GOOD INTENTIONS GONE BAD?
WSJ’S JASON RILEY ON HIS NEW BOOK,
‘PLEASE STOP HELPING US: HOW LIBERALS MAKE IT HARDER FOR BLACKS TO SUCCEED’

INTRODUCTION:
ROBERT DOAR, AEI

GUEST SPEAKER:
JASON RILEY,
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ROBERT DOAR: OK. I think we’ll begin. Good evening, everyone. I’m Robert Doar. I’m a resident scholar here at the American Enterprise Institute. My focus is on poverty studies. And in addition to being new to AEI, I am very new to this format, so I hope you’ll forgive me as I stumble through an interview which I hope will be interesting and exciting. And then at some point we’ll open it up for questions from the audience.

We are very pleased today to have Jason Riley, a longtime Wall Street Journal journalist and now a member of the editorial board of the Wall Street Journal editorial page and the recent author of “Please Stop Helping Us: How Liberals Make It Harder for Blacks to Succeed.” He’s been – the book has had quite a good run, I think. All in all, people have been paying attention to it, and if you Google him or Google his appearances in the popular media, you’ll see that it’s gotten some nice reception.

It says a lot of provocative things, which I’m not going to quote, but hard, strong, important things. Jason is against hiking the minimum wage. He’s against affirmative action. He’s strong on crime and not pleased with soft-on-crime approaches in African-American communities, and he’s pro-school choice and for vouchers. And he says these things strongly.

Just to give you a little hint, he says, for instance, “We are in the second decade of the 21st century and a black man has twice been elected president in this country, where blacks are only 13 percent of the population. Yet liberals continue to pretend that it’s still 1965.”

So, Jason, my first question is, well, how’s it going? How has the reception been? How is the liberal and mainstream media receiving you? And how’s it faring?

JASON RILEY: Well, it depends on who specifically you’re talking about on the left. I think the black elites are responding the way they often do to black conservatives, which is either to ignore them or put them on the couch.

So I’ve often joked that, you know, Justice Scalia, as far as the left is concerned, is simply wrong or perhaps evil. But Justice Thomas is a sellout, self-hating Uncle Tom. They psychoanalyze him. And so you get a lot of that sort of ad hominem response from some on the left. Now, that’s when it comes to the black elites, by and large.

Among the black rank and file, I get a very different perception, at least as far as I can judge the social media and taking calls from – on talk radio and so forth. You get a – you get a different response, where I think the message, particularly the cultural arguments I make in the book, resonate in the black community with parents, with ministers, with store owners, and so forth. I think they agree that a lot of what’s been tried isn’t working, and they tell me about it.
MR. DOAR: So the way that you answer that question, it gets to me that it is a truism that liberals react more harshly to black conservatives than they do to white conservatives.

MR. RILEY: I’ve never been a white conservative. (Laughter.) I couldn’t answer that. You’d have to – you’ll have to ask – but I am very much against seeing – blacks seeing themselves as victims, so I’d have to push back a little bit on that.

MR. DOAR: OK. All right. That’s right. I guess if you answered yes to that then you’d be giving into that kind of rhetoric. So, now, the president of the United States is a liberal, Democrat, and he is also a strong family man, married, two children, lovely father, good husband, lovely wife. Do you think that the cultural issues in America about single-parent families and raising kids outside of marriage – do you think that he, just in that example, helps in this discussion?

MR. RILEY: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. And from time to time, he does talk about these things, about growing up without a father – the bad outcomes that result from that. He’s spoken to black audiences very pointedly about this, black college graduates and so forth, commencement addresses. Sometimes I wish it’s all he would ever talk about, but, unfortunately, he weighs in on other matters. But, no. I think this is something he does quite well.

The problem and I think the reason he doesn’t do it more often – and, by the way, Michelle Obama does it as well, they both do it, to their credit – is because they get their heads handed to them by black elites from the left. Your Michael Eric Dysons, your Tures, your whole MSNBC crowd does not like this talk. You might recall when Bill Cosby weighed in on black culture some years ago, he got slammed. He got slammed. And that’s generally what happens to you, no matter who you are on the left or right. When you start talking about personal responsibility in the black community, you are taking the focus off of white behavior, and that is not something that the black left wants to allow, particularly the traditional black left in the civil rights community, who have a vested interest in keeping the focus on white behavior, not black behavior.

MR. DOAR: You know, I’m the – I said in my introduction that I work in poverty. I was the commissioner of social services in the city of New York. And the issue of non-marital births and the extent to which too many children in America – black, white, Hispanic – are raised outside of two married parent families makes it hard for social services professionals to help people as successfully as they’d like to. And you talk about some of that in the book. You talk about culture in the book. What do you think we could do as a country to turn the trend around on children being raised in single-parent families?

