

THE
PRICE
of
UNION

RACE, POWER, *and*
the MAKING *of*
AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

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Foreword by Father Richard Rohr

READING GROUP GUIDE

READING GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

for

THE PRICE of UNION

RACE, POWER, and the MAKING of AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

by Kelly Burton, PhD

This reading group guide for The Price of Union includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author Kelly Burton, PhD. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

INTRODUCTION

What if American democracy isn't undergoing a political crisis but a racial reckoning?

In *The Price of Union*, political scientist and civic leader Kelly Burton argues that our democratic crisis runs deeper than political divisions. It is—and has always been—ultimately a matter of race.

From the beginning, American democracy and racial caste have existed in a codependent relationship, each shaping and sustaining the other.

Drawing on four hundred years of history—from Jamestown to January 6—Burton shows how this arrangement has defined the nation's institutions and values and how as the caste system begins to weaken, the democracy it upheld is beginning to come apart.

Picking up where Isabel Wilkerson's modern classic *Caste* left off, Burton offers a deeply researched, narrative-rich retelling of the American story that exposes the original bargain that more than anything else made America what it is today. The result is a sweeping and provocative work that challenges and reframes how we understand power, race, and belonging in the "land of the free."

The Price of Union challenges readers to confront the true cost of the American experiment as we have known it and to imagine what has never been: a nation built on shared humanity and capable of serving the common good.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In the introduction, Burton states that “America’s origins are not political, philosophical, or ideological. They are economic.” How did you feel when you initially read this claim compared to now, having read the case she’s laid out throughout the book to support this statement?
2. In chapter one, Burton quotes James Baldwin, who stated that “People are not ... terribly anxious to be equal, but they love the idea of being superior.” Taking into account both your lived experience as well as history, do you believe most people want equality or superiority?
3. According to Burton, the social order’s middle tier often functions as the “keeper” of the hierarchy. While those at the top benefit the most, the middle are invested in maintaining the status and comforts their position affords and are willing to “defend the system at all costs.” Think of who has served in this middle tier role throughout American history. Who, if anyone, serves that role now, and how much responsibility do you assign them for our current inequalities and the rampant exploits of those at the top?
4. What does Burton mean by racial caste? What is the difference between race and caste? Re-read Isabel Wilkerson’s breakdown of the two terms if you need a refresher. How do the distinctions between race and caste show up in American society? What does caste look like in other societies?
5. Revisit the founding myths outlined in Chapter Two. Which surprised you the most? Does the busting of any of these myths change your views on American democracy?
6. America’s social contract, according to Burton, involves the people giving the government the power and the government giving the people what we need for a good life (security and prosperity). Has the government held up its end of the social contract? Under our current structure, has the social contract fully applied to people of color?
7. Burton discusses the role of the rule of law in American democracy. Having read examples of how the legal system has been used to exploit, erase, and extract from Native Americans, Mexican Americans, and Black people, what are your beliefs about the fairness, justice, transparency, and impartiality that can be expected from our government and legal system as it relates to those on the lower rungs of the racial caste system?
8. What, if any, similarities do you see between the regional solidarity seen in government through the Southern bloc following the Civil War and modern American politics?
9. Burton breaks down the democratic mechanisms used to restore Southern political power and therefore reestablish and preserve racial caste following the Civil War. All this was made possible by the federal government’s abandonment of Reconstruction, removing troops from ex-Confederate states and instead choosing appeasement of white Southerners over protecting

its new Black citizenry. What, if anything, do you think the federal government could have done to save Reconstruction in the South?

10. What are some concrete advantages whiteness has afforded throughout American history? Describe some advantages bestowed on white people during the first founding era/colonial period and then further advantages received during the second founding era through the creation of the white middle class.

11. Throughout the book, Burton introduces readers to people whose stories have often been overlooked or forgotten. Which person stayed with you the most, and why?

12. Burton opens chapter eight by discussing the staying power of whiteness and, particularly, its political function. “Whiteness unites poor and wealthy conservatives in a shared political identity rooted in cultural grievance. By appealing to racial belonging and symbolic status, elites convince working-class, lower-caste whites that their interests are aligned, leading them to trade clear economic benefits for the promise of standing with those at the top.” It’s a common liberal refrain that poor white conservatives vote against their own interests. Do you believe this to be true?

13. Despite the progress that has led to an expansion of the social contract to include Black people and other people of color, racial inequality persists as the norm in many facets of American life, e.g., Black people having higher rates of unemployment and maternal mortality, Latinos being more likely to be negatively affected by pollution, and Native people having twice the child mortality rate compared to whites, as Burton discusses in chapter eight. What do you take away from the permanence of white advantage over the course of American history? Do you believe true equality is possible under the American democracy that exists?

