



ALLIANCE FOR COLLECTIVE EMPOWERMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

REFORM WAS THE TRAP

The Case for Building

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For Our People, By Our People

WHAT LIES BENEATH

The condition of Black America today is not meaningfully different from the condition Black America faced on the day marchers were beaten crossing the bridge at Selma. Sixty years have passed. The distance covered is far smaller than the distance promised.

That persistence points to a question resting at the base of the condition of Black America, one that is ignored far more often than it is asked. It is a question about the system responsible for producing that condition.

The question most often asked is how to fix the system.

The more honest question is whether the system was ever broken at all.

Given the efforts and energy of countless movements, organizations, and activists, one might reasonably assume it must be broken, that something once functional simply went wrong and now needs repair. Something that is broken had to have once been whole. At some point, it malfunctioned, departed from its intended purpose, and became something capable of being repaired. That assumption has governed decades of Black political effort: identify the flaw, apply the necessary pressure, pass the law, correct the error, and eventually the machine will work as intended.

Generations have given their lives to that belief. They marched. They litigated. They legislated. They organized and even died for the cause. Yet the conditions those efforts were meant to change remain. By many measures, they have worsened.

Part of the reason is simple, though it is rarely confronted directly: no act of Congress, no court ruling, and no constitutional amendment has ever been capable of legislating what lives in the hearts of the people charged with enforcing them.

A law can prohibit discrimination, but it cannot make a person believe in equality. A court can order compliance, but it cannot compel conviction. An amendment can declare a right, but it cannot determine the heart of the person entrusted to honor it.

That is the limit of legislation. The law can change overnight; the people responsible for carrying it out do not change with it. The hiring manager, the lender, the police officer, the prosecutor, the judge, the administrator, all bring their own beliefs, prejudices, and judgments to the authority they have been given.

This is written to say plainly what the record already shows. The system did not malfunction. It performed. What looks like failure from the inside was function from the start. And once that is understood, everything changes about what comes next.

I. A System Designed to Exclude Cannot Be Reformed Into One That Includes

Reform assumes good faith. It assumes that somewhere in the design was an intention to include, and that intention was simply frustrated by prejudice, by circumstance, by the slow pace of progress. Fix the prejudice, the logic goes, and the underlying design will deliver what it always meant to.

But the design did not mean to. The exclusion was not a bug that crept into an otherwise fair system. It was written into the foundation, in law, in economics, and in the deliberate withholding of everything a freed people would have needed to compete. A nation that declared, in its own highest court, that Black people held no rights it was bound to respect did not accidentally produce a wealth gap. It engineered one, and then built every subsequent institution on top of that engineering.

You cannot reform your way into a house built to keep you out. You can petition at the door. You can demand the locks be changed. You can win, occasionally, the right to stand in a room you did not build and do not own. But the house remains the house. Its foundation remains its foundation. Reform, at its most successful, wins access to a structure whose entire architecture assumes your subordination. That is not liberation. It is a more comfortable arrangement of the same confinement.

A system designed to exclude cannot be reformed into one that includes.

II. The Architecture Is Not an Oversight. It Is a Structure to Escape

If the exclusion were an oversight, the remedy would be correction. You would point to the flaw, name it, and the fair-minded machinery of the country would move to set it right. That is the theory that has been sold for more than a century, and it is the theory that keeps a people petitioning at a door that was never going to open on their terms.

The truth is harder and more clarifying. What Black Americans face is not an oversight. It is an architecture. It has load-bearing walls. It has a foundation poured on purpose. It was designed to distribute power in a particular direction and to keep it there, and it has done exactly that, adjusting its methods across eras while preserving its result. Slavery became convict leasing. Convict leasing became redlining. Redlining became mass incarceration and the wealth gap it feeds. The name on the outside changed. The function did not.

Consider what was actually offered. The most famous promise of land ever made to freed Black Americans, forty acres and a mule, rests on Special Field Order No. 15, which set aside roughly 400,000 acres of coastal land in 1865. At the full forty acres per family, that entire allotment could have reached only about one percent of the freed population. The other ninety-nine percent were never accounted for. There was never enough land set aside to make the promise real, and the arithmetic was not hidden. It was available to anyone who cared to do the division. A promise extended to four million people, backed by enough land for a fraction of them, is not a promise that failed in the execution. It is a promise that was never meant to be

kept, offered to a people with nothing, precisely because it cost nothing to offer and bought quiet while the country moved on. It was revoked that same year, before even that one percent could be made permanent. The most celebrated commitment in the history of Black land ownership was, from the moment it was spoken, too small to be anything but a pacifier.

This is why the call to return a nation to its former greatness deserves a plain question in response: greatness for whom, and in which year? Every era held up as a golden age has to be measured against who it was golden for. The decades most often invoked with longing were, for Black Americans, decades of the architecture operating at full strength: legal segregation, denied ownership, sanctioned violence, and exclusion enforced by law. A return to any of them is not a restoration of greatness. It is a restoration of the machine to an earlier setting. The word return is itself the admission. It points backward to a state someone wants rebuilt, and for Black Americans there is no year in that backward direction that was not worse.

You do not correct an architecture. You do not file a grievance with a building and wait for the walls to move. When a structure is built to contain you, the task is not to renovate it from the inside. The task is to escape it, and then to build something of your own on ground the old structure does not control.

The architecture of Black subordination is not an oversight to be corrected. It is a structure to be escaped.

III. The Path to Dignity Is Construction, Not Admission

So if not reform, and not endless petition at the door, then what?

The answer is construction. Not admission into institutions built to keep Black people out, but the deliberate building of new institutions, built by Black people, for Black people, on ground they own and govern. Schools that answer to the community that founded them. Hospitals that heal without contempt. A financial system that builds wealth instead of extracting it. Courts, governance, and law written by the people they serve and accountable to no one else.

This is not a retreat from the world. It is the opposite. You cannot partner as an equal when you own nothing. You cannot trade on your own terms when you have no ground of your own. You cannot invite anyone in when you are a guest in someone else's house. Sovereignty is not isolation. It is the precondition for genuine participation in everything that comes after. A people who build their own foundation are not walling themselves off. They are finally standing on ground solid enough to reach out from.

The path to dignity is not through the front door of institutions built to keep Black people out, but through the construction of new institutions built by Black people for Black people.

IV. What ACE Actually Is

This is where principle becomes plan. The Alliance for Collective Empowerment and Development is the architecture that makes these three truths buildable rather than merely spoken.

ACE is a network of self-governing, self-sustaining cities for Black and Native American communities, established on tribal sovereign land, funded by community capital, and governed by a constitution written by the people it serves. It unites two peoples with a shared history of dispossession and a shared claim to self-determination: the land sovereignty of Native nations and the population, capital, and labor of Black America, joined to build permanent institutions that answer to no one else.

It is not a protest. It is not a petition. It is not a request for a better seat inside a house that was built to exclude. It is the construction of a new house, on ground of our own, under law of our own, built to outlast the people who build it. Where reform asks permission, ACE builds the conditions under which permission is no longer required.

The full framework, the legal architecture, the phased twenty-five-year plan, the constitutional structure, exists and is documented in detail. But the whole of it rests on the three simple truths this document has named. Everything ACE builds is an answer to them.

*Reform was never going to work, because the system was never broken.
The answer was always to build.*

**THE FUTURE IS OURS.
LET'S BUILD IT.**

To read the full philosophical and historical foundation, see [The Founding Position](#).

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