MR. RILEY: Well, it wasn’t always this way. I believe as late as 1960, two out of three black kids grew up in two-parent homes in this country. Today, more than 70 percent do not. It’s quite a turnaround in a relatively short period of time.
I think what public policymakers could do – and this gets to the title of the book – it’s really what they can stop doing, which is putting in place incentives that I think do not help in terms of encouraging responsible child rearing, or even responsible child bearing.

The central premise of this book is that blacks, ultimately, must help themselves by developing the same attitudes and habits and behaviors that other groups in America have developed in order to rise. And to the extent that a government program or policy, however well intentioned, interferes with that self-development, it’s ultimately doing more harm than good. So trying to replace the father in a home with a government check may seem like a compassionate thing to do, but you are not encouraging that group to develop a work ethic when you do that, which is ultimately what they must develop in order to rise out of poverty and stay out of poverty.

So, again, it’s what the government needs to stop doing – stop pricing young blacks, inexperienced blacks out of the labor force by increasing minimum wage laws; stop trapping them in failing schools by blocking school choice. It’s what the government should stop doing that I focus on in the book.

MR. DOAR: Now, you – when we came up on the way up in the elevator, we were talking about another topic you’ve discussed in writing. You wrote a book called “Let Them In,” about immigration. And sometimes you’ll hear among some people that open immigration is detrimental to the job prospects of young African-Americans in the cities. How do you react to that? You reacted to it on the way up and I’d like to hear more on that.

MR. RILEY: Yes. I pick the easy topics, the ones that bring us together as a country: immigration and race. (Laughter.) I think minimum wage laws are much more detrimental to black job prospects than immigrants. And if you look at labor force participation rates and compare them to the varying levels of immigration over the decades, you don’t see much change in black (labor ?) participation rates. Blacks aren’t really competing for these jobs, and that’s get back to the work ethic I think in black ghettos, attitudes towards work, and a lack of stigma for not having a job or not even attempting to look for one.

You could also look at black unemployment under Bush or Clinton, which was lower, even though we had more immigrants coming into the country back then – a lot more immigrants, both legal and illegal, than we have today.

So, again, economists like Richard Vedder, Ohio University, and others have looked at immigration trends over the entire 20th century and found that lower levels of unemployment are associated with higher levels of immigration. I’m just not someone who sees U.S. labor markets as a fixed pie, as a zero-sum game. An immigrant coming here to take one job does not mean one fewer job for you and me. It’s not a static situation as I see our labor markets.
MR. DOAR: The immigration discussion and your current role at the Wall Street Journal, not that the Wall Street Journal plays a big role in the immigration debate or has a strong position on the immigration debate, reminds me of my position here with our president, Arthur Brooks. He is often saying conservatives need to make peace with the safety net. And we need to understand that relief is going to be a necessary ingredient of providing assistance to people that are struggling. Now, there may be other elements. And I wanted to ask you, in the anti-poverty fight, what are some things that you would do? And do you accept that relief has to be available?

MR. RILEY: I think I don’t have a problem with the safety net per se, but we have to be very careful about putting the wrong incentives in place. I’m also very hesitant of attempting another huge wealth redistribution scheme in the aim of helping the black core. That’s what the Great Society program was in essence. And the black white poverty divide is wider today than it was in 1960. Black poverty is no longer falling in this country.

So the idea that we need yet another huge wealth redistribution scheme – on the left, it’s slavery reparations – if we cut everyone a check, we’ll do something. I just don’t buy it. I’ll give you a statistic a lot of people aren’t familiar with: the black poverty rate among married couples in America is in the single digits, and has been for 20 years. There’s your anti-poverty program: get married before you have kids.

MR. DOAR: So, you know, I worked in welfare reform, so the famous Clinton TANF legislation, all the way back in 1996, passed and changed welfare as we know it. One element of it was a kind of new paternalism in that offices like the ones I’ve run gave a lot of instruction and guidance and sanction for failure to comply with appointments and work requirements and workfare.

MR. RILEY: You’ll be happy to know that Mayor de Blasio is rolling all of that back as we speak.

MR. DOAR: Yeah. Yeah. I’m thrilled by that, I assure you.

MR. RILEY: In the name of compassion.

MR. DOAR: Yeah. Well, the question is, is that’s a government intervention and that’s a relief linked to responsibility. Does that make you a little more comfortable with programs for the poor designed to help them but in a better way?

MR. RILEY: Of course. I think there is a right way to do this and a wrong way to do it. Open-ended welfare benefits don’t help people develop a work ethic, but time limits do. And we know that works because we had welfare reform not only coming out of Washington, but we know what Giuliani did, we know what Bloomberg continued to do not only in New York, but in other large cities. And we saw welfare rolls shrink as a result. So, you know, you give people an incentive to get a job, you get more people
looking for jobs. Yeah. I just think it’s about getting it right. Again, it’s not an aversion to a safety net per se.