14. “What did white people have to give up to take up privileged position in the American social hierarchy?” This is a question Burton poses in chapter eight, and while she shows several examples throughout history of tangible losses, ultimately doesn’t feel equipped as a Black person to fully answer this question. If you’re a person of color and therefore unable to draw from personal experience, consider taking a historical or philosophical approach to this question. If you are white, really give this question deep thought, and share your reflection through the lens of history and your own lived experience.

15. Of the four central American values that Burton describes in the final chapter of the book—Liberty, Meritocracy, Self-Reliance and the Protestant Work Ethic, and Individualism—which of these would you personally find the hardest to let go of? Have these values played a large role in how you see yourself, others, or the decisions you’ve made in your life?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

1. What inspired you to write *The Price of Union*, and is this book in its final form what you originally set out to write?

A: Not at all. I initially set out to write a book about the decline of American democracy. Like many people, I assumed our political dysfunction stemmed from polarization, institutional decay, or money in politics. But the deeper I dug into American history, the more I realized those were symptoms, not the underlying condition.

A friend who reviewed an early draft said something that changed the course of the project: “Kelly, this is all about race.” At first I resisted that conclusion. I had spent my career working on issues of race and honestly hoped this crisis was about something else. But the evidence kept leading me back to the same place.

The book I ended up writing is very different from the one I imagined. It became less about democracy’s decline and more about democracy’s design. I came to believe that if we wanted to understand the instability we’re experiencing today, we first had to understand the bargain that made American democracy possible in the first place.

2. Who would you say this book is for?

A: I wrote this book for anyone who has looked at the state of our country and wondered, *How did we get here?* It’s for readers across the political spectrum who are willing to examine American history with curiosity and humility.

More specifically, it’s for people who sense that our current political crisis runs deeper than elections, parties, or personalities. If you’ve ever felt that we’re arguing over symptoms while missing the underlying condition, this book is for you.

My hope is that readers come away not necessarily agreeing with every conclusion, but seeing American history and democracy through a different lens.

3. How much did your research for this book change your views on American democracy?

A: Completely.

I began this project believing that democracy was fundamentally sound but in need of repair. I assumed our institutions had simply failed to keep pace with a changing society.

What I discovered was far more unsettling. The instability we’re experiencing today isn’t simply the result of broken institutions. It reflects tensions that have existed since the nation’s founding. I came to see that racial caste wasn’t an unfortunate byproduct of American democracy. It was one of the primary ways democracy organized power from the very beginning.

That realization fundamentally changed how I understand both our history and our present.

4. Did you begin writing the book already knowing that you wouldn't be concerned with "how we save democracy," or was this driven by discoveries you made during your research?

A: No. I didn't begin writing the book asking, "How do we save democracy?" I began with a much more basic question: *What is going on?*

As a political scientist, I found myself increasingly frustrated that so much of what I had learned in graduate school couldn't adequately explain the political moment we were living through, particularly the emergence of Donald Trump and the instability surrounding American democracy. The conventional explanations, whether polarization, institutional decline, or money in politics, all felt incomplete.

As I dug deeper into American history, I realized I wasn't simply studying a democracy in decline. I was uncovering a much older relationship between democracy and racial caste that had been there from the beginning. That discovery fundamentally changed the direction of the book.

5. Are you hopeful about the future of America?

A: I am hopeful about humanity. America, I'm less certain.

History reminds us that nations rise and fall. Empires are not permanent. Whether America is experiencing a temporary period of instability or something more profound remains to be seen.

My hope doesn't rest in the permanence of any one nation. It rests in our capacity to grow, to tell ourselves the truth, and to build societies where every person has the opportunity to flourish. I believe that is humanity's great responsibility.

I wrote *The Price of Union* as a contribution to that work. Whether America becomes the place where that next chapter is written, I don't know. But I remain hopeful that it can help us imagine a more just future, for this country and for the world.

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. Take a field trip to a historic site, e.g., Jamestown, Independence Hall, civil rights museum, etc. Make note of how the American myths Burton discusses may be woven into the stories presented at these sites.

2. Fiction often imagines forms of government that don't exist in our world. Think about a fictional society from a novel, film, or television series. Discuss: What aspects of its governing system would you borrow, reject, or adapt if you were designing a new political order? How does fiction help expand our imagination about what is politically possible?

3. Write your own "founding document." As the Founding Fathers did when they drafted the Constitution, you're invited to brainstorm, experiment, and debate about what your ideal government would look like.