



Cornel West and Donald Trump (Chauncey DeVega/Getty Images/Chip Somodevilla)

## Cornel West on hope and resistance in the age of Trump: We must "find joy in the struggle"

Controversial scholar on why he criticized Obama, why he's backing Bernie and how black people taught America love

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**CHAUNCEY DEVEGA**

NOVEMBER 3, 2019 5:04PM (UTC)

**D**onald Trump's presidency is a stress test for American democracy, the rule of law and the U.S. Constitution. The enduring strength of American democracy has long been prefaced on the assumption that the country's leaders — especially the president — had some basic respect for democracy. Moreover, the president was assumed by both elites and the public to be a person who wanted to leave the country better off than it was when he or she first took office. Donald Trump has exposed these assumptions as grossly naïve, paper-thin restraints on a person who has shown **himself to be mentally unwell, as well as an authoritarian demagogue.**

Donald Trump is an American fascist. His movement — the supporters, enablers, voters, the Republican Party and the conservative media — are implements of Trump's will. In TrumpWorld he is a king or emperor whose perfidy, greed and ego supersede the common good and American democracy. As with other authoritarians and demagogues, **cruelty** and the ever-present threat of violence is both how Trump enforces their will as well as being an end goal in themselves.

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Trumpism is a crisis of public policy. Trumpism is a moral crisis. Trumpism is a psychological, emotional and physical assault on the American people. Defeating Trumpism will require a critical intervention across all areas of America's political culture and institutions.

I recently spoke with philosopher, public intellectual, activist, scholar, and author Dr. Cornel West about resistance and hope in the age of Trump as well as the unique role that black Americans have played in sustaining and fighting for the country's democracy. West is Professor of the Practice of Public Philosophy at Harvard and a professor emeritus at Princeton. He is the author of several bestselling books, including "**Democracy Matters**," "**Race Matters**" and "**Black Prophetic Fire**."

In this wide-ranging conversation, West explained how Donald Trump embodies the worst of American society — but that Trump’s rise to power should not be a surprise. He also reflected on his support of Bernie Sanders, his criticisms of Barack Obama, and why **American society needs challenging truth-tellers such as comedian Dave Chappelle.**

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This conversation has been edited for clarity and length.

**Several weeks ago, I received an email from someone who reads my essays and listens to my podcasts. This person wrote, "Chauncey, I appreciate everything you're writing about Trump and fascism, and this culture of cruelty, but it's upsetting me and scaring me. I don't know what to do." Then the person wrote, "Please stop." Their learned helplessness was so depressing and sad. What would you have told them?**

Oh no. You don't want to stop it. You just tell that person it is difficult for me to think about these topics and live through this moment too. But that's the way in which any of us will be

strengthened and empowered. Stopping is not going to lead us to be empowered at all. Not at all.

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### **How do we inspire Americans and others to get over that learned helplessness?**

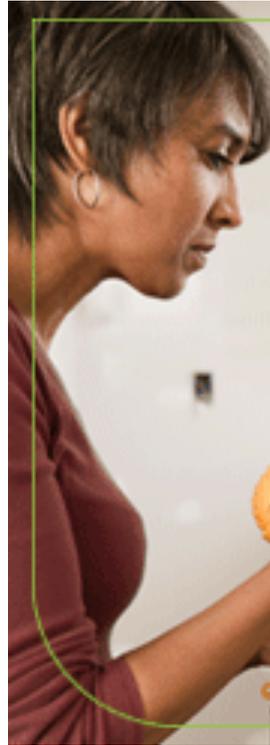
You recognize that it's just a moment. That's all it is. There are always moments in which all of us feel helpless. All of us feel impotent. You're standing before your mama's coffin, you're going to feel helpless, and you ought to be because you can't do anything about it. You love her to death, but you've got to learn how to acknowledge the helplessness. You've got to learn how to wrestle with it and know that there will be moments, instances in which you will feel so thoroughly impotent and so thoroughly helpless that you will feel like giving up. There is nothing wrong with feeling like giving up.

He or she who has never despaired has never lived. It's just a sign that you are alive. And then from there you recognize that it's just a moment. And that time is going to pass. And that's when you bounce back and say, "What would she want you to do? How will her afterlife in part be at work in your life? Would she want her afterlife to be you feeling helpless for the next 10 years?" That isn't your mother's legacy. You have to be true to her.