MR. DOAR: Or aversion to assistance to – (inaudible).

MR. RILEY: No. No.

MR. DOAR: Yeah. OK.

MR. RILEY: There are limits. I mean, there are limits to what the government can do to help, beyond providing a leveled playing field. This is another mentality that comes – that came out of the Great Society program where Johnson said, you know, equality of opportunity is not enough. We need equality of results, which you’re never going to find – not here, not anywhere, not ever. But that has become the goal. And then, in the absence of that, to assume something’s wrong, the government isn’t doing all it can so it needs to tip the scales a little bit here or a little bit there. That’s where we get into trouble, that sort of social engineering.

I mean, all the job programs, all the job training programs in the world aren’t going to help if a group doesn’t have a work ethic. School vouchers aren’t going to work if a group doesn’t value education. So it does – in some sense, what I get at the book – come back to cultural attitudes, anti-social, counterproductive cultural attitudes in the black community that don’t get enough attention because that’s not where the black leadership wants to focus matters.

MR. DOAR: OK. So let’s pursue that a little because I’m familiar with that in my own way, and it’s not in the same way that you are, I recognize, in that I ran an agency that was 75 percent minority, mostly Democrat, all labor union members. And they all had come into work because they saw an opportunity to work in social services. I ran the welfare agency in New York City.

But I found that the people that I had working on the front line were some of the most conservative welfare policy thinkers you could find. They believed in responsibility. They believed in work. They believed in family. They believed in people having to step up. So in that little culture of our office place – not just me, but my predecessor, Jason Turner, who worked for Mayor Giuliani, we were able to turn the culture of our office to be strongly supportive of the kinds of things you’re talking about. And the people that were in that culture were African-American, Hispanic New Yorkers.

And I’m not patting myself on the back – or maybe I am – but my question is, can that kind of shift among people change in the country at large? You’ve mentioned a couple of times black leaders. So do we need more black leaders saying things the way you do that will help shift that and would that do it?

MR. RILEY: I don’t know if leaders need to be black per se. You know, one of the best charter school networks in New York City is run by a white woman, Eva
Moskowitz, who I’m sure you’re familiar with. As far as I’m concerned, she’s a black leader. I mean, her students are 80, 90 percent black, low income, free and reduced lunch qualified. She’s doing wonders with this group that the left likes to blame for the failure of the public education system. She’s showing it’s not the kids. It’s the schools. She’s producing the same scores in Harlem that you’re getting in Scarsdale.

So I just think blacks in general deserve a better leadership, political leadership, better social policies, but I don’t care who’s promoting them, the skin color of the person promoting them. I just want to see results. And, right now, the policies that are being tried on behalf of helping blacks clearly are not working. I think it’s a very poor track record.

MR. DOAR: Well, you know, that’s – I’m glad you mentioned Eva Moskowitz because she also showed that she knew how to use political power and the very people you’re talking about, parents and families of the kids in those schools. And when she did, it turned the tide back in her favor. So, in a way, that’s a really great example of a possibility – it was the first time I had seen in a long time a mobilization of African-American families in New York City against the hardcore, mainstream Democratic Party, because that’s what de Blasio represented in his efforts to roll back charter schools. So that – I think you’re right. There’s a sign of hope there that results do matter. And people, when they see better results, will turn their opinions around.

MR. RILEY: It’s also an example of the disconnect between the black elites and the black rank and file. Education policy in general, as you know, the black left is allying themselves with the teachers unions who put the needs of their members ahead of the needs of the kids, and this has been going on for a long time, this alliance. You know, you go back to the busing wars of the ’70s. NAACP wants these black kids put on buses. Of course, their kids weren’t the ones on the buses, but the black parents wanted the schools in the neighborhood.

You had a divide back there today. You mentioned President Obama. Since the day he entered the office, he’s been trying to shut down the voucher program here in Washington. This Justice Department is trying to shut down one in Louisiana. He claims he wants higher graduation rates, higher college attendance. There’s empirical data out there showing that vouchers produce both. Yet he opposes them, not because vouchers don’t work but because he has a political need to do so because of the Democrats’ alliance with the teachers unions. So there is this huge disconnect between the people who claim to speak on behalf of the interest of the black core and what the black core actually want and need.

I’ll give you another example in New York City. Wal-Mart’s been trying to build a store in a depressed neighborhood in Brooklyn for years. Black leadership, political, civil rights initiative sides with the unions. We don’t want Wal-Mart to build that store because they won’t use union labor. So here you have the black elites who’d rather people in these communities stay unemployed than work at a Wal-Mart.
MR. DOAR: So affirmative action. Your book is very strongly opposed to any kind of affirmative action based on race. And you raise the issue – you say going forward, defenders of affirmative action will have to explain why blacks deserve preference over Asians to address past behavior of whites. And that’s an issue for New Yorkers that’s very common.

