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Tricia Johnson:

It's Aspen Ideas to Go from the Aspen Institute. I'm Tricia Johnson. In 2015, Freddie Gray, a 25 year old black man from Baltimore died seven days after being arrested by police. He slipped into a coma shortly after the arrest, which was caught on video. Wes Moore wrote about Gray's life, arrest and the uprising that followed his death. In America today, Moore says we're reliving history.

Wes Moore:

It's impossible to talk about the life of Freddie Gray or the life of many people in Baltimore without understanding the history that not just racism, not just incidents of racism, but systemic racism played in the environments and the communities that people are existing in.

Tricia Johnson:

Aspen Ideas to Go brings you compelling conversations from the Aspen Institute, which drives change through dialogue, leadership and action to help solve our greatest challenges. Today's discussion is from the Aspen Security Forum presented by the Aspen Strategy Group.

Tricia Johnson:

Wes Moore says inequitable policing is real and evident in the deaths of other black Americans, including George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Eric Garner and many others. His book, "Five Days," addresses the problem, but also digs deep into the life of Freddie Gray. He says Gray's life, which was full of impossible challenges, should be mourned just as much as his arrest and subsequent death. In a conversation with former deputy national security advisor, Dina Powell McCormick, Moore talks about Freddie Gray, systemic racism and poverty in America, which has been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. Here's Dina Powell McCormick.

Dina Powell McCormick:

Such a delight for me to have the opportunity to moderate this conversation. And I have to say there's a little bit I just have to brag about when it comes to Wes Moore. Wes grew up between Baltimore and the Bronx, a single mom, an amazing woman who saw that her son was going to play a very important role in this world. And he had a little bit of a rough patch, which we can get into. I think it makes the success all the more amazing. But he eventually ended up at Johns Hopkins, graduating Phi Beta Kappa, applying and becoming a Rhodes scholar, working at Citigroup in investment banking, but then having a calling after 9/11 to serve and going and serving in Afghanistan as a combat vet. And it's really an extraordinary life. And he is one of the most humble and dedicated leaders.

Dina Powell McCormick:

But I want to take Wes back a little bit to some other moments when he realized that there was a calling for him. And it really revolved around two people that kind of crossed his life. The first was another Wes

Moore, a gentleman who grew up a couple blocks away, very similar circumstances to Wes, but somehow instead of ending up in Afghanistan, ending up as a Rhodes scholar, ending up as a White House fellow, he is sadly serving life in prison. Wes, will you tell the story of the other Wes Moore and why you chose to write that book about him and how relevant his story is in what we are dealing with today in the United States?

Wes Moore:

Yeah. Thank you. And I remember when I first even learned about him, it was actually from my mom. I was in South Africa doing a study abroad program and then she called me one day and she said, and I was like, "Is everything okay?" Because this is before the days when you could make Skypes and free phone calls all over the world. This is when a phone call overseas was a really expensive venture. And so I was like, "Is everything okay?" And she said, "No," she's like, "everything's fine." She said, "I just have the craziest thing to tell you." She said, "There are wanted posters all over your neighborhood." And I wasn't trying to be funny, but I grew up, where my neighborhood was, was over in at the time over in kind of northeast Baltimore and so wanted posters wasn't something that I thought really justified a long distance phone call. And I said, "That's okay, but why are you calling me to tell me that?" And she says, "Because they have your name on it."

Wes Moore:

And that was the first time that I learned about Wes Moore and I learned about the crime. I learned about the fact that four guys walked into a jewelry store one day in a botched armed jewelry store robbery, ended up murdering an off duty police officer. A person who was a 13 year veteran of the Baltimore police force. He was a three time recipient of police officer of the year. He was also a father of five who just had triplets and he went to work one day and he didn't come home. And these wanted posters were all over the neighborhood because the police were looking for Wes Moore in connection to the crime and finally after 12 days, they finally caught all four people. And that was really what made me want to learn more about this crime, learn about this tragedy, but also made me want to learn more about Wes.

Wes Moore:

And one day I just decided to write him a note. And a month later I got a note back from Jessup Correctional Institution from Wes Moore. And about one letter turned to dozens of letters. Those dozens of letters turned to dozens of visits. I've now known Wes for over 17 years. He is now in year 20 of his life sentence without parole. And a couple of the big things that I learned throughout that process was one, was how thin that line is between our life and someone else's life. Where I say, the chilling truth is that his story could have been mine. Knowing my history, knowing my background, knowing the fact that we lived two blocks away from each other and came up in similar circumstances, similar challenges. And that the chilling truth is that his story could have been mine, but the tragedy is that my story could have been his.

