



AMERICA, THE GREEN

HOW WE (ALL) SUCCEEDED John Hope Bryant

In many ways, the American Dream is falling into disrepair.

Income and wealth inequality have reached unsustainable breach levels. Racial and political divisions have escalated to heights unseen in close to a century—defining us all more by what is separate and apart, rather than what binds us all together. And, worst of all, we have let our environmental responsibility get away from us. The planet that we all live on, that we all share, is increasingly shedding, sometimes violently, layers of its natural skin. I see on the other side of the Coronavirus pandemic an opportunity for us all to take a collective deep breath, reassess our values—what we are about and what we are for—and to recast the business plan of America as one that is empowering and sustainable for all of us. It is clear to me that America has reached its “up from nothing” moment—and we can all agree that there is a lot of nothing to come up from for all of us.

It is not about black and white, as in race, or red and blue, as in politics. It is about the color green—as in money and, if you will, as in a more sustainable world—and it’s about every stakeholder in America committing to forgetting the noise. It is about how we stop messing with our own business plan so we can all come up; how we rebuild a country that will sustain us all—culturally, financially, and environmentally—for the future. It’s about recognizing the value of the invisible people at the bottom of the pyramid, about turning the barely surviving into thriving and us all being winners.

IT IS TIME TO HIT RESET ON THE AMERICAN DREAM

America is a country with an ego, a bit of a chip on its shoulder. At the dawning of this new nation, she had something to prove to the world.

I can relate. I too had something to prove, coming up from nothing in Compton, California, and South-Central Los Angeles. Up until recently, I can admit that I still felt as if I had something to prove to the world. Becoming reasonably comfortable in your own skin comes in time, with both maturity and a long, hard search for inner strength.

Given my skin color, as a direct descendant of a brutally enslaved people brought here against their will, I have every good reason to focus on the legitimate anger and anguish I feel when I reflect on the history of my people in America. The injustices brought by slavery and racism are etched into the soul of my black community to this very day. You see its effects echoed in a kind of collective low self-esteem, in a lack of real confidence and belief in the system of mainstream success, and, worst of all, in lost hope.

But there are countless great scholars who have already chronicled those sickening injustices far better than I ever could. And, more so, adding my voice to that chorus would not make fixing the problem today one ounce easier. Sometimes, focusing on the pain just makes it feel worse.

So instead I am focusing on how to take the good about America and make it work for us all. I want us all to fix our problem, starting right where we stand, by signing up, maybe for the first time ever, for the same team. America has succeeded in spite of our many glaring shortcomings. But what if we eliminated some of those shortcomings—like our absurd focus on race, and our broken aspirational ladder for those at the bottom? What would happen if we had a business plan that focused on what we're for (as in winning) rather than what we're against (as in each other)?

Back in its earliest days, the young upstart country calling itself the United States of America did not have royalty, or the class-oriented bloodlines of Europe, or the vaulted history of the Middle East, or the large populations of China, India, or Africa. She hit reset on all the noise about what it takes to win as a nation. And she turned necessity into opportunity.

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America turned to her immigrated, otherwise-written-off upstarts to create its own class structure—with entrepreneurs and business owners at the top. Celebrity, a uniquely American creation, became our own form of royalty, with a small r.

Let me explain the American success story in the most straightforward way possible: America is the largest economy in the world because she is not actually a country, she is an idea. And that idea is freedom. Freedom of opportunity for all (almost). And that's where our opportunity today lies.

As I finished the writing of my new book, *Up from Nothing*, I was sheltering at home in Atlanta, Georgia, doing my part to flatten the curve as the COVID-19 virus swept through every state in our country, shattering every idea we had about how we live, work, and prosper. It hit the most vulnerable and marginalized communities first and hardest, but has reached the most powerful.

It's like the universe is sending us a message to reset.

What if we took America's dream of freedom for almost all and made sure it was accessible to actually every American, regardless of race, color, background, and gender?

What if we grabbed this opportunity to rebuild America into a nation where we all can win?

That's what I'm writing about.

America thrived because most of her people were the type to leave behind the comforts of home and all they knew in search of something more. They were hooked on a dream of aspirational opportunity. They were hooked on freedom.

You know the story. They came here through Ellis Island, looked up, and said, "I'm going to live the American Dream for me and my family. With no money, and no sponsor. Just a dream and grit."

Now, either these people were criminally insane or they were geniuses waiting to be tapped and mined. Certainly they had an unmined, unproven belief in their own future success. They were winners who hadn't even won yet.

These individuals possessed the qualities that I believe make America exceptional:

- They were hooked on freedom and making their own way on their own terms.
- They had a capacity for reinvention.
- They didn't want where they came from to matter as much as where they were going.
- They had up-from-nothing grit, an "I am all I need to make it happen" attitude toward success and life.

These type-A personalities believed in America as the only place where they could reinvent themselves, make their own way on their own terms, be free. As for me, I am not sure that my bottom-to-the-top story would have been possible in any place but America—race limitations and discrimination factors included.

