

AGAINST ALL ODDS

THE FIGHT FOR A BLACK MIDDLE CLASS

WITH BOB HERBERT

AN EDUCATIONAL DISCUSSION GUIDE



ABOUT THE FILM

AGAINST ALL ODDS: The Fight for a Black Middle Class with Bob Herbert is a look at the extraordinary difficulty African Americans have faced in their efforts to establish a middle-class standard of living. Through dramatic historical footage and deeply moving personal interviews, the documentary explores the often-frustrated efforts of black families to obtain the financial security that is enjoyed by white citizens. This is a film about historic, brutal, institutionalized racism – racism that has played out in the courtrooms, classrooms, financial institutions and communities of America for generations, and that established huge, almost wholly insurmountable barriers to success for African Americans in their pursuit of the American Dream. Journalist Bob Herbert interviews prominent African Americans, including Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author Isabel Wilkerson, Congressman Elijah Cummings, renowned psychologist and author Alvin Poussaint, Maya Rockey Moore, President of Global Policy Solutions, Marc Morial, President of the National Urban League, and policy activist Angela Glover Blackwell, among others, who share generational stories of profoundly damaging economic and social prejudice.



ABOUT THE HISTORY

Today, many African American families are still digging out of the recession that followed the Great Crash of 2007-08, and although some are doing better, black wealth remains meager compared to that of the white middle-class. Nearly 40 percent of black children are poor, and for every dollar of wealth in the hands of the average white family, the typical black family has only a little more than a nickel. *Against All Odds* looks back at the uphill struggle facing black families freed from slavery over a century and a half ago, yet, still oppressed. The film traces the barriers to employment and housing that were deliberately designed and utilized to keep black people “in their place” both in southern and northern states as African Americans migrated throughout the country in search of opportunity and a better life. Shocking footage from the 50s and 60s in Chicago shows how black families trying to escape overcrowded ghettos faced riots if they moved to a white block or suburb. And many of these incidents of “white rage” have gone un-reported compared to “black rage” often reported as front-page news. The Tulsa Race Riots of 1921, which resulted in a self-sufficient African American community being burned to the ground and utterly destroyed, is an example of such sanctioned racism and lawlessness that debilitated economic advancement of the African American community and kept blacks from thriving. For those African Americans who succeeded in acquiring a middle-class lifestyle in suburban neighborhoods, and even today, like those in Prince George’s County, Maryland, the foothold feels tenuous. The reality behind that sense of insecurity was abundantly clear following the Great Recession when widespread foreclosures stripped wealth out of the black community. Yet through it all, black Americans have shown time and again a tremendous resilience in the face of cruelty and injustice and a determination to get their fair share of the American Dream.

With our country's current tense racial climate, *Against All Odds* provides a fact-based starting point for productive dialogue about racial inequality in America. The film is a primer on the history of institutionalized bias in the United States – from the horrors of slavery and Jim Crow, to the upheaval and violence of segregation and the civil rights era to today – and the bias that is still debilitating, infiltrating all of the socio-economic pathways of our society.

Against All Odds raises difficult questions about the history of brutal, relentless, violent bigotry in our country, and the ways in which this history continues to play out today. These truths are not easy to watch – or easy to talk about, but they must be faced and discussed in order for real and lasting change to take place. The purpose of this guide is to provide viewers with a roadmap for productive conversations about the film and the issues it raises, with the goal of effecting real change in communities around the country.



SCREENING GUIDELINES

One way to create a positive change in your community is to host a facilitated screening of this film. Bring your friends and neighbors together to view the film, talk about the issues and feelings it raises, and develop an action plan to turn those responses into qualitative change. Below is a step-by-step guide to help you plan your own screening of *Against All Odds*.



PICK A TONE



Your screening can be anything you wish – from brunch-and-a-movie on a Sunday, to a get together for your office staff, to a small gathering at your house of worship. It can be a call to action for your neighbors, or an educational opportunity that can start a meaningful conversation. Be creative, and don't be afraid to customize your approach. The most important thing is to create an environment that feels welcoming and safe, so that participants are open to viewing – and discussing – this crucial content.