And the same is true in terms of struggle for something bigger than us. What would Malcolm say? What would Martin say? What would Fannie Lou Hamer say? What would Ida B. Wells say? What would Toni Morrison say? All of these warriors who have passed away, we have to be true to them.

**How do you define the "Black" in the "Black Freedom Struggle"? Do we as black folks — as black Americans specifically — have a special obligation to struggle in this moment of fascism and authoritarianism against Donald Trump's regime?**

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The Black Freedom Struggle has always been the leaven in the American democratic loaf. Therefore, when we as black folks go stale, the whole project is going to go stale. And we've seen this in the last few decades. But I don't think we do struggle just because we're Americans. We do it because we are human beings trying to have integrity, honesty, decency, generosity and courage. Because it's just not an American project. It's a global project. It's an international project. It's a human and humane project. It goes far beyond national boundaries and national lines. It includes America, but it goes far beyond it.

**When I write about the long Black Freedom Struggle, I always try to locate that struggle as part of a broader global struggle for human rights. How can we do a better job of communicating those relationships?**

Part of doing that work is realizing that we are in a moment now where people's conception of community has been degenerated into a conception of constituency. It's that people's conception of a cause has been degenerated into a conception of a brand. People's conception of the public has been degenerated into PR strategies. This creates a spiritually and morally impoverished culture. And so in order to have some notion of human rights that is actually full of content and substance, one has to have some primacy of the moral and the ethical. The calculations cannot be just the Machiavellian. So much of the culture just comes down to strategies and questions

such as, "How am I going to make more money? How am I going to get something out of somebody?"

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In response one should say, "No." Life is not about that. Life is about the primacy of the moral and ethical. The legacy of a people, especially black people with Martin Luther King and others, has always been rooted in a tradition that embraces everybody and we're losing that. We're in a decadent moment in the culture where everything ethical becomes strategic. Integrity is reduced to money and so forth.

**What of black and brown and other freedom fighters in a moment when the market, through neoliberal capitalism, can make all things and people into commodities and products? It totally robs our freedom fighters of their radicalism. For example, see how capitalism has debased and distorted and lied about Martin Luther King Jr. and used his image and legacy to sell fast food and other consumer products.**

It's true. If they can appropriate Marvin Gaye by selling some commodity on TV, you know they can get Martin Luther King. The market has that power. But we've got to remember that the market cannot completely commodify the sacrifice, the love to service and the death. When it reaches that level of giving, there is something that eclipses the market appropriation of the

image and the spectacle. This is true of the movement as well. For example, there is no Martin Luther King Jr. without Howard Thurman, Benjamin Mays and his mother and then so forth. All of them come out of traditions and families and networks. Those institutions and networks and families are tied to causes in love which cannot be thoroughly commodified.

**But what do we do with the truth-tellers? It comes at a cost. Dave Chappelle has been taking lots of criticism for his last comedy special. I think it was genius. Especially so when you watch it in the context of the first two specials on Netflix. Chappelle is a master bard because he's making people uncomfortable. He's dislocating their sense of comfort. But some folks can't handle Chappelle right now because of their expectations. They expect art to always cater to their expectations and not to challenge them.**

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Dave Chappelle is doing what he's called to do. He is being true to who he is. Chappelle has got to be able to express himself. Now, that doesn't mean of course, that people do not have a right to criticize Chappelle. That's part of what the conversation's about. But the thing is, you should not truncate someone's art. You just don't do that. That's like trying to tell Marvin Gaye, "You wrote this album, 'What's Going On.' We want your next album to be political." He said, "No, my next album is going to be 'Let's Get It On,' because that's what I'm feeling." Don't trying to police his mood or creativity. Police the craft and the technique.

The same is true with David Chappelle. He has got to say what's inside of him. That is mediated through a mastery of his craft and technique. And so if it looks like Chappelle's offended somebody, then he can explain it and say, "No, I'm not trying to trash anyone, I'm trying to come to terms with some of these issues. I express it in a way that might be too challenging at times, but my heart is not motivated by trying to trash anybody." And that's true for any great artist.