Wes Moore:

And understanding that line, that distance between who we are and where we go and those who oftentimes society we think are just so distant and so far off, but actually it's fractions, it's minutes, it's moments, it's interventions that actually do make a crucial difference in where we end up. And then I think the big thing was, he helped me to really think through this idea of environments versus expectations. And I remember once he said to me, we're talking about Baltimore and he said, and I

asked him, "Do you think that we're products of our environments?" And he looked at me and he said, "Actually, I think we're products of our expectations." And as soon as he said that, I thought to myself, he is absolutely right.

Wes Moore:

And I remember someone once said to me, "It's a real shame that you looked up to your expectations in Wes didn't." And I said, "Actually, the real shame is that we both did." We both ended up exactly where we thought we would at some point. And because the expectations that people have of themselves, they're not born from nowhere. They really are born from the expectations that other people have of them and they internalize them and they make them their own. And so that was a really important process, getting to know Wes, building a friendship with Wes and now, and not only did eventually I end up writing about it, but it is something that really does in many ways serve as a compass in terms of how I think about my work and how I think about the things that how I want to spend my life.

Dina Powell McCormick:

Just such a powerful story. And I remember when he first told me I actually got goosebumps and he said, "Basically I lived up to my expectations."

Wes Moore:

He ended up exactly where he though he would.

Dina Powell McCormick:

He really did. And sadly enough, those expectations to some extent were dampened from a very early age and so were his opportunities. A lack of good education, a lack of a support network and that's a little bit the story of the tragic killing of Freddie Gray. And you've just come out with a book about his life in Baltimore and it's really moving because it doesn't just talk about what happened in those five days when he was in custody and then very tragically died at the end of those days but what happened literally from the beginning of his life when he was in utero. Will you just describe all that you found out about his life and how not only were there expectations issues, but challenges from before he even was born?

Wes Moore:

I really wanted to, in trying to tell the story of Freddie Gray, where I feel like oftentimes the entire narrative that was developed was what happened the day that he died? What happened in terms of police interaction? And I make no bones about the fact that we have to be able to address inequitable policing because it is real and we are watching example after example, how it is showing itself, how inequitable policing shows. Whether you're talking about the names of a George Floyd or whether you're talking about the fact that George Floyd actually represents a whole list of much longer, a much longer list of names that are now repeatedly caught into this cycle, whether that is Eric Garner or Sean Bell or Walter Scott or Philando Castile or Michael Brown or Breonna Taylor or Sandra Bland or Laquan McDonald.

Wes Moore:

We're watching this list of names, but the thing that always struck me about Freddie was if you look at Freddie's life, we actually have to mourn than that just as much. We have to mourn the fact that it's not

just his death that should make us stand up and take notice and it's not just the fact that this was a 25 year old young man who made eye contact with police and ran. And that was his crime because in a high crime neighborhood, that is enough to justify probable cause. And he's arrested, an hour after he is arrested, he's in a coma and he spends the next week in a coma until finally he passes away. And we spent so much time focusing on what happened in that time period of the arrest, but really with this book I also wanted to spend time talking about the 25 years prior and talk about the fact that this was a young man who was born premature, underweight and addicted to heroin. His mother, battled addiction for much of her life. She never made it to high school. She could not read nor write.

Wes Moore:

When he and his twin sister finally gained enough weight to leave the hospital, they moved into a housing project over in North Carey Street, over in West Baltimore. And that house that he moved into along with 480 other homes, were actually cited in a civil lawsuit back in 2009, because of the endemic levels of lead inside of that house. The CDC indicates that if someone has six micrograms of lead in every deciliter of blood, that that person will have cognitive damage for the remainder of their life. Freddie Gray had 36. This was a young man who was born underweight, premature addicted to heroin and was now lead poisoned. And by this time in his life, he was two years old.

Wes Moore:

His last recorded date in Baltimore City public schools was in the 10th grade. He was 19. He had been in special education classes his entire academic career because of the lead poisoning. And when I think about the reality of the life of Freddie Gray, this isn't a young man who never had a chance. This is a young man who, and it's really it's heartbreaking to think about this idea that arguably maybe the most peaceful week of his life was the week he was in a coma, because at least that week, he was surrounded by doctors and nurses. And at least that week, he was surrounded by lawyers and activists. At least that week, the entire city knew his name. And at least that week, the entire city cared whether he lived or died. And I don't know another week in 25 years prior where all those factors would have been true.