CONSIDER TIMING & AGENDA



This film can be used in a variety of settings, depending on your own needs and restrictions. Time is one of the most important considerations. The film comes in two lengths, a shorter 57 minute or a longer 76 minute version. For an effective event, you need to add at least 15 minutes before the film to set the tone, and 60 minutes after the film for a discussion. To assist with the post-film discussion, you might consider inviting a moderator, or assembling a panel of local experts or stakeholders, such as diversity mediation experts, religious leaders, or educators. You might also consider a series of two or three evenings that address specific themes in the film, which would allow more time for in-depth follow-up, or for the group to develop a community action plan. As you begin to envision your event, you should set the agenda and format depending on your desired outcomes.

CHOOSE A DATE + LOCATION



When picking the date and time for your screening, consider holidays and local events, as well as the general preferences of your invitees. A weeknight evening is often a good time to host an adults-only event, as it allows professionals to come straight from work and does not conflict with major weekend plans. If you are choosing between days, do not hesitate to ask an expert, such as an administrator at your church or synagogue, about when they've had the most success with attendance.

The location to host your event is very important. Depending on the format of your event and the number of intended guests, your event can take place in your living room for an intimate group, a large auditorium for hundreds of people or anything in between. Securing this location early in your planning process will help drive all other areas of planning a successful event.

...AND NOW THAT THE BASICS ARE DECIDED, YOU CAN GET TO PLANNING YOUR EVENT!

2-4 WEEKS PRIOR

- Put together your invitation list.
- Design and mail or email your invitation. Make sure your invitation outlines all the details of your event: including the name of the film, and a description of the activities you have planned (panel discussion, moderated Q&A, open group dialogue, small group activities, etc.). If you are planning a potluck or bring-your-own event, make sure you detail this expectation in your invitation as well.
- Use social media assets, printable postcards and posters to help get the word out. You will find links to some useful assets we provide at the **back of this guide**.
- Secure your media so you have a copy of the film ready to screen. Request a complimentary DVD of the film by contacting roys@publicsquaremedia.org or use a link:

56 MINUTE VERSION OF THE FILM: <http://bit.ly/AAO56min>

76 MINUTE VERSION OF THE FILM: <http://bit.ly/AAO76min>

2 WEEKS PRIOR

- Plan the food and drinks you will serve. Will you serve drinks and light snacks? A full buffet meal? Do you need to rent tables, chairs, plates, glasses, and utensils, or purchase disposable ones?
- Prepare an agenda for your event. This can be as formal or as informal as you wish, but you should decide on the timing for arrivals, introductions, starting the film, and starting the post-film discussion or supplemental activities. Be sure to allow time for a bathroom and refreshment break after the film ends. This guide provides questions and discussion prompts for creating a unique, dynamic dialogue

1 WEEK PRIOR

- Send out a reminder to those guests who have RSVP'd yes, or not RSVP'd at all.
- Consider providing RSVP'd guests with links to the film's preview trailer to garner involvement in the issues, and get your guests excited about your event.

PREVIEW TRAILER: <http://bit.ly/AAOTrailer>

3 DAYS PRIOR

- Purchase the necessary food, drinks, and other event supplies.
- Set up your technology – whether it is a projector and screen or a TV and DVD player, you want to ensure you have it up and running before the day of the event. Although the film can also be streamed online, technical issues may arise due to your accessible internet speed and is not recommended.
- Confirm with your invited guests one more time, and consider resending the invitation to any late RSVPs.
- Prepare and practice an introduction to the film and a welcome to your event.



THE DAY OF THE EVENT

- Test the tech before guests arrive. Give yourself ample time to test the DVD player, projector, and/or sound equipment to make sure everything will run smoothly.
- Arrange your space to accommodate your guests, and to create a welcoming environment for a meaningful event and discussion.
- Don't forget your agenda. Make the most out of your time by following the agenda you created. Introduce the film and explain why you are bringing it to the group. Before the film starts, let your guests know that there will be a short discussion, panel discussion, or activities in small breakout groups afterwards.