**It always goes back to the truth. There are these horrors in Trump's concentration camps. Yet there are so many people both in the American news media and among the general public who keep saying "This is not who we are!" That is a jaw dropping claim, viewed by anyone who has even an elementary school level understanding of American history. I want to be critical and respond with, "You don't know your history." But then I say to myself, maybe those folks who say such a thing are being aspirational about what America should be. How do you work through that tension?**

Every nation is founded on barbarism. It's not just the United States. We also don't know of a nation that has not produced some magnificent human beings to fight against that barbarism — people of all colors. We have seen bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, black bodies swinging from trees in Alabama, the Chinese Exclusion Act, people denigrating gay brothers, lesbian sisters and trans folks. That is all in fact part and parcel of America. When we see people fighting against those barbarities, that is part and parcel of America too.

Let's use Trump as the example of the worst of America — which he is. Trump is also American as apple pie. Let's use Martin Luther King Jr. as the best of America. King is as American as apple pie. Trump and King are both America.

You can't say, "Oh my God, there's Aretha Franklin singing and there's John Coltrane blowing and that's who we really are as America now." They are as American as apple pie — but they represent the best. There is the worst too. So one cannot say that the worst is who we really are as America. You also cannot say the best is who we really are either. They're part and parcel of what it is to be part of the American imperial project and also part of America as a democratic experiment. America is both an empire and a democratic experiment against the backdrop of empire. America is a profoundly white supremacist civilization and also a democratic experience in which people of all colors have tried to fight against white supremacy.

We make some progress. We get pushed back and make some concessions. They get taken away. That is part of what it is to fight against evil and injustice. There are some people actually saying, "Well, I've never felt ashamed of being American until Donald Trump became president." The response is, "Well, where have you been? What is your understanding of American history? What is your understanding of our past, and the present?"

Good God, is Donald Trump worse than Obama? Hell yes. But when it comes to surveillance, when it comes to security, when it comes to drones, when it comes to special operations forces around the world, when it comes to seven wars going on at the same time, bombs being dropped on innocent people, there is continuity between Obama and Trump.

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**America under Donald Trump and his allies is a condition of malignant normality. So many Americans and others are disoriented. They are dislocated by Trump and his allies' attacks on the truth and empirical reality.**

There has been a lot of sleepwalking that has been going on for a long time. America is a corporate democracy. That is the challenge. That is why I support brother Bernie Sanders so strongly. It's always a critical support. But it's a strong, intense support because we have got to focus on the concentration of wealth in America. Capitalism has to be a crucial object of critical interrogation. Now, even as a socialist, I still believe in markets, and I still believe in private liberties. I believe in civil rights. I believe people should have freedom of expression and opinion and so on. But under what conditions do we have these markets where 1% of population owns 42% of the wealth? How are those "free markets"? Quit lying. There is escalating poverty that is hardly even counted.

Structures and institutions which are linked to social misery must be highlighted. What I love about Bernie is, at least in his critique of America, he really begins with a critique of capitalism. We have a highly financialized capitalism now run from Wall Street. It's not the old corporate model that had industry at the center. Now the banks are at the center. We have to begin a critique there. We must have a serious critique of what Martin talked about, which is both the poverty of capitalism and militarism. We need to talk about the ways in which mass incarceration is connected to poverty and the white supremacy. We must also take on male supremacy and homophobia. There is serious work to be done in terms of vision and analysis.

**When democracy becomes conflated with capitalism, what does that do to people's ability to dream, their sense of a better future and more hopeful possibilities?**

It is connected to a type of moral and spiritual sleepwalking. So if your dream is just to be the head and winner of a rat race, then you can do that. But when you win, you're still a rat. It's still moral and spiritual impoverishment. So if the American Dream is just narrow success and has nothing to do with spiritual greatness, then you will never be spiritually great. The aim is to try to be a human being. We need a larger framework and a broader horizon, one which is moral, spiritual and political in order to get at the root problem.

This is why the crisis cuts so very deep. A person wins the rat race. They then say, "I'm the winner, I'm the peacock, look at me, I'm so successful!" Yes. That may be true. But that person is successful in an empire that's disintegrating.

**So many people in this moment of American fascism are aghast at the abominations. But they do not realize that these horrible things being done by Trump and at his command and in his name are another person's dream. Trump's fascists, agents and supporters are looking at this evil and saying, "This is beautiful. I want to see more brown and black babies in concentration camps. I want more walls. I don't want women to have their reproductive rights. I want to be able to stand on black and brown people's necks!" We must confront the nightmare and the utopia of American fascism or the battle cannot be won.**

That is this country's history. It is built on somebody else's land. This is the history of assets and wealth based on slave labor. The history of white suburbs with ties to redlining and a whole host of manifestations of racial apartheid. Jim Crow laws didn't allow people of color, especially black folk, to gain access to credit, capital and housing. We made great progress because we've got these black elites and billionaires at the top who are living so well. And many black folks live through them even though they have been kept in hell. This is the tension and interplay between the nightmare and the dream in America.