I once – I was sitting next to a woman who was probably liberal and I was talking to her at something. And she told me about the makeup of the kids in Stuyvesant, the most selective public school in New York City, or one of the most selective public schools in New York City. And she said, only 2 percent of all the kids in Stuyvesant are minorities. And I looked at her, and I said, Asians are not minorities? And she said, oh, I didn’t mean that.

But my question to you on that is you also point out that Asian-American leaders or Asian immigrant leaders have not broken, or seem to be more likely to be aligned with Democrats or with pro-affirmative action constituency groups. What causes that? Why is that? And do you think that will change – is that going to change as time goes on?

MR. RILEY: Well, I’d be careful. I think the argument is that Asian civil rights organizations have typically aligned with their black and Hispanic counterparts. And the question is when that may end.

And we had an example of some tension in California recently where the Democrats had the super-majority in the state legislature and a Democratic governor in Jerry Brown, and were starting to just grab anything off the shelf and push it through while they had the numbers to do so. And they got the idea of trying to roll back the ban on affirmative action in college admissions – racial preferences in college admissions to the University of California system. And a number of Asian lawmakers said, oh, no, no, no. We get hurt disproportionately when we move away from a meritocracy. It’s our kids who get hurt. You know, there may not be a fixed number of jobs in America, but there are a fixed number of slots at elite school freshmen classes. And Asians dominate in a lot of these schools when it comes to filling those slots.

And so when you start moving away from test scores and GPA and class rank to more subjective measures, Asians get hurt, and they pushed back. And I can see this happening quite a bit more going forward as the number of Asian population in the U.S. rises.

But Asians complicate a lot of arguments made on the left with regard to racism as an all-purpose explanation for black outcomes, whether it’s lending – claims made by the left that banks loan to – don’t loan to blacks at the same rates as they loan to whites but they don’t loan to whites at the same rates that they loan to Asians and no one accuses the banks of being anti-white. You look at school suspension rates, where blacks are suspended at a higher rate than whites. Well, whites are suspended at a higher rate than Asians but no one calls the school suspension outcomes anti-white. But Asians tend to complicate things for the black left when it comes to these discussions.
MR. DOAR: So one of the – for those of you who haven’t read book, one of the best parts about the book is Jason talks about his one personal life growing up I believe in Western New York or Buffalo?

MR. RILEY: Yes, Buffalo, which is in – (inaudible).

MR. DOAR: Yeah. One mistake – (inaudible) – I do know that.

MR. RILEY: New York City guys, I know. You can’t really –

MR. DOAR: That’s right.

MR. RILEY: All –

MR. DOAR: All right. Well, that’s another story. So how did this happen? How did Jason Riley become a black conservative?

MR. RILEY: Well, I didn’t grow up in a particularly political household where we sat around discussing these things at the dinner table. I guess it started late in high school, when I had to start reading newspapers for a class or something like that, current events, and started reading our local paper which would run – had a pretty lively editorial page and op-ed page where I’d read columnists like Charles Krauthammer and George Will and William Safire, alongside columnists like William Raspberry and Carl Rowan and Alan Goodman and the like. And I – one side made more sense to me than the other.

And it probably started there. I came from a very religious home so one of the cultural conservatives. Most probably – the groundwork was probably laid there with the churchgoing and spending so much time around the congregation. Then, in college, I discovered people like Tom Sowell and Shelby Steele and Walter Williams. And that’s when I think my thinking on this really started to evolve.

MR. DOAR: And you feel that you have an adequate ability to get your views out, that the Wall Street Journal editorial page is a good place to be published?

MR. RILEY: Oh, certainly. Certainly. It’s been a lot of fun. You get a lot of exposure. I’m also a Fox News contributor so I get on television and get to talk about some of these things there.

The social media – the fragmentation of our viewing habits has really hit home when I started promoting this book because under my Fox contract, I’m only supposed to appear on Fox unless I’m promoting a book. Then I can appear on other networks. I started exploring this window of opportunity and going on NBC, CNN, and C-SPAN, and the rest. And you walk off the set, and the social media is so polarizing; you’re either a genius or a pond scum. There’s nothing in between – nothing. It’s immediate. The response is immediate and fierce. And it’s a – it was quite an eye-opener.
I mean, I’d read these studies about how people watch what they want to hear and – I mean, I did “Meet the Press” once and I walked off the set – I mean, I’ve been doing television 15 years. I walked off the “Meet the Press” set; I got an e-mail from someone I hadn’t heard from in a decade. Oh, you do TV? I mean, either you watch Fox or you don’t. Either you watch CNN or you don’t. And, I mean, my wife and I sit around flipping, but I guess a lot of people don’t do that.

