

## **Caste -- The Origins of our Discontents by Isabel Wilkerson**

Week 7 – Part Six: Backlash; Chapters 25-29

This document includes passages and prompts for reflection and discussion.

1) At the beginning of Chapter 26, Wilkerson describes a conversation she had with journalist Gwen Ifill in late 2015 about the real possibility that Donald Trump would win the 2016 presidential election. Most political commentators and most of us initially dismissed this notion. Knowing what you know now, what do you think Ifill and Wilkerson saw that so many others failed to see? Provide examples of ways in which our political commentary underestimates the role of racism and caste in the rise and persistence of Trumpism.

2) On p. 326, Wilkerson writes, “The Republican reverence for its base of white evangelicals stands in stark contrast to the indifference often shown the Democratic base of African-Americans, who are devalued for a host of reasons, among them their suppressed state at the bottom of the social hierarchy.”

Sit with that description for a moment. Provide examples of Democratic failure to take the agenda of African Americans seriously, from both moderate Democrats and the Left. What would it look like to take that agenda seriously, both locally and nationally?

3) In Chapter 27, Wilkerson observes that, although the Confederacy lost the Civil War, it “would win the all-important peace” in the succeeding decades. In what way have Lost Cause tropes and mythology become pervasive in our culture, not just within the South, but more generally in American culture? How do the successes of the Lost Cause myth perpetuate white supremacy? What can we do to counter these effects?

4) At the end of Chapter 27, Wilkerson quotes German students explaining whether or not they felt guilt for the Holocaust:

“Yes, we are Germans and Germans perpetrated this... it wasn’t just Germans, it is the older Germans who were here and who should feel guilt. We were not here. But we do feel that, as the younger generation, we should acknowledge and accept the responsibility. And for the generations to come, we should be the guardians of the truth.”

What would it look like to have a cultural commitment by Americans of all generations, to be the guardians of the truth about slavery and Jim Crow?

5) What kinds of monuments do we need to reckon with our history of slavery and racial injustice? Where should they be?

6) At the end of Chapter 29, Wilkerson recounts a conversation in 2018 with Taylor Branch. At the end, Branch said, “So the real question would be if people were given the chance to vote between democracy and whiteness, how many would choose whiteness?”

How would you answer this question? What steps can or should every-day citizens take to tip the balance toward democracy?