

Commentary: Holder wants to tear down wall of race

- Story Highlights
- Michael Eric Dyson: Holder's "nation of cowards" comment an honest view
- He says it contrasts America's achievements with its avoidance of race
- Dyson: Let's use this as an occasion to come out of our racial cocoons
- He says America should tear down the wall of ignorance and segregation

By Michael Eric Dyson
Special to CNN

Editor's note: Michael Eric Dyson is a university professor of sociology at Georgetown University, and author of 16 books, including the New York Times bestseller, "April 4, 1968: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Death and How it Changed America."



Michael Eric Dyson says critics of Eric Holder are misinterpreting his challenge to confront racial issues.

(CNN) -- In remarks delivered Wednesday to the Justice Department to commemorate Black History Month, Attorney General Eric Holder offered one of the most courageous and honest speeches on American race by a political figure in quite some time.

Holder's remarks have predictably been quoted out of context and thus easily misrepresented and misinterpreted. Holder's comment that despite considering ourselves a melting pot, Americans are "essentially a nation of cowards" when it comes to race has provoked ire and outrage.

Part of the backlash against Holder's words has to do with the national self-image he so brilliantly punctured with a deft and deliberately provocative turn of phrase. But Holder's critics missed a vital link:

By calling attention to America's racial cowardice, Holder, by implication, was praising the nation's ability to be courageous on other fronts -- the creation of one of the greatest democracies ever, for instance, or in taking the lead in aiding the world's poor.

It is precisely because America has been so great at other tasks that we must cite its comparatively dismal record on race. When it comes to advances in scientific research, for example, we've been heroic; when it comes to racial dialogue and honesty, we've been timid and unimaginative; we've been cowards.

That [Holder's](#) remarks should cause such disgruntlement in the privileged chattering classes and among some of the masses as well points up the difficulty of the task at hand -- getting Americans to talk openly and forthrightly about race -- while underscoring just how fragile is the American racial ego.

Despite all the bravado that hinges on talk about taking responsibility for our actions -- a point that is usually hammered home when speaking about black folk taking responsibility for their problems -- it seems that most Americans feel disinclined to assume responsibility for the poor state of American [racial](#) affairs.

Thus we trot out tried-and-true strategies of diversion and avoidance: blaming the victims for their ills, assaulting the suffering for their sins or blasting the messenger for telling the unkind truth. To borrow a familiar metaphor, while we're pointing out the trees of misperception in someone else's eyes, we're blinded by, and to, the forest in our own.

If one ventures beyond the single phrase that has been parsed with a verve usually reserved for literary critics, one gains a sense of Holder's sweep and intelligence in examining the racial landscape.

Holder's broader point is that black history is American history, and that we do further injustice to the unduly neglected contributions of our black citizens to the common good if we continue to revel in historical ignorance or avoid addressing the racial trauma that makes the study of black history necessary.

Holder laments the segregation of black history into a single month since the knowledge of what blacks have done to make this country better is worthy of systematic study integrated into the standard curriculum.

Holder understands that the heroic efforts of black activists and intellectuals in the past forced America to clarify its ideals in the crucible of struggle that helped to define the American character.

From slavery to the civil rights movement, black social action offered the nation the opportunity -- and template -- for transforming democratic rhetoric into uplifting deeds that brought America closer to its founding principles.

Holder also argues that other movements for social change -- the feminist and antiwar movements most notably -- took their cue from the noble efforts of often unsung black Americans who gave their lives unselfishly to improve the lot of their brothers and sisters, and thus, the lot of the nation.

Neither is Holder interested in a one-way conversation; he admits that there is legitimate space in the culture to debate the nuances and complexities of affirmative action. But without telling the truth about the bloody history that made affirmative action necessary, we can hardly debate its finer points of application or abuse.

In making such arguments, Holder insists that black history is not only good for black Americans but vital for the entire country. Unlike others who lament black history's segregation into a month and therefore seek to get rid of the celebration, Holder sees the need for weaving black history into the fabric of ordinary American life and offering our citizens a critical tool of self-inventory while broadening the horizon of our nation's self-awareness around racial issues.

Holder understands that America's segregation of its history reflects its history -- and its present practice -- of segregating its people. Holder offers a strikingly alert and truthful account of how American social interaction follows patterns established some 50 years ago when the nation suffered the effects of Jim Crow and its mandate of legal separation of the races.

Now that official restraints have been loosened, Americans nonetheless retreat into what Holder calls "race-protected cocoons" and rely upon cliches, stereotypes and familiar habits of ethnic and racial congregation instead of opening ourselves to the undeniably uncomfortable, but ultimately rewarding, prospect of facing each other across the chasm of learned behaviors and inherited reflexes.

Holder is doing for race relations what [Ronald Reagan](#) did on June 12, 1987, for relations between Eastern Europe and the domineering Soviet Union when he declared from the base of the Brandenburg Gate to the Soviet leader about the menacing Berlin Wall, a symbol for Reagan of unjustly denied freedom: "Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall."

On February 18, 2009, Eric Holder offered a similarly tonic and provocative commentary on race when he begged us to cease from our cowardice and come out from our racial cocoons to confront the business at hand.

He is asking us to open the gates of history. He is asking us to tear down the walls of segregation that divide us and to walk into the daybreak of genuine freedom and justice

that President Obama's election as the nation's first black president, and his appointment as the nation's first black attorney general, so powerfully represents.

We couldn't ask for a finer interpretation of black history's importance to the nation, and for a fairer or more tough-minded speech on race in America.

America, open this gate of democracy and justice. America, tear down this wall of ignorance and segregation.