



# Cory Booker

*The Honorable Cory Booker is a United States senator from New Jersey. Previously he was mayor of Newark, New Jersey.*

*My country 'tis of thee  
Sweet land of liberty  
Of thee I sing  
Land where our fathers died,  
Land of the Pilgrims' Pride,  
From every mountain side.  
Let freedom ring!*

As a small child, I loved this song. It spoke to my idealism and hopeful notions of our nation, and singing it in chorus with other boys and girls made me feel a sense of belonging. I felt pride and a love of country that, reflecting now, I believe was embedded in me by my fiercely patriotic family.

Yet, in singing that song, I also felt like I was reaching a bit. As a boy I came to know that my family's journey to this land, now the United States, wasn't in any way similar to the Pilgrims'. Ellis Island, too, gave me pride (and even a sense of ownership, as it is in New Jersey). I loved the stories of the hopeful, triumphant entrances of the ancestors of my classmates whose Irish, Italian, and other European ancestors entered through that portal of promise. But these tales were different than the ones that filled my own family stories.

Even my family's entrance into the town I grew up in was different than those of my peers. In 1969, just to move in, my parents had to work with the Fair Housing Council—lawyers, activists, and tremendous leaders—to construct a sting operation to expose and overcome the

housing discrimination that threatened to deny my parents entrance into the town.

My parents would show up to look at homes in white neighborhoods, and real estate agents would lie to them. They would be told the house had been sold or pulled off the market. The Fair Housing Council would send white test couples to the homes after my parents, and they would inevitably find that the house was still for sale. A white test couple eventually bid on a house my parents loved. The bid was accepted, and on the day of the closing, the white couple didn't show up: instead, my dad did, along with a volunteer lawyer. The real estate agent didn't capitulate when caught, and his illegal housing discrimination was exposed. He stood and punched the Fair Housing Council lawyer, and my dad had to wrestle with the agent's Doberman as the two men fought. Ultimately, after this fight and legal threats, my parents moved into my childhood home, and we became the first black family to live in the town.

In my family's stories, and the history from my elders, I knew of no courageous explorers, no Pilgrims seeking religious freedom, no escape from persecution or famine, no Lady Liberty opening her golden door beside Ellis Island. My American ancestry came up from slavery. Millions were killed—upwards of a fifth of the humans stolen from Western Africa died during the passage from that continent to this one. Those who made it faced inhuman brutality. Generations endured horrors in a system of chattel slavery marked by vicious beatings, rape, oppressive labor, and unimaginable anguish. African history, the cultural roots, the religious beliefs, the very memories linking families to their countries of origin were stolen along with the bodies of my ancestors. These historical possessions were robbed by a villainy that sought to eviscerate humanity, dignity, connection, and independence, an evil that sought to render human beings as property, obedient and enslaved.

My great-grandmother had memories of our family lasting back into slavery. My grandparents discussed these roots and remembered some circumstances, but going more than a generation into our past was difficult for my family. What followed the end of slavery was what

I knew better from family stories. Like so many families of all different backgrounds, there were humble stories of poverty and struggle. And because of my ancestors' race, these difficult paths were cruelly compounded with stories of discrimination, of citizenship rights violently denied, and too often of opportunities rendered unattainable. This reality resided in many family stories in one way or another. Simple stories of family trips would often involve mentions of the inability to use basic facilities like bathrooms, restaurants, or hotels. From accessing the ballot to going to a hospital to obtaining a job, the struggle against discrimination and for full citizenship, equality, and opportunity was a part of the culture in our American experience.

“America never was America to me, and yet I swear this oath—America will be!”

— Langston Hughes

As a child I learned the source of my parents' and grandparents' love of this country. Their faith and hope for America were intertwined with their larger view of the forward march of our American tradition. They saw connections between their struggles and aspirations and the heroic hopes of those early colonists in Jamestown, the religious freedom dreams of Pilgrims, the defiant demands of our original revolutionaries, the humble ambitions of refugees or immigrants, the equality struggles of the suffragettes, the freedom fights of the abolitionists, the justice dreams of the union organizers and so many others who brought America—marching, stumbling, striding, jumping—forward.

This was what my family heralded about this nation and our presence in it. In fact, our very survival, our very presence spoke to America's struggle for itself, the struggle to make a more perfect union, the ongoing mission to make this a land of liberty and justice for all. My childhood was filled with the elders in my family showing a devotion to this determined destiny: to have America achieve herself, not stories about how we got here, but what seemed paramount was the ongoing struggle to have America finally and fully arrive.

“We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”

— Martin Luther King Jr.

In 2012, Henry Louis Gates Jr. had me on his show, *Finding Your Roots*. A year before my father would die, he and the rest of my family got an incredible view into our history. Gates discovered astonishing facts. Not only was he able to enter a generation or two into slavery and reveal to me many of my before unknown black American ancestors and the circumstances of their lives, but he also was able to discover and illuminate many of my white ancestors as well, and, through DNA analysis, he revealed that I am also a descendant of Native Americans. From Gates’s experience, he let me know that we in this country share far more DNA than we realize.

What had once been an inscrutable history now lay out before me in a host of documents and charts. I am the descendant of slaves and slave owners. I am the descendant of white Alabama militiamen who fought in the Creek Wars against Native Americans and I am descended from Native Americans who were forced from their land. I am the direct descendant of a Confederate soldier who was captured by Union officers and then escaped capture. And then Henry Louis Gates did something I’d never imagined. Along one branch of my family tree, starting with my grandfather, he marched backward and backward—thirteen generations into American history, to 1640, 136 years before the founding of our nation, thirty-four years after the Pilgrims came to Plymouth, and roughly two decades after Jamestown, when my direct forebears came to what is now Virginia to settle.

Settlers and slave ships; Native Americans and strangers in a strange land. It seems my ancestors got here and were here in a multitude of manners. But the lessons of my family still hold: we are all—from the latest new citizen in our nation to those, like me, who can trace their history to 1776 and beyond—bound together in this nation, bound by blood and spirit more than we know. We belong to each other; we need

each other. I have some understanding of who my ancestors were, and I am appreciative. And even more so, I have great hopes for who my descendants will be. I honestly have no great desire that they know me or my name, or that they know how our family came to live in this country, but I do have abiding hope that this great nation that they inherit will have come fully to fruition and that they can join with their countrymen and women and sing with full-throated, prideful force these words:

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Sweet land of liberty  
Of thee I sing  
Land where my fathers died,  
Land of the Pilgrims' Pride,  
From every mountain side.  
Let freedom ring!*

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