

# Civic Saturday

## 4/26/25 Civic Scriptures

---

### 1. A bigger problem

*Andre Henry, 2024*

*Andre Henry is the program manager for the Racial Justice Institute at Christians for Social Action. He hosts a podcast, "Hope & Hard Pills," sharing insight on anti-racism and social change. In January 2024, he wrote about the threat of dictatorship – and, in his opinion, the much more significant danger of losing faith in democracy's promise.*

\* \* \*

**America has always been defined by dreams – especially the dreams of America's oppressed.** Though our current world is far from perfect, the freedoms and pleasures we enjoy today were first dreams in the minds of our predecessors. There was a time when no one could imagine the end of chattel slavery or Jim Crow – except those who fought against it. There were people who could never imagine the right to vote or a Black president.

**The collapse of these givens of our politics seemed nothing short of miracles when they happened.** If we want to see radical change – be it something as mundane as an electable third-party candidate or as dramatic as toppling an American dictator – we must keep faith in miracles. I fear losing our capacity to dream far more than I fear losing at the ballot.

**We can't be blamed for how difficult it is to dream these days.** After all, imagination is based on memory. I learned that when my former pastor challenged a room full of young adults to draw an alien that looked nothing like ones we've seen before. We all drew a blob. The imagination relies on analogy. This is why a sense of history is important.

**Our oppression depends on historical amnesia.** The opponents of progress want us to remain ignorant of the depths of our nation's atrocities and the genius of resistance movements in American history. But if we don't understand that we've already fought some previous iteration of today's boogeymen – fascism, Christian nationalism, or something else – we'll feel powerless to stop them or else reinvent the wheel trying to do so.

**I scratch my head at talk about today's anti-democratic movements as if they are new.** Historian Robert Paxton suggests that “fascism was born in the late 1860s in the American South,” referring to the Ku Klux Klan in its initial form in the 1800s.

**The Ku Klux Klan was reborn in Atlanta in 1915**, when a Methodist preacher set a sword, American flag and a Bible in front of a burning cross atop Stone Mountain and led a group of Confederate veterans in swearing an oath to the “Invisible Empire.” If that’s not Christian nationalism, I don’t know what is.

**Jim Crow was an inspiration for Nazi legal scholars, who looked to America’s homegrown fascism as a model for the Nuremberg Laws.** As a result, when the world got up in arms about Nazism, Black Americans were able to say it was nothing new to them. “We Negroes in America do not have to be told what fascism is, in action,” Langston Hughes told the Second International Writers Congress in Paris in 1937. “We know.”

**I don’t dredge up these details to wallow in how terrible America has been.** Rather, I want to remind us that the terrors that seem to loom ahead have been fought here before. Every Black liberation struggle on American soil has been an antifascist struggle, a struggle against Christian nationalism, a struggle against tyranny.

**That’s good news for two reasons.** First, we have examples of how to defeat them, and a basis for thinking that, even if the worst were to happen, America’s story may not be over. We don’t have to hand the future over to some abstraction, like quote-unquote dictatorship. We, the people, are not just an artifact of history. United in the struggle for freedom, we are a cause.

**Democracy has never been secured as simply as casting a ballot.** We have always had to contend for it in the streets; perhaps now it’s our turn.

**We need to dream bigger dreams than simply avoiding dictatorship.** We need to fight for the promise of democracy.

###

## **2. You’re More Powerful Than You Think**

*Eric Liu, 2017*

\* \* \*

*Eric Liu is the co-founder and CEO of Citizen University, which works to build a culture of powerful and responsible citizenship in the United States. He is the author of numerous acclaimed books, including 2017’s You’re More Powerful Than You Think: A Citizen’s Guide to Making Change Happen. Here is an excerpt.*

**There is no final, correct answer to the question *Why exercise power?*** ... In the American context, the best we can hope for is perpetual contest. America doesn't just have arguments; America IS an argument: between Federalist and Anti-Federalist worldviews, strong national government and states' rights, liberty and equality, individual rights and collective responsibility, color-blindness and color-consciousness, *Pluribus* and *Unum*.

**This is perhaps our highest shared value as Americans: to argue over our values.** If we are lucky, these arguments will never end, because if they've ended it means one side will have collapsed, which means eventually the American experiment will as well.

**But as we engage in these arguments about how to allocate resources and prioritize our ideals, we can at least learn to have *better arguments*** – ones informed by a sense of wisdom that extends the horizon of our intentions and our understanding of consequences.

**... Think about the United States in 1830, when every stream of individual activity eventually fed into the institution of slavery and what its critics called the Slave Power.** Slavery – whether in the fields of the South or the ledger books of the North – was as seemingly unmovable as the Mississippi River. But by 1840, enough free people had begun to ask why this should be so, and a movement to confront the enslavers had arisen. By 1850, the sense of imminent crisis was undeniable. By 1860, the conflict had arrived, changing the course of human events.

**My point isn't that the United States today is approaching another Civil War.** It's that the Civil War started long before 1860. In those decades of rising tension and grim, implacable polarization, some citizens felt the changes coming. Some sped the changes along. Some denied or resisted them.

*What would you have done?*

*What would a citizen do?*

**Being a citizen is not just a matter of literacy in power.** It is a matter of coupling that literacy with moral purpose. When you do that, you can challenge any of the givens of a given array of wealth, access, and advantage. You can start the new cascades of belief and behavior that our “leaders” will eventually, even if reluctantly, join. You can write future history.

**Many Americans would rather not have to do that much work.** In his classic, *The True Believer*, Eric Hoffer examined the psychology of mass movements and described how in times of great turbulence, what many seek is not freedom but “freedom from freedom.” They want

someone else to be responsible, both in the sense of “at fault” and in the sense of “accountable.” They become entranced by strongmen who will wield power in our name. Hoffer wrote in the wake of Nazism and fascism and in the mindset of the Cold War. But he describes a strong current of our times and the culture of Trumpism.

**Our choice is not about the presidency or any election.** It is whether we as free people respond to a sense of powerlessness by claiming our full actual power – or by surrendering it altogether. Strong people don’t need strong leaders, the civil rights activist Ella Baker once said.

*Are we strong people?*

**We in the United States have an opportunity to create the planet’s first mass multicultural democratic republic.** Ancient Athens was a democracy but not mass, multicultural, or a republic. Rome’s republic was multicultural and democratic but not mass. The Soviet Union was mass, multicultural, and a republic, but not democratic.

**No nation has ever hit all four marks.** Including the United States. And it is unclear whether the United States will. What is certain is that we are at the birthing of a new America: the beautiful, painful, bloody arrival of a new majority that does not call itself white. This new America is arriving at precisely the same time when our national government is locked in sclerosis, our economy is warped to send prosperity to the already prosperous, and our sense of shared memory and common culture is dissipating. That all of these circumstances are converging now guarantees nothing except contest and conflict.

**So then: Do you DARE integrate character and power?** Do you DARE work to ensure that more people can participate in power? Do you DARE define self-interest as mutual interest?

**Only you know your most candid answers to these questions.** Together, they form an atlas for your own quest for purpose. Who are you – and who are you for? Together, they remind us that it takes courage to live like a citizen.

# # #