**How does what you and others have described as the “blues sensibility” of black folks prepare us to survive and triumph in these hard times? How can others model our struggle and survival skills? Is it even possible? Of course we should avoid race essentialism. But we should also not run away from the particular experiences, struggles, triumphs and lessons learned and exemplified by black folks.**

You don't want to essentialize. But you do want to tell the truth in terms of how rare it is that a people could be hated for 400 years and those same people can teach the world so much about how to love and what love is. I don't know of too many oppressed people such as black folks who produce the love warriors that still embrace the very people who raped them and raped their grandmothers and mothers and sisters. That same society incarcerated their friends and their partners, and yet black folks still treat white brothers and sisters with a certain decency. I'm talking about the best of black folks such as Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, A. Philip Randolph, Nina Simone, Coltrane and others. All of these are examples of people who come out of a community that has been so hated and terrorized and traumatized, but they are not calling for the hatred and terrorizing and traumatizing of others.

There was not a black version of the Ku Klux Klan. We could have a black version of the Ku Klux Klan. It could have been the dominant black response to American empire. Instead, black Americans and others across the Black Atlantic produced love warriors. Of course we've got black thugs and black gangsters. But black thugs and black gangsters did not become the major spokespersons and leaders of our churches and of our trade union movements and in the universities. These are not people calling to hate other people. They're not calling to terrorize

other people. They're not calling for revenge. They calling for justice. It didn't have to be that way. And one of the problems we have now is that tradition is getting weak and feeble.

**You were in "The Matrix Reloaded."** The "Matrix" trilogy is a retelling of Plato's "**Allegory of the Cave.**" So long after the Greeks in antiquity struggled with that metaphor for the truth, why are so many people still stuck in the cave? Are 21st-century troglodytes afraid of the truth?

One, is you recognize that the truth has always been under siege. It is just a matter of degree. Two, you have your own life to live. The question becomes, given whatever limitations and faults you have, how are you going to bear witness to a truth-telling and a justice-seeking with a certain kind of integrity and courage? Yes. It is a difficult question, but everybody has got to face that question in terms of how short our lives are.

But there is a structural, institutional question as well, which is, "How will you become part of movements and organizations that are trying to bring political pressures to bear that will tilt American society and empire towards the poor, towards those friends who are called the wretched of the earth?" Do not be obsessed with the prizes of the world, the approval of the establishment and being patted on the back by the rich and powerful. That is not the criteria. To do that is like looking at America through the lens of the stock market rather than its prisons and decrepit schools. If you know that the truth is always under siege, then the question is, "How will one you be a force for good against that siege?" It's a day-to-day challenge.

**The Age of Trump is a moral crisis. A reckoning will be needed to help fix all that Trumpism has broken — and the deep cultural, social and political problems his fascist movement has shined a light on. People want change. They want to improve American democracy. But they do not want to do the work and make the necessary sacrifices. The American people need to decide what side of history they will be on. Unfortunately, it seems so many of them are content to be bystanders.**

"What side of truth in history are you going to be on?" That's exactly the right question. When you talk about the reckoning, my brother, that is not just about the pain, the persecution, the lies and

being misunderstood. It is also about joy. And this is very important. The only way you can be a long-distance freedom fighter is to find joy in the struggle. Joy in empowering others. Joy in enabling others — even when they don't understand you. I was critical of Obama for eight years. Black folks were coming at me tooth and nail, trashing me and misunderstanding me. And I tell them, I'm not loving them for them to love me back. This is not a quid pro quo thing. No, it's about integrity. It's not about popularity. I'm concerned about poor people, especially black poor and working people. And I'm doing this work because they're worthy of it. That is true whether folks understand it or not.

And then there is this magnificent sense of joy in surrendering yourself to a cause that's bigger than you. Even if it gets you crucified, you are on the cross with a smile on your face. It's like your mama's love. The world can't take that away. You always remember the people who loved you, who put a smile on your face even right before you get executed. Nothing can take that away from you.

## **CHAUNCEY DEVEGA**

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