THE DAY AFTER

- Send a thank-you to all your guests and encourage them to continue the discussion and/or the action plan that was started at your screening.
- Think about the ways that you will continue to work towards the ideals and goals the film brought up for you – even after the movie ends. Refer to the **EXTENSION ACTIVITIES** section of this guide for ways to get involved.

THINGS TO CONSIDER **BEFORE** WATCHING *AGAINST ALL ODDS*

This film explores the historical and contemporary, often frustrating, African American pursuit of the American Dream. Drawing from the reflections of experts and a number of black families struggling to join the established middle-class, *Against All Odds* places this very American struggle into context, exploring the nuances within the framework of race relations in this country – from slavery through today. The topics and issues raised in the film might create strong reactions for some viewers. Try to give everyone an opportunity to be heard. Be clear about how people will take turns or indicate that they want to speak. Plan a strategy for preventing one or two people from dominating the discussion. Talk about the difference between dialogue and debate. Remind people that you want to encourage dialogue where participants try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and actively listening.



Before the group views the film, provide a brief introduction based on your objectives. Refer to the *About The Film* section of this Guide for a general description. Then, communicate some of the main questions that you hope the film will raise, such as:

- What is the American Dream? What does it mean to be in the middle-class?
- How is the American Dream, or membership in the American middle-class, handed down from generation to generation in this country?
- What is the legacy of slavery, segregation, and Jim Crow in our culture? Where do we see that legacy in our culture today?
- What is the difference between overt and implicit racism? How do each of these forms of racism affect the victims differently?
- For a deeper pre-viewing discussion, you may wish to use one or two of the following discussion prompts to lead the group discussion.
- What is meant by the phrase “coded language?”
- Where do you see institutionalized bias in this country today?
- What are “micro-aggressions?” Have you seen or experienced racially motivated micro aggressions?
- Are you and/or your parents’ home or landowners? Were your grandparents and your great grandparents’ homeowners?

THINGS TO CONSIDER **AFTER** WATCHING *AGAINST ALL ODDS*

This film explores the pursuit of the American Dream through the eyes of African American thought leaders as well as regular families – all of whom have experienced the unique challenges that African Americans have faced throughout history – and continue to face – as they struggle to claim their place in the American middle-class. The film points out a number of factors on which socio-economic upward mobility depends, a quality education, governmental representation, financing and bank loans, quality housing, social access, and employment – all of which are not equally accessible to whites and blacks in this country. After seeing this film, some viewers may feel demoralized, depressed, or angry. The goal of hosting a screening is to use the film as a point of departure for a larger conversation about racial inequality, and then, to apply the new understanding to discussion and work to make a difference in your community city, state, and beyond. After viewing the film, use some or all of the following questions to guide a thoughtful discussion. Depending on your audience and your objectives, you may select from the topics and questions below.



ECONOMICS

- *Against All Odds* reports that for every dollar of wealth for whites, blacks have little more than a nickel, 80% of African Americans are below median wealth, and 1/3 of all blacks have no assets. How do economic statistics such as these translate into a barrier for black families to attain middle-class status? Do we see that in our community?
- The film explores the impact of post-slavery sharecropping. How did sharecropping perpetuate many of the inequalities of slavery to keep blacks from joining the path towards the middle-class even after slavery had officially been banned?
- How were African Americans denied access to Social Security and the GI Bill? What might be some of the long-term ramifications of this sort of economic exclusion? How do these ramifications play out in society today?

SOCIAL ACCESS

- Until the 1960s, the entire American south was segregated. Drinking fountains, schools, hotels, elevators, stairs, taxis. The film notes that African Americans living at this time were required to be constantly on guard. At every turn, at every moment, every single thing that you did you had to be keenly aware and observant and vigilant as to where you happened to be and making sure that you were not crossing the line. How did this sort of constant vigilance undermine the success of black citizens in this country going forward? Does that need for vigilance still exist today?
- In the early 1900's, the black middle-class was made up of African American people who owned businesses catering to the black community such as restaurants, barbershops, retail stores, etc., where they were able to achieve success and safety within their own community. But outside the "bubble," blacks who improved their lot were literally at risk for their lives. How does this sort of segregation undercut equal access to the American Dream? How might it de-incentivize African American citizens to want to achieve economic equality with their white peers?
- How did the Fair Housing Act, the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act and Affirmative Action impact the establishment of an African American middle-class?
- How has "coded language" been utilized by politicians and leaders to perpetuate socio-economic inequality? How is the phrase "states' rights" used as coded language? What does it really mean? What are some examples today?