America is the only place where the belief in yourself is enough to succeed, to create the future you seek. Everywhere else, you have to believe in something else—like a king, or a social system. In America, we have the freedom and opportunity to determine our own success.

The only question is, do you believe?

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AMERICA, THE GREEN

The new color for America is green—and yet it's also always been green.

Not white, black, red, brown, or yellow, as in race. Not red or blue, as in partisan politics.

Green, as in the color of US currency.

Are there race and racism issues in America? That's like asking if rain is real. Yes, of course there are. My black ancestors were absolutely limited by and because of racism. To a lesser degree, I have been too. Racism was at the base of slavery and the slave trade in America—but what was underneath that base was money and economics. Slave labor was a wealth-building tool, the building of wealth on the literal backs of others. Africans weren't enslaved only because Europeans saw them as an inferior race; Africans were brought to America because they were agricultural geniuses with an insane work ethic, even under the most extreme conditions.

Let me include the talk about politics here too. Of course politics are important. Many of our greatest wins for both the mainstream and the underserved have been achieved through the political narrative. But underneath politics, and driving it, is money and economics. War too. No country goes to war "just" to save a country of poor people. It's all too often, more like 95 percent of the time, about that country's economic relevance.

So let's not get into a side-tracked, emotional argument about and around race or politics here, because those induce anger. This is how they get you: they take you off track, they distract you, they make you unfocused and emotional.

Complaining about our reality is not going to get our kids into college. Complaining is not a business plan; in fact, it messes with our business plan. For what it's worth, pay back is not a business plan either. Reparations are absolutely needed, but by themselves reparations are not how we will win. We need to get our priorities right. Let's put our focus back on the green.

My billionaire businessman friend and partner Tony Ressler taught me something about business, life, and social change. In a private moment, he acknowledged what we all know but don't like to say.

"John, of course racism is real, and it's horrible. That said, you cannot change the way someone feels about you. The way you can achieve social justice today—the way a generation of black America can achieve social justice today—is probably a combination of as much education as you can handle, access to capital, and access to opportunity, at scale. Success, and a little money in your pocket (let's call that wealth creation), goes a long way to leveling the playing field. This is how you can help your people."

Tony later suggested that we work together to build a generation of successful entrepreneurs from the sections of our economy that have been left behind.

Getting everybody in America up from nothing is about a higher consciousness, a higher frequency thinking. And it's about action.

What we need is for every stakeholder in America to start thinking beyond the racism and politics that plague our airwaves, because they only serve to divide us. The message of this book is US-ism—how everyone in America can turn our attention back to our winning business plan. It is selfish, but it's also about our sustained uplift as a nation.

The greatness of America rests within the will, spirit, and determination of its people. This greatness is as old as the country's founding itself. It was reflected in our independence from Britain, our civil war, our civil rights movement (which was not just about black people—it just unfortunately starred us), our domination of arts and culture, and our history of economic builders. Our greatness lies in our striving to be great, to succeed globally, and to accomplish things that no other nation has accomplished in the history of the modern world.

It's important for us to know that we can succeed—that we have succeeded, literally up from nothing.

We need to change the way we see ourselves—not as survivors or even thrivers, but as winners. And we need to change the way we see others—not as enemies or, worse yet, irrelevant, but as essential parts of our collective up-from-nothing story.

Consider this: the idea of those “others” as being the minority employee base of a corporation, which is headed by a racist CEO. Why should a racist CEO want his minority employee base to have everything to succeed and live a good life? Because if they succeed, he does.

We cannot segregate our hearts and integrate our wallets. Coming up together is the business plan for America—where everyone rises, and everyone can win. This is how we actually make America great again.

You can do it. We all can do it. News flash: We all *have* to do it.

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THE DREAM IS ALIVE; THE LADDER IS BROKEN

Pretend for a moment that it's possible to take racism and racial issues out of the disgusting business of both the slave trade and slavery itself. What it actually was at its core was the largest reverse generational wealth transfer in modern history—not to mention bad capitalism.

When I say this, I am not trying to make an emotional statement, or an anger statement, or a reparations statement. Nor am I even remotely attempting a guilt trip. I have only one, nonemotional point to make: the thing that helped every honest, and even dishonest, entrant to the American experience was their own self-determination. They were individuals benefiting from their own industriousness, allowed to reap the returns of their own hard work and the sweat of their brows. And yet, this opportunity for self-determination was 100 percent denied to African Americans for more than 300 years.

Let's put this into proper context. The complete American experiment is a little over 450 years in total, and slavery represented approximately 300 years of that history. African Americans spent 300 years enslaved, and 150 years free—but at least 100 of those post-slavery "free" years functioned within a system that we refer to as "Jim Crow," which is basically just another name for economic and social repression.