Wes Moore:

And that's the thing that I also wanted to highlight and profile is that even in this moment where we understand so much of what is driving us to this moment, so much of what brought, not just the nation, but the world to this moment is the fact that we saw on camera, a man handcuffed, face down on the ground, pleading for his life until he no longer had the breath to plead for it anymore while another man had nonchalantly put his knee in his neck. We saw that. And that's what brought us to this moment.

Wes Moore:

But the reality is when we're talking about justice, justice is not just simply about banning of choke holds, justice is not simply about eliminating no knock warrants, justice is economic justice. Justice is environmental justice. Justice is health justice. Justice is economic justice. Justice is thinking about why a life like Freddie Gray, that we spend a lot of time focusing on what's snuffed it out at the end, but the reality is it was snuffed out a long time ago. And this was a young man who in many ways and from no fault of his own was living on borrowed time from Jump Street. And that's what we as a society, we've got to wrestle with that and we've got to wrestle with that complicity as well.

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Dina Powell McCormick:

Wouldn't you say that that story, the sad story, the sad life of Freddie Gray is an example of what you drive when you talk about systemic racism?

Wes Moore:

Absolutely.

Dina Powell McCormick:

That is an important term that I think we are all finally really recognizing. Institutional bias, Mayor Landrieu was on the call and he just texted me. He doesn't go through the chat room because he's got my phone number. Just texts me when he has good points to share. And I would say one of the most powerful things that he saw under his leadership as mayor, is that we got to stop talking about this as incident by incident. Help us define systemic racism. How do you define it? Obviously it is illustrated in the life of Freddie Gray and many others. What's your description?

Wes Moore:

And hey, Mayor Landrieu. It's one of these things and he's absolutely right that I think oftentimes we misconstrue what actually racism is because we do look at it as if it's an act. Where if a person does something that is an act, that is racist. But what it also does is it lets us all off the hook far too easily, where we can say, "Well, I don't use the N word or I don't attend white supremacists rallies so therefore I'm not a racist." Racism isn't an act. Racism is a system. It's a system that allows these levels of discrepancies and disparities. It doesn't just allow them to take place, but it's the reason for them. It's impossible to talk about the life of Freddie Gray or the life of many people in Baltimore without understanding the history that not just racism, not just incidents of racism, but systemic racism played in the environments, in the communities that people are existing in.

Wes Moore:

It's impossible to talk about the way that East and West Baltimore are structured without understanding the history of red lining and without understanding the history of discriminatory housing policies and discriminatory lending policies and the Homestead Act and the unequal distribution of the GI bill. We're talking about policies that were incredibly deliberate and incredibly color coded. And so racism and systemic racism is this reality. It is this distinct understanding of the amount of discrepancies that we see is not because of individual acts or because of individual hard work or an individual not working hard enough. The fact that we have a racial wealth gap in this country that is literally 10 to one between white families and black families, it's not because one family worked 10 times harder. And I think we

have to be honest about that. The fact that a black woman with breast cancer is 42% more likely to die from that than a white woman with breast cancer. We have to be honest about the structural racism that plays into the healthcare system.

Wes Moore:

The fact that even right now when we're looking at COVID-19, when people say that COVID-19 has been the equal opportunity hitter and killer, that's just not true and the stats don't back that up because if you look at it also the impact of COVID-19 has also been incredibly color coded. Where African Americans are twice as likely to not just contract and get infected, they're twice as likely to die from it. And so when I think about the fact that we are twice as likely to not just get infected but die from this and all the issues of systemic health racism that plays into the infection, but also systemic health racism and also economic injustice that plays into why we're twice as likely to die from it.

Wes Moore:

These are things that we have to contend with as a larger society. And part of that and the understanding of that is not to play gotcha or I told you so or anything like that. But the reality is if we are going to be honest and truthful, that it means we have to understand that this was a country that was founded on a racial hierarchy. It was a country that was founded with stolen labor on stolen land. We have to understand that it did not just end with slavery, but after slavery it went into black codes and reconstruction and Jim Crow and mass incarceration and all these other things that showed themselves in different ways that created these massive gaps in not just outcomes, but opportunities. These are things that we have to wrestle and contend with if we're ever going to be honest about really fulfilling the larger dreams and hopes that this country shared and promised for everybody.