EDUCATION

- How is access to quality housing linked to access to quality education?
- How did socio-economic trends such as sharecropping keep generations of African American children out of school?
- According to the film, in what other ways have African Americans been denied equal access to a quality education?
- Why is quality education inextricably linked to upward mobility and wealth accumulation? How does this play out in society today?
- When Elijah Cummings was sworn in as a Congressman, his father cried, noting what he could have been if he hadn't been denied an education. Today, where do we see this sort of exclusion persist?

VOTING & POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

- According to the film, historically, how have African Americans' right to vote been undermined and limited? How does this affect this community's ability to participate in our democracy?
- When Elijah Cummings was sworn in to the House of Representatives, his father noted that "in this place they used to call us slaves. In this place they called us 3/5 of a man. In this same place they called us chattel." How does this history, and the knowledge of this history, inherently affect the political representation afforded to African Americans in this country?

HOUSING

- What is redlining? How was this used to limit African American access to housing?
- What was the "black belt" in Chicago? Is there one in your community?
- How did forced housing segregation lower the property values on black-owned property? How does this pattern sabotage African American upward mobility?

JOBS AND EMPLOYMENT

- Did the Great Migration actually help African Americans to get better jobs and a higher social standing?
- What is the impact and importance of government jobs on African American culture? Reflect on your community today.

FINANCING, INVESTING, & BANKING

- How was the practice of redlining used to deny African Americans equal access to bank loans and home insurance? How is redlining a form of “American Apartheid?”
- What does it mean to buy a home ‘on contract’? Why would people buy homes on contract? What are the ramifications of this sort of home purchase?



EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Continue the journey from audience to agent of change by engaging with a nonprofit or social movement that works to promote economic equality, equal access, and fight institutionalized bias.



- **THE SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER** works to promote economic justice for people of color through education, advocacy, and on-the-ground, grassroots activism. Learn more at [SPLCENTER.ORG/ISSUES/ECONOMIC-JUSTICE](https://splcenter.org/issues/economic-justice)
- **OPERATION HOPE** empowers underserved communities by providing financial education and financial literacy programs. It is an organization dedicated to financial dignity education and economic empowerment programs for underrepresented communities. [OPERATIONHOPE.ORG](https://operationhope.org)
- **MONEY THINK** is a nonprofit that focuses on financial literacy education for inner-city youth as a path to breaking the generations-long cycle of economic inequality at [MONEYLINK.ORG](https://moneylink.org)
- **COLOR OF CHANGE** is one of the largest online civil rights organizations in the country. Sign up to learn more about the issues they champion and how you can make a difference at [COLOROFCHANGE.ORG](https://colorofchange.org)
- **CHANGE.ORG** Sign a petition or start one of your own to raise awareness about the generational inheritance of institutionalized racism in our financial systems, our educational systems, our housing systems and more – and how this inheritance is perpetuating inequality on every level for African Americans at [CHANGE.ORG](https://change.org)

DIGITAL ASSETS

30-MINUTE PROMO: <http://bit.ly/AAOTrailer>

SOCIAL MEDIA POSTCARDS: <http://bit.ly/AAOpostcards>

POSTER (PRINTABLE): <http://bit.ly/AAOposter>

SCREENING POSTCARDS (PRINTABLE): <http://bit.ly/AAOnotice>

PRESS RELEASE + FILM DESCRIPTIONS: <http://bit.ly/AAOPressRelease>

FOR MORE INFORMATION OR TO REQUEST A DVD: roys@publicsquaremedia.org

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