MR. DOAR: And that’s sort of troubling really because that – I mean, we’re not hearing – Americans aren’t hearing enough – they’re hearing only what they want to hear and not something different. Now, the middle of rolling out a book or actually a little bit afterwards, of course, we’ve had what’s happened in Ferguson, Missouri. And I wanted to ask you about your reaction to that just generally and your reaction to the reaction to that.

MR. RILEY: OK. Whenever we have these flare-ups, whether it’s a Ferguson or a Trayvon Martin, my concern is that we start having discussions but they’re the wrong discussions. They’re discussions really on what I would consider side issues that don’t really get at the underlying problem. So we start talking about gun control or racial profiling or tensions between the black community and the police or unemployment and poverty in these communities.

But what I think what is underlying episodes like that is black criminality in America. It is the black crime rate. Blacks are about 13 percent of the population. They commit about half of all murders in this country. Blacks are arrested at two to three times their numbers in the population for all manner of violent crime, all manner of property crime. Until we solve that problem, until we get at that racial disparity in crime rates, there’s going to be tension between the black community and police. There’s going to be racial profiling.

Young black men are going to be perceived a certain way so long as those crime statistics are what they are today. If you want to get at those perceptions, if you want to get at that tension in the black community, you need to get at the behavior that is driving those perceptions. And that is not the conversation we tend to have when these things happen. We start talking about – do cops value black lives? Does America value black lives? Well, given that half of the murders are committed by blacks and 90 percent of their victims are other blacks, shouldn’t we first be asking if the black thugs in these communities value black lives? Am I supposed to hold whites to a higher standard than I hold blacks when it comes to valuing black lives?

So I want to have the right conversation. I want to talk about black criminality, personal responsibility, and I don’t want to fob it off on, oh, it’s racism. It’s a racist criminal justice system. The black incarceration rate in 1960 was lower than it is today. Was there less racism in 1960? The black crime rate in the 1940s and ’50s was lower than it is today. Was there less racism that time? These are dodges, and I don’t think we
want to have the conversation that needs to be had if we’re ever going to get at addressing the underlying problem.

MR. DOAR: Now, I did hear you on one of the shows, however, say that if the action by the police officer in this case or any other case was an example of bad policing or criminal behavior that the process should be followed –

MR. RILEY: Sure.

MR. DOAR: – and seen through. So you’re not ignoring the possibility that in the particular instance –

MR. RILEY: No, I said if excessive force was used, they should prosecute it. But let’s not pretend – (laughs) –

MR. DOAR: Yeah, OK.

MR. RILEY: – that the black homicide rate is what it is because cops are shooting black people. It’s because other black people are shooting black people. The cops are not the problem. The cops are in these communities because that’s where the 911 calls originate.

MR. DOAR: I was talking to –

MR. RILEY: You’re there trying to protect the law-abiding residents of these communities. And that’s where my sympathies lie – with the law-abiding residents in these communities, who are the majority of these communities. I mean, we had – we got into this discussion about the over-militarization of the response. Do you know – we sent the First Airborne Division into Little Rock – (laughs) – to handle segregation of schools. Were the same people today complaining about the over-militarization of Ferguson complaining about Little Rock in 1950s and the response there by the federal government?

MR. DOAR: So let’s turn to – since you brought up Little Rock, let’s talk about the history of civil rights movement and the Voting Rights Act. It’s also something that you cover in your book. One of the things that you talk a lot about is the extent to which what happened in the 1960s with regard to the civil rights movement, I think you used the phrase, was liberalism at its best.

MR. RILEY: Yeah. Yeah, I agree. I think it was. The freedom riders, Thurgood Marshall, Martin Luther King, what those guys were doing, I think, made America more just for everyone. And I think we can all be proud of what was accomplished. The issue is what has arisen from the ruins of Jim Crow in terms of public policy going forward to help low-income blacks in particular.
MR. DOAR: Right, but I’m sticking on the South for a minute. You talked a little bit about the changing political dynamic in the South, in the old South states – Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama – and indicated that the decision by the court to overturn the preclearance in the Voting Rights Act –

MR. RILEY: Oh, yeah. Well, the – this is of a piece with the civil rights movement’s attempt to pretend it’s still 1960 in order to maintain relevance. I mean, one of the arguments I make in the book, you know, people complain about the quality of black leadership today, but I see it as a sort of sign of progress. I mean, if – because people like Thurgood Marshall and Martin Luther King and others handled the serious business more than half a century ago.

I mean, if blacks are still being disenfranchised, if legal segregation still exists, I think, you know, the best and brightest of the black community would come to the fore and go fight those things. But those battles have been fought and won. And so you’re left with sort of second and third-tier types today, running around the country, trying to pretend that nothing’s change because we’ve still got a Donald Sterling out there. And it looks a little ridiculous, but I think it is a sign of some progress.

