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## Gates: Blacks have seen big gains and tragic setbacks

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*(Photo: Jeremy Fleming/Furman University)*

Black Americans have seen tremendous gains but also have experienced significant setbacks in the past 50 years, Henry Louis Gates Jr. told a Furman University audience Monday.

Even as more blacks have entered the middle-class, many other African Americans have been beset by poverty, police brutality and high incarceration rates, said Gates, 67, a Harvard professor, documentary filmmaker and prominent commentator on race in America.

"To paraphrase Dickens, for some of us it's the best of times, and for other people, it's the worst of times," Gates said, addressing a capacity audience at Furman's Younts Conference Center.

"The black middle-class has doubled, the black upper middle-class has quadrupled," Gates said.

However, poverty and incarceration rates remain tragically high among African Americans, Gates said.

The percentage of black children living at or beneath the poverty line in 1970 was 41 percent, he said. Today, that figure has hardly budged, remaining at about 39 percent, he said.

In 1970, the number of black men in prison was 183,000, Gates said. In 2014, more than 2.3 million blacks were incarcerated, according to the NAACP.

"In effect we have two parallel lines running within the race," Gates said.

### **Trump, education**

In a wide-ranging onstage interview with SCETV host Beryl Dakers, Gates criticized the Trump administration for chipping away at gains made during the Obama administration. He compared the present to the post-Reconstruction era, a time of Jim Crow segregation and outbreaks of violence against blacks.

"Ten years of maximum black freedom followed by a hard right critique/rollback? What does that sound like?" Gates said. "I think there's been too much of a self-conscious attempt by this administration systematically to undo what Obama did just because of a personal vendetta."

But Gates, a self-described "mediator," also had harsh words for some teenage blacks who, he said, devalue education.

Gates cited a past survey in the *Washington Post* of inner-city black children suggesting that some young blacks associate "speaking standard English, getting straight A's in school and visiting the Smithsonian" with being white.

"if anyone had said anything like that when we were growing up, your mother would spank you upside your head and say, 'What's wrong with you?'"

"Our heroes in the 40s and 50s were Dr. (W.E.B.) Du Bois and Mary McLeod Bethune, educated black men and women, and not just basketball players and baseball players and entertainers," Gates said, referring to prominent educators and civil rights leaders Du Bois and Bethune.

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"The blackest thing in the black tradition was getting an education and succeeding in society," Gates said. "We can never be content to say that being an educated person, being successful, is not black. You're not betraying the race by being successful. What we need to do is maximize those benefits for a greater swath of the black community."

#### **Affirmative action losses**

Gates, who spoke at a Constitution Day program titled "Black America Since MLK: A Conversation with Henry Louis Gates Jr.," said the three biggest setbacks for blacks in the past 50 years were the killing of Martin Luther King Jr., the recent chipping away of affirmative action programs, and Hillary Clinton's loss to Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential race.

In decades past, affirmative action efforts lifted poor blacks into the middle class, he said. But the loss of those programs has stunted black social mobility today.

Quoting Harvard law professor Lani Guinier, Gates called affirmative action "a class escalator" that helped blacks from poor families to attend college and reach the middle class.

"Many of us rose and the black upper middle-class quadrupled," Gates said. "But then someone hit the power switch on the escalator and that social mobility stopped."

Now, most of the black students Gates sees in Ivy League universities are not first-generation college students from poor families but the children of middle-class blacks, he said.

#### **'Reaching back'**

Gates cited his own experience with affirmative action as an undergraduate student at Yale University as an example of why such policies are worthwhile.

In 1966, only six black men graduated from Yale, he said. Just two years later, in Gates' 1969 class, thanks to affirmative action and co-educational reforms, 96 black men and women graduated from Yale.

Among those in Gates' class were U.S. Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee of Houston, former Baltimore Mayor Kurt Schmoke, and surgeon, former presidential candidate and U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Ben Carson.

"It was an amazing group of people," Gates said. "We were all there together. We were all smart. We all deserved to be at Yale. We all did very well. But we would never have gotten into Yale without affirmative action because Yale, an historically white university, had a strict quota on the number of black people allowed to matriculate."

Gates said his fellow students were passionate about helping other blacks from poor families to achieve the same level of success.

"We were very self-conscious about reaching back," Gates said. "We would serve as a leadership class and enable other black people to go up the socioeconomic scale."

That same sentiment inspired Gates' recent documentary series, "Black America Since MLK: And Still I Rise," which aired on PBS in April 2016.

"In a way, this series was meant to be a wake-up call for people within the race that we cannot be content with our success, that we have to keep fighting to get the brothers out of prison, to get more integrated schools, to get people to finish high school, to get better public schools and to get more kids from elementary school to high school and into college and the middle class," he said. "We cannot rest."

### **Confederate images**

Asked by a Furman student for his thoughts on Confederate statues, which have provoked controversy nationwide, Gates suggested two options.

"Probably I'd move the statues to a museum, where we could talk about the history of the country in a full and rich way," Gates said. "The other thing I would advocate is surrounding Robert E. Lee with (abolitionists) Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth. That's another way to contextualize it. But I don't think I'd just tear down the statues. That gives right-wing people a rallying cry, like in Charlottesville. You can't erase the history of the country."

Gates also defended universities as venues for free speech at a time when some in higher education are questioning whether so-called hate speech should be curtailed.

"There is no idea so reprehensible or dangerous that we can't bring it into the university, critiquing it and exposing it," Gates said. "You also have to be free to stand up and say what you think without being vilified."

Speaking of King, Gates said the civil rights leader in his last years was looking beyond race to focus on better opportunities for all people — and that message remains relevant today, he said.

"We have to fight for a society where we're not going to have people living on the street, we're not going to have people without health care, everybody's going to have enough to eat, people are going to have decent housing," Gates said. "I think that we as a society have to fight for those kinds of values and that doesn't make you a Democrat or a Republican. It's just fighting for basic human decency among the great American people."

*Paul Hyde covers education and everything else under the South Carolina sun. Follow him on Facebook and Twitter: @PaulHyde7.*

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