Dina Powell McCormick:

It's also the things that, those very values that America was built on, are very hard to promote abroad when we have been on this journey that doesn't seem it's going fast enough. I'll never forget traveling to the Middle East with Condi Rice. And I'll never forget being in rooms with kings and crown princes and high level ministers and it was during a difficult time, it was post Iraq and some of them would say to her, "We don't want to hear America preach to us about democracy." And I'll never forget her answer and her strength. She would look them in the eye and she would say, "I'm certainly not here to preach to you about democracy. It wasn't so long ago that I was considered three fifths of a man in my country. But what we have done is we have striven, we really are striving on this long journey to get better. And that's what you should hope for your people."

Dina Powell McCormick:

And it was always so powerful to me, the humility, but also the hope that we're recognizing that we are at least moving forward. Where do you think we are today on that journey? Are we taking steps backward? Are we moving in the right direction? And what will we kind of think about with COVID and George Floyd? How can we make sure not to waste this moment of national reckoning?

Wes Moore:

First, I love that story and it's so true. And it's so true that in order for us to have the kind of credibility that we need, we've got to let people know that even though our history has been uneven, that we have moved towards a sense of progress and we have to understand that yes, we've got work to do, but also work has been done. I think about it actually in context of my grandfather. And where my grandfather

was actually the first one on my mother's side of the family born in the United States. He was born in Charleston, South Carolina and spent his young years there. My great grandfather was a minister and a very vocal minister and started receiving a collection of threats and first they turned into vocal threats, then physical threats. To the point that in the middle of the night, my great grandfather picked up my grandfather and his family and they left. They didn't leave Charleston, they didn't leave South Carolina, they left the United States because the Ku Klux Klan ran them out.

Wes Moore:

And so my grandfather then really was raised in Jamaica despite being born in the United States. And the majority of my family actually pledged to never come back here. And the majority my family has not. They've never been back to the United States. But my grandfather did. And he always looked at it where he said, this was his birth home and no one should have any form of jurisdictional authority as to where he spent his time or the place that he felt most connected to than him. That he was proud of being American. This is a person who, again, always for his entire life, spoke with a deep Jamaican accent but was more proud to be American than anyone that I have ever known. And I think about his existence, I think about the fact that his earliest memories in this country were the country rejecting him, but he still spent his entire life, he moved back here, he went to Lincoln University and HBCU in Pennsylvania, raised his family here.

Wes Moore:

And he always believed in what the hope of this country was. And I think about it in context of where we are now and where people say, "Have we made progress?" And the answer is, not enough, but yes. And we have to recognize that and use that as a level of fuel and ammunition as we continue to push forward. Understanding the fact that two years ago, we had people who were calling for Black Lives Matter to be called a terrorist organization. A terrorist organization. An organization that was started by three black women after the death of Trayvon Martin. Who started off initially as a hashtag, but then eventually turned it into a movement because they said, "We feel like we have to remind this country that it's not that black lives matter more, but that they actually matter and you cannot kill us with impunity."

Wes Moore:

We now saw where that, where two years ago there were calls for it to be listed as a terrorist organization. Now we've got every corporation trying to figure out a way to put it into their mission statement. Three words that just could not be more true, but also could not be more obvious when we're talking about the hope of this country, that black lives matter. We're talking about where even in a short period of time, we now know that the conversations are not just about justice for Mr. Floyd and justice for the individual names that we now know and rattle off and unfortunately continue to get longer. But it's about how are we creating a level of measurable justice for an entire society? We're watching how people are making a collective movement. How we've watched a football team in my home state, who people have been calling for the name change for a very long time, and now within a matter of weeks, because we see a level of collective pressure that their name is now gone.

Dina Powell McCormick:

Much more unity. And I am just going to jump in here because we've got to cut. We've got a lot of questions for you.

Wes Moore:

Sorry, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Dina Powell McCormick:

Two men, I admire greatly, senator Sam Nunn has a question.

Wes Moore:

Ah yes.

Dina Powell McCormick:

Ambassador Tom Korologos. Let me start with you Senator Nunn and Tom and then hopefully we can have at least one more question.