With respect to the South’s change, one of the things I point to is that – and this is in the realm of politics – the black voter turnout rate in 2012 was higher than the white voter turnout rate. A lot of people missed that. In 2008, Barack Obama outperformed both John Kerry in ’04 and Al Gore in 2000 in Texas, Georgia, and the Carolinas. I think that’s progress.

MR. DOAR: OK, I’m going to finish. Before I open it up, I just – I want to, again, ask you to – that’s a progress positive note, but what more leads you to be hopeful about changing these issues concerning poverty or the culture or black leadership? Is there anything else besides the appearance of your book? I mean, is there something that we can hold on to and the build on to –

MR. RILEY: Well, I mentioned Eva Moskowitz, who runs a charter network up in Harlem. And the school choice movement, I think, is a real beacon of hope for me. I think getting these kids a decent education is extremely important. I think as these charter schools succeed, they’ll develop a critical mass of graduates and people who will support them and promote them going forward, because it’s their personal experience in dealing with them. So there’ll be sort of a critical mass of support for them going forward. And I’m very hopeful there with that development. We know these kids can learn, if given the opportunity. And this movement is proving that and it continues to grow.

I’d like to see more voucher programs out there. But I think we’ll get there, but right now, the charter movement does seem to be a viable alternative to failing public schools. And I think it’s a very hopeful sign, of course.

MR. DOAR: While I’m on that, the recent flurry of activity among prominent conservatives and Republicans, especially those who might be running for president on
poverty issues – Paul Ryan, Marco Rubio – as a conservative, how do you respond to those? Does that worry you as being a little squishy, or do you think there’s some merit there?

MR. RILEY: Well, as a – do you mean as a sort of form of black outreach by Republicans?

MR. DOAR: Yes.

MR. RILEY: Or just, or – well, I think – I often get asked why more blacks don’t vote Republican, given the poor track record of Democrats in terms of these outcomes in the black community. And one reason, I’d argue, is that Republicans don’t do a lot of black outreach. You have exceptions. You had Jack Kemp back in the ’80s. You had Richard Riordan, Los Angeles mayor. You have Chris Christie in New Jersey and in his reelection bid he did go into Camden and places like that, and I think it paid off in terms of the black vote. Now, you have Paul Ryan doing some of this traveling around with Bob Woodson and other people like that, introducing themselves to these communities.

I’m hopeful they’ll continue to do that. But to date, they’re really exceptions to the rule. And I don’t ascribe racial animus to that. I think the issue primarily is a sort of political pragmatism. The Republican Party doesn’t feel it needs the black vote to win. And until it does, I don’t expect to see a lot of Republicans courting black voters. Time spent courting one group is time not spent courting another group.

Right now, we’re having this huge debate in the GOP over the Latino vote and whether Republicans can win elections going forward without more Hispanic voters. There’s no such discussion going on about the black vote in the GOP right now to my knowledge. And again, I don’t think you’ll see that until Republican feel they need these voters going forward.

MR. DOAR: OK. All right, so let’s open it up to any questions from the audience. I’m going to point to you and then someone’s going to bring you a mike. And we’re big fans of questions or statements in the form of questions. And we have one right here, gentleman in the front row, over here, right there.

Thank you, Claire.

Q: Thank you. Mr. Riley, I appreciate your comments very much. I’m Bruce Greenberg from Brinkmann Publishing. You mentioned several times the gap between black left leadership and the rank and file. So the question for me is, why hasn’t the political process helped make that gap less? Why haven’t black entrepreneurs, black political entrepreneurs sought to displace those people?

MR. RILEY: That’s a good question. One of the arguments in the book is that the left has made blacks overreliant on the government. And that’s both in terms of jobs, post office workers, your military personnel, civil service jobs, and so forth. And then, you
have an overreliance in terms of handouts, welfare benefits, food stamps, or what have you. But it is an overreliance on government per se, a feeling that big government is good for blacks. And they hold on to the black vote that way. They like that status quo. We’re the party that gives you things. And the black community, I think, has been taken in by that. But it’s not only the black poor that have that mentality.

I was speaking to a group of very accomplished blacks – a black graduate fraternity – a couple of months ago. And about 40 men, all Stanford graduates and law partners and doctors and engineers and so forth, room full of them. And we started talking about affirmative action. Some of these guys are second, third generation college graduates, convinced that they’re where they are because of affirmative action. I mean, the left has done a brilliant job of convincing blacks that these government programs have produced the outcomes we see today in terms of the size of the black middle class.

