

There Is No Dignity in This Kind of America

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By Jamelle Bouie

Opinion Columnist

Over the past year, we have seen [a sweeping and ferocious attack](#) on the rights and dignity of transgender people across the country.

In states led by Republicans, conservative lawmakers have [introduced or passed dozens of laws](#) that would give religious exemptions for discrimination against transgender people, prohibit the use of bathrooms consistent with their gender identity [and limit access](#) to gender-affirming care.

In lashing out against L.G.B.T.Q. people, [lawmakers in at least eight states](#) have even gone as far as to introduce bans on “drag” performance that are so broad as to threaten the ability of gender-nonconforming people simply to exist in public.

Some of the most powerful Republicans in the country want to go even further. Donald Trump [has promised](#) to radically limit transgender rights if he is returned to the White House in 2024. [In a video address to supporters](#), he said he would push Congress to pass a national ban on gender-affirming care for transgender youth and restrict Medicare and Medicaid funding for hospitals and medical professionals providing that care.

He wants to target transgender adults as well. “I will sign a new executive order instructing every federal agency to cease all programs that promote the concept of sex and gender transition at any age,” Trump said. “I will ask Congress to pass a bill establishing that the only genders recognized by the United States government are male and female, and they are assigned at birth.”

There is plenty to say about the reasoning and motivation for this attack — whether it comes from Trump, Gov. Ron DeSantis in Florida or Gov. Greg Abbott in Texas — but the important thing to note, for now, is that it is a direct threat to the lives and livelihoods of transgender people. It’s the same for other L.G.B.T.Q. Americans, who once again find themselves in the cross-hairs of an aggressive movement of social conservatives who have become all the more emboldened in the aftermath of the Supreme Court’s decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* last year.

This is no accident. The attacks on transgender people and L.G.B.T.Q. rights are of a piece with the attack on abortion and reproductive rights. It is a singular assault on the bodily autonomy of all Americans, meant to uphold and reinforce traditional hierarchies of sex and gender.

Politicians and those of us in the media tend to frame these conflicts as part of a “culture war,” which downplays their significance to our lives — not just as people living in the world, but as presumably equal citizens in a democracy.

Democracy, remember, is not just a set of rules and institutions, but a way of life. In the democratic ideal, we meet one another in the public sphere as political and social equals, imbued with dignity and entitled to the same rights and privileges.

I have referred to dignity twice now. That is intentional. Outside of certain select phrases (“the dignity of labor”), we don’t talk much about dignity in American politics, despite the fact that the demands of many groups for dignity and respect in public life have been a driving force in American history since the beginning. To that point, one of the great theorists of dignity and democracy in the United States was none other than Frederick Douglass, whose experience in bondage gave him a lifelong

preoccupation with the ways that dignity is either cultivated or denied.

Douglass observed “that although dignity seems to be woven into human nature, it is also something one possesses to the degree that one is conscious of having it,” the historian Nicholas Knowles Bromell writes in “[The Powers of Dignity: The Black Political Philosophy of Frederick Douglass](#),” “and one’s own consciousness of having it depends in part on making others conscious of it. Others’ recognition of it then flows back and confirms one’s belief in having it, but conversely their refusal to recognize it has the opposite effect of weakening one’s confidence in one’s own dignity.”

It is easy to see how this relates to chattel slavery, a totalizing system in which enslaved Black Americans struggled to assert their dignity and self-respect in the face of a political, social and economic order that sought to rob them of both. But Douglass explored this idea in other contexts as well.

[Writing](#) after the Civil War on women’s suffrage, Douglass asked his readers to see the “plain” fact that “women themselves are divested of a large measure of their natural dignity by their exclusion from and participation in Government.” To “deny woman her vote,” Douglass continued, “is to abridge her natural and social power, and to deprive her of a certain measure of respect.” A woman, he concluded, “loses in her own estimation by her enforced exclusion from the elective franchise just as slaves doubted their own fitness for freedom, from the fact of being looked down upon as fit only for slaves.”

Similarly, in her analysis of Douglass’s political thought — published in the volume “[African-American Political Thought: A Collected History](#)” — the political theorist Sharon R. Krause shows how Douglass “clearly believed that slavery and prejudice *can* degrade an individual against his will” and generate, in his words, “poverty, ignorance and degradation.”

Although Douglass never wrote a systematic account of his vision of democracy, Bromell contends that we can extrapolate such an account from the totality of his writing and activism. “A democracy,” Douglass’s work suggests, “is a polity that prizes human dignity,” Bromell writes. “It comes into existence when a group of persons agrees to acknowledge each other’s dignity, both informally, through mutually respectful comportment, and formally, through the establishment of political rights.” All of our freedoms, in Bromell’s account of Douglass, “are *means* toward the end of maintaining a political community in which all persons collaboratively produce their dignity.”

The denial of dignity to one segment of the political community, then, threatens the dignity of all. This was true for Douglass and his time — it inspired his support for women’s suffrage and his opposition to the Chinese Exclusion Act — and it is true for us and ours as well. To deny equal respect and dignity to any part of the citizenry is to place the entire country on the road to tiered citizenship and limited rights, to liberty for some and hierarchy for the rest.

Put plainly, the attack on the dignity of transgender Americans is an attack on the dignity of all Americans. And like the battles for abortion rights and bodily autonomy, the stakes of the fight for the rights and dignity of transgender people are high for all of us. There is no world in which their freedom is suppressed and yours is sustained.