So we're talking about a group of people who for over 400 years in America had no meaningful chance of benefiting from what most proudly refer to as the "sweat of their brow," their natural smarts, or their raw intellectual genius. None of what they were born with or developed was theirs to keep.

As part of Reconstruction, on March 3rd, 1865, President Abraham Lincoln founded Freedman's Bank "to support the land grants and other elements of the Freedman's Bureau Act," and "help newly freed Americans navigate their financial lives." By 1874, that venture had completely failed, and many of those who had so recently gained their freedom lost their savings in the process. That fact makes clear that there was never a broad-based effort to make sure that African Americans had even the most basic financial services or literacy. No one attempted to teach them how money, banking, entrepreneurship, small business creation, and big business growth work.

We live in a free enterprise democracy in America—indeed, the nation was founded on that basis—but no one has ever made it a priority to ensure that African Americans had even the most resources to succeed in that environment.

And so, mainstream America directly benefited from the wealth created by the tireless efforts of industrious and hard-working blacks, who were 100 percent unpaid for three centuries. The agricultural economy rocketed growth in early America, rooted as it was in that wealth accumulation in land—lots of it—much of it fertile farmland worked with free slave labor.

Despite black America's brilliance, talent, and industriousness, we never got what I call "the memo" on real, broad-based, sustained business and wealth creation. White America owned that memo—and they owned it from the first inning of the first game.

Now, to be totally clear, what I'm laying out here is not an indictment of all (or most) white people of that era. There are many positive examples of these same mainstream white members of the wealthy class, the power structure, who used their wealth and power to free slaves, to grant safe passage for the unjustly persecuted, and to provide real opportunity to black Americans. The founding backers of the Freedman's Bank were enlightened white elites. The founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the National Urban League, were a thoughtful collection of enlightened blacks and whites who worked together and put their lives at risk in order to create institutions that America needed then and still needs now. These and other examples of powerful white men and women, in and out of business, in and out of the community, and in and out of politics, are legend, and they deserve to be recognized and acknowledged. But none of this is the point.

My nonemotional point here is about the system itself, and the accepted culture that produced that unequitable system. The system has never worked for African Americans—nor has it worked for many other groups. The business plan for America was all messed up. In some ways, it still is.

Again, I am not talking about the exceptions. I am talking here about the rule. The rule whipped black America's aspirational rear end from sunup to sundown, every day, while rewarding even the most average of their mainstream counterparts. This is the math of the matter. This is my point.

When people think about affirmative action, people automatically think about black people. But actually, the first beneficiaries of affirmative action were my white brothers and sisters. Twice. I've already provided the first example: three-hundred-plus years of unequal access to the uniquely American aspirational dream, plus the rules to achieve it.

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The second experience of affirmative action for white people immediately followed World War II. It was called the G.I. Bill. Now, let me make it clear that I think this was a brilliant move for America. Ensuring that every returning American military veteran from World War II got as much education as they could consume, a down payment for a home they could own, and an apprenticeship for a well-paying job was how we created what we now call the American middle class. But those benefits were largely denied to returning African American military veterans, and actually widened the gap in achievement along racial lines in the process.

And, to this day, the agricultural business sector (read: 99 percent mainstream farmers in rural America) are the recipients of literally the largest financial and economic subsidy, year after year, in America's history.

Why do we do it? Our leaders will tell you that it is America's interest.

Well, my book *Up from Nothing* is designed to convince the reader that imagining new strategies to support the unleveraged talents, hopes, and aspirations of the rest of left-behind America—which is not just American blacks by the way—is also in America's interest, and always has been.

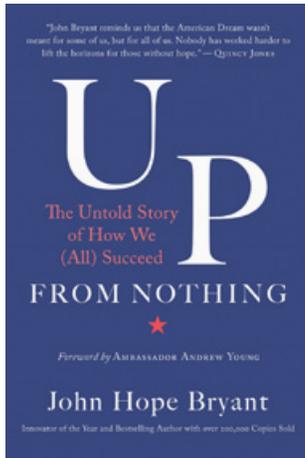
African Americans are absolutely not the only group that has been left behind in America, but let me use them as an example one more time. Bridging the wealth gap for black America alone would create trillions—that's with a *t*—of additional GDP and American wealth. **The color of those trillions isn't black, though. It's green, and it benefits us all.** 🌱

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John Hope Bryant is the founder, chairman, and CEO of Operation HOPE Inc., CEO of Bryant Group Ventures, CEO of Promise Homes Company, and cofounder of Global Dignity. He has been recognized by the last five US presidents and served as an advisor for the last three. Bryant is the recipient of hundreds of awards and citations for his work, including being named as one of the *Atlanta Business Chronicle's* Most Admired CEOs for 2018, *American Banker's* 2016 Innovator of the Year, *Inc.'s* the World's 10 Top CEOs (honorable mention), and *Time's* 50 for the Future. He is the author of three bestselling books, *The Memo*, *How the Poor Can Save Capitalism*, and *Love Leadership*.

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