And I said to them, you know, the data on affirmative action does not suggest what you think it suggests. When the University of California system ended affirmative action, in 1996, black college graduation rates increased by more than 50 percent, including in the more difficult disciplines like math and science and engineering. Again, by more than 50 percent. So a policy that had been in place to increase the black college graduate ranks, the size of the black middle class, was in fact producing fewer black doctors and lawyers and engineers and dentists than we otherwise would have had in the absence of this policy.

And the reaction was just – it was shocking. No, no, no, no, no, it can’t be. How’s that possible? I said, well, there’s a mismatching problem that occurs with affirmative action. Kids are funneled in to schools where they’re overmatched in terms of the workload, and they subsequently often switch to an easier major or drop out of school altogether. And that’s what was happening. And once that stopped happening, because you couldn’t take racism to account, more blacks were attending more schools where they could do the work and more were subsequently graduating.

So it’s interesting that you have this mentality that there’s this – and not to mention the fact that prior to the implementation of affirmative action policies in the ’70s, you had blacks entering the professions at a faster rate than you did in the decades following the implementation of affirmative action policies. That history, too, is completely lost on them and lost on a lot of people, which is one of the reasons I put it in the book. But my point is that you have this overreliance on government as a solution, as a friend to the black community. You have that among a lot of blacks, whether you’re talking about lower-income blacks or even in many cases higher-income blacks.

MR. DOAR: OK, way in the back, gentleman with the blue jacket.

Q: Nick Hahn, RealClearPolitics, RealClearReligion. I’m curious – you’re referencing the black criminality and the black behavior as sort of the animus for this. You’ve written elsewhere that there’s even a more underlying problem and I’d like to get
your comments on that, is the breakup of the black family and the precipitous decline of the black family. So I’d like to hear your comments on that.

MR. RILEY: Well, yeah, I think we spoke to this a little earlier, but I mentioned the statistic that as late as 1960, two out of three black kids were raised in two-parent homes, and today more than 70 percent are not. And the social science on the bad outcomes associated with not having a black man in the home, I mean the social science is pretty clear and pretty voluminous on this. The outcomes in terms of teen pregnancy and drug use, involvement with the criminal justice system, just dropping out of school, you just go down the list of bad outcomes associated with absent fathers, and that’s what you have in the black community as the norm these days. And I think that is a huge problem. You saw the looting in Ferguson. You see these wilding episodes all around the country. It’s black criminality. It’s this warped sense in the black community of what it means to be black, what it means to be a man, the whole acting white phenomenon, the anti-intellectual stream.

One episode I related in the book involves my niece, back in Buffalo. I went home to see her. This had to be some 20 years ago. She was maybe seven or eight years old. And having a conversation with her and her little friend before dinner one night, and she stops me midsentence and says, “Uncle Jason, why do you talk white?” She said – turned to her little friend and said, “Doesn’t my uncle sound white? Why is he trying to sound so smart?” Seven-, eight-year-old little girl associating race with intelligence and knowing enough, even at that age, how not to sound if you don’t want to be made fun of. She’s going to make a conscious effort to speak broken English. She’s seven years old. And then we wonder why black kids are graduating, black 17-year-olds are reading and doing math at the level of white 13-year-olds?

It starts at a very young age. It’s cultural. Kids who raise their hands in class, who are bookish, who are nerdy, get made fun of, get beat up, get harassed. This is one of the reasons that drives me crazy, this whole anti-black suspension movement that Obama and Duncan have been pushing in our public schools, trying to pressure schools into racial parity in suspension rates, regardless of who’s doing the bullying. How are you helping the kids who are in school to learn by going easy on the bullies? And why would we expect to see racial parity in suspension rates in schools anyway? Do we see them outside of school? Do you see racial parity in the prison system? Do you think this bad behavior just starts after the kids leave school?

So again, all in an effort to help. They’re trying to help. They see these disparities in outcomes and it’s so sad. And there must be something wrong in what we’re doing if we have these disparities. But they won’t talk about what’s really driving those disparities, which are certain values and sensibilities and habits and attitudes within these black ghettos that is producing these outcomes. And that’s the conversation we need to have in this country.

MR. DOAR: OK, right in the middle there, the gentleman.
Q: Hi. My name is Kenneth (Rothschild ?). It’s not everything that you discuss that bothers me. What bothers me is if – and the liberals do this, too. It’s like if you frame everything in this old style, we never get real solutions. For example, if I listen to what you said, the projection was that all this crime in the ghetto, these bad habits and bad culture. That’s a small percentage of people, too. A lot of that crime is very small percentage. And we’re not –

MR. RILEY: It’s what I said. I said the majority of people in these communities are law-abiding.

Q: I don’t know. Maybe I didn’t remember that part. OK, but what I’m saying it persists in the same old, same old, is that the people that aren’t making it are living off the dole and that’s all they want to do. The economy and the nature of the economy and the jobs available to people to pull themselves out by the bootstraps has changed. And that’s part of the discussion, too. And I just would appreciate your comments on that because –

MR. DOAR: That’s a good question. How about a comment?

