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“How Long is ‘Not Long’?”

In a famous speech at the end of the Selma-to-Montgomery Civil Rights March on March 25, 1965, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) asked and answered a question concerning the expected delay in Black America’s ascension to an equitable position in American society. He elaborated using a refrain: “How long, not long.”¹

Nearly 60 years and three generations later Black America is still very far from that equitable position. We are jerked around perpetually with promises of real change. Generations rise and demise, but there is little real change. Specific plans with firm deadlines dates are not promulgated and supported with sufficient resources for the achievement of this equitable position.

Yes, the nation has experienced a Black President and a Black Vice-President. But neither of these politicians have come from the ranks of ADOS (African American Descendants of Slaves). Moreover, both politicians are fair-skinned—thereby being patently acceptable to White America.

What did we expect, and what are we expecting, to achieve? For many, the answer is an equitable position all around. However, let us consider Table 1 and just four critical economic metrics where Black America remains very far from achieving an equitable position.²

Table 1. —White vs. Black Poverty, Unemployment, Income, and Wealth

Line	Categories	White America	Black America
1	2019 Poverty Rate	7.3%	18.8%
2	2020 Unemployment Rate	7.3%	11.4%
3	2020 Median Household Income	\$71,231	\$45,870
4	2019 Median Household Wealth	\$188,200	\$24,100

Sources: US Census Bureau, US Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the US Federal Reserve Board

¹ Listen to an excerpt from the speech: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-2cdeplmTQ>.

² Table 1 data are available as follows: (1) Poverty Rate data are from the US Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2020/09/poverty-rates-for-blacks-and-hispanics-reached-historic-lows-in-2019.html>; (2) Unemployment Rate data are from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, <https://www.bls.gov/cps/tables.htm#annual>, Table 3; (3) Median Household Income data are from the US Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-income-households.html>, Table H-5; and (4) the Median Household Wealth data are from the US Federal Reserve Board, <https://www.federalreserve.gov/econres/notes/feds-notes/disparities-in-wealth-by-race-and-ethnicity-in-the-2019-survey-of-consumer-finances-20200928.htm>,

Table 1 shows that the Black poverty rate was more than twice as great as the White poverty rate in 2019; the Black unemployment rate was over 150 percent of the White unemployment rate in 2020; median (half of the households above and half below) Black household income was just 64 percent of median White household income in 2020; and median Black household wealth was less than 13 percent of median White household wealth in 2019.³ This is to say nothing about our inequitable positions for other important socioeconomic categories, such as health and education.

Why did we believe—and many of us still believe—that those who have exploited Black America for over 400 years were—and are now—willing to treat us equitably? White and Black adherents to truth know that the answer to equitable treatment is Reparations. Unfortunately, although H.R. 40 and SB40 are making their way very slowly through the US Congress, the legislation only concerns studying, not actually extending, Reparations.

What we know is that the nation is busy spending, and planning to spend, trillions of dollars that are **not** targeted specifically and equitably toward Black America, and for which Black representatives in the US Congress (the Congressional Black Caucus) seem unwilling or unable to fight for our equitable share.

Let us pause and ask an important question: Has Black America done all that we can to position ourselves to achieve equality?

As a smaller nation within a larger nation, is it the case that we simply have not assimilated and that is the reason why White America does not accept Black America? It is common knowledge that humans have an affinity for those who have great similarity—i.e., similar appearance and behavior. Is it the case that, as long as Black America does not display a White-like appearance and behavior, then we will not be accepted?

The accompanying important question is: Will Black America ever extinguish our cultural expressions in favor of White cultural expressions? If the answer is “no,” then “not long” will be “forever.”

On the other hand, the reason for very slow progress on achieving an equitable position is likely as simple as “haves” never relinquish resources, power, or control to “have nots” voluntarily.

Whatever the reason(s) for continued inequalities, it seems reasonable that Black America should focus on MLK’s refrain: “How long, not long.” We should ask and answer: How long is “not long?” If “Not long” has become “too long,” then we should begin to take **action** to generate the most favorable possible outcomes for ourselves now and in the future.

BlackEconomics.org is just one of many resources available for high-quality and timely information on futures that Black America can and should pursue.

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³ Please keep in mind that Black America’s sticking point is not with the middle of the distributions. Rather, it is with the top of the distribution. Wealth hoarding at the top of the distribution is driving much of the inequality.