Sam Nunn:

Yeah. Wes, terrific, terrific words of wisdom. Love your broad definition of justice. Question on national service. There's a lot of talk about national service. It was the first bill I introduced in the Senate in 1972. That shows you how effective I was, because it hadn't happened yet, except in very limited ways with America. What do you think of national service as a way of bringing us together and having us understand each other much better by working together and not just talking it, but doing deed together?

Wes Moore:

Senator Nunn, it's great to see you. And also I say, I am not in favor of it, I'm enthusiastically in favor of it. I know that some of the greatest joys and mercies that I have received in my life have not been when I was wearing a suit or not when I was wearing jeans or a t-shirt, but it was when I was wearing the uniform of this country. And for me, it was the uniform of the United States Army. But I don't care whether that is a green, whether it's a red city year jacket, or I don't care whether it is a Habitat for Humanity outfit or I don't care whether it is as a school teacher in an urban or rural or suburban school districts, where we know we have the highest needs. If we can instill a sense of national unity and collective service for our people, for our young people, we are going to be better off.

Wes Moore:

And actually, I would say, I think now is actually a really important time to do it because I think there's also going to be an economic calculation for it. Where because of the dangers of COVID-19, because of not just the health, but the economic impacts of COVID-19, we are going to have more and more people, more and more students, more and more people who are finishing up who are now going to be thinking very carefully about how do I want to spend these next couple years? And so we're actually watching a really interesting confluence where we're going to have increasing need for our citizens and also a population that are going to have some different options and really need to think hard about what do I do in terms of my next steps?

Wes Moore:

If we can come up with a truly calcified way of establishing national service and national service options, paid national service options for our young people so they can go out, whether it is joining the armed forces or whether it is going to work as a teacher, whether it is doing clean up supports, whether it is

doing it with things like lead abatements. We have a collection of issues that we've got to take care of our society and if we can create a national call and a national will for us to take care of our own issues, our own challenges and have our young people help lead the way it's not just going to be better for us in the short term, but frankly, it's going to be better for us in the longterm as well. I'm a huge proponent of it and I think it's something that we can and should move on.

Dina Powell McCormick:

And there's something right now, Senator Nunn, that they really have done in your honor, which is the CORE Act. That is a bipartisan initiative, Senators Rubio, Blunt, Chris Coons is a lead co-sponsor. I hope everyone on this call will look that up and support it because it does exactly what you and the Senator are talking about, double the number of service slots and increase pay. And quite frankly, recognize that essential workers have finally received the dignity they need. The EMT, the nurse, the grocery worker, et cetera. Thank you Senator. And last question, Ambassador Korologos.

Tom Korologos:

Let me ask you something. I have long held a theory that the younger preschool kids get into diversity, get into playing with other racially mixed kids. I remember growing up in Salt Lake, I didn't care about anybody. Could he catch passes? If he hits well, fine, if he doesn't go sit on the bench like I did. Is there any way we can promote younger generations of schoolchildren as they grow up finally, they don't care what color anybody is? Am I wrong on that? Or how wrong am I? What do you think of that theory, Wes?

Wes Moore:

You're not wrong at all. In fact, I can say that some of the most powerful experiences that I had was actually when I had a chance to get into environments where the people who are around were known like the people that I came up with. I think about my military experience. One of the things I loved about my military experience was the fact that I was now serving with people who had completely different backgrounds from me and I was learning from them every single day. But I think you bring up an important point also about history and about curriculum, because also some of the most important things that happened to me when I was coming up was I got a chance and it wasn't through school, but I got a chance to learn more about history. And I got a chance to learn about the history of not just my own history, but the history of others. I got a chance to learn about the beauty of the contributions of people like James Baldwin and Langston Hughes and Sojourner Truth and Paul Robeson.

Wes Moore:

And why that mattered is it did two things. One, it showed me that every room that I am in, I'm there because I belong there and that I'm not there because of someone's benevolence or kindness, but it was really, it was because of this amazing lineage of giants that paved the way for me. But the other reason why that becomes really important is it's important for other kids to know that too. It's important for other kids to understand the breadth and the contributions of people who might not look like them, who might not come from their background, but how it's actually been that kaleidoscope that makes this country so special.

Wes Moore:

And so I agree that we have to come up with ways of having kids, our young people at our earliest stages, being able to work together, learn together, grow together, laugh together, play together, but

we also have to make sure we're thinking in a really true and core and crucial way about the curriculum, the stories, the images that we're asking our children to inherit and interpret. Because that also will break down any forms of barriers or fears that our kids