MR. RILEY: It’s changed for everyone. Why is it disproportionately harming blacks?

Q: (Off mic.)

MR. RILEY: Do blacks operate in a different economy than whites and Asians?

Q: (Off mic.)

MR. RILEY: Can you elaborate on that?

Q: I don’t know if they – (off mic.)

MR. DOAR: Yeah, let’s do that.

Q: One of the big issues with affirmative action is the whole question of class-based affirmative action, you know, which some people have talked about and also what about – the incidents in Ferguson, Missouri, raised the whole question of driving while black and how some African-Americans are disproportionately treated badly by police. Could you talk about that as well?

MR. RILEY: So that’s two questions. One was on income-based and class-based affirmative action. No, I’m not a fan of class based either. Either we’re going to treat people as individuals or not. And once you get away from that and start with the social engineering, I just think it’s a very slippery slope. And so no, I would not be in favor of trying to move to a class-based system, either.
And the whole idea of trying to solve this problem at the college level to me is a little ridiculous. If you look at our K-12 education system and the inequities there in terms of quality of schools, why would you expect – what are you going to solve all this freshman year I the college with a few remedial classes? I just – I don’t – I don’t – and the second part, the driving while black – I can just – trust me, it is not that hard to avoid getting shot by cops. It really is not that hard. It’s much more difficult for these young black men to avoid getting shot by other young black men in the community. There’s a much higher chance of that happening, an exponentially higher chance of that happening.

Q: (Off mic.)

MR. RILEY: If – well, I’m declining to try and litigate this in the press. I don’t know all the facts. I do know that the cops in these communities are not the problem. People complain about these communities being over-policing, but, again, they’re there because that’s where the 9/11 calls originate. That’s why the cops are there.

MR. DOAR: Jason, can I ask you a question about statistics, just interrupt that. And then I’m going to have – you’re going to have the last question, OK? You talked earlier about a disparity in outcomes between households with two parents and versus single parents – married households, including within the black community. I think at one point you said this. When we talk about outcomes for children or outcomes for Americans, what do you think if we focus more on those disparities between the black or white, Hispanic, were you raised – are you in a household with two married parents versus not, and then see how those two different groups do in schools or with criminal justice. Does that make it a little – well, certainly less racial and more about parenting and how to successfully raise children?

MR. RILEY: Well, I mean, I discuss in the racial context because I think it’s of a piece with other cultural problems. If – there are some white women out there and some black women out there who, if they decide to have a child out of wedlock, they’re going to be fine and the kids are going to be fine. But chances are that is not the case in the ghetto because of so many other issues going on in the community. So it’s – I don’t divorce the problem from race in my discussion of it in this book. I can understand why you might want to do that as a sort of academic exercise, but in the context that I’m discussing it here, I think it’s a of a piece with certain behaviors and attitudes towards marriage and fatherhood.

MR. DOAR: Which are not only in the black community.

MR. RILEY: Bill Cosby said, you know, pull up your pants, finish school, take care of your kids. Those shouldn’t be fighting words on the left, but they are. That’s blaming the victim. That’s condescending. That’s talking down to people. You can’t state – we all know, everyone in this room knows the stepping stones to the middle class: education, hard work, delayed gratification. Those are not the cultural values of the ghetto, and that’s got to change if you want to change these outcomes.
MR. DOAR: One last question.

Q: (Off mic.)

MR. RILEY: Nothing can do what good parenting can do. That’s the problem. And I think those outcomes you’re describing in preschool kids have a lot to do with the parenting they get between birth and entering school – the size of their vocabulary, their attention span, and so forth. And again, that gets back – that gets back to responsible child bearing and responsible parenting.

And I don’t know – I don’t have the solutions and this book certainly doesn’t pretend to have the solutions, but I think we have a good 50 years of Great Society programs to look at to see what does not work. And I focus on stopping – (laughs) – no longer doing what we know doesn’t work. And I think that is the beginning of getting at the solution.

In terms of people moving out of – you know, climbing socioeconomically, I think you’re going to find that among all groups. And I don’t have a problem with that per se. The problem in the black community is the cycle, this generational cycle of not rising. And that’s a persistent problem, the cycle of dependency, generations of welfare use and so forth. It’s not a temporary situation for a lot of black families to be in this situation, and then move out or to have their children move out. What we’re seeing is generation after generation after generation, and that to me is the real problem.

MR. DOAR: OK, thank you very much. I hope you’ll thank Jason, our guest. (Applause.) I feel a little bit like saying, and so what do we have for our guests, but I know that’s not what I want to say. Are we having a little gathering here now? There’s a reception, so we welcome all to the reception. Thank you.

(END)