, is anti-black, and there's nothing we can do about it. I just totally disagree. I think it doesn't require that we throw away democratic principles. You know that wonderful reference, she's riffing on Annie Dillard when she says the canary that sings on the skull. That ugliness, cruelty is a definitive feature, a defining feature of our lives. We cannot deny that. But if we recognize that we also must understand the power of grace and beauty that can be evident in our tending to each other, that when we understand the fullness of our capacity to be different, to be together differently, America can in fact be saved. It can be imagined differently, more powerfully a fulfillment of its promise. I refuse to give that up. I can't give it up. And so to invoke Morrison at that moment, Tom, is to invoke a kind of hope that's necessary for us all to fly.

[00:58:38.9] Thomas Donnelly: Excellent. What a wonderful way to end this conversation, Eddie Glaude Jr. For sharing your wonderful book with our audience. And just, it was just an absolute delight to speak with you. I hope that we could bring you back to the Constitution Center, many, many times in the future.

[00:58:52.6] Eddie Glaude Jr.: Man, thank you so much for everything, Tom. Thank you for reading the book so carefully. I appreciate you.

[00:58:57.1] Thomas Donnelly: Absolutely. Thank you so much, Eddie.

[00:59:00.2] Eddie Glaude Jr.: Appreciate you.

[00:59:01.6] Lana Ulrich: This program was live streamed on June 19th, 2024. This episode is produced by Tenaya Tauber, Bill Pollock, and me, Lana Ulrich. It was engineered by David Stotts and Bill Pollock. Research was provided by Samson Mostashari, Cooper Smith and Yara Daraiseh. Check out our full lineup of exciting programs and register to join us virtually at constitutioncenter.org. As always, we'll publish those programs on the podcast, so stay tuned here as well. Or watch the videos available in our media library at constitutioncenter.org/medialibrary. Please rate, review, and subscribe to live at the National Constitution Center on Apple Podcasts, or follow us on Spotify. On behalf of the National Constitution Center, I'm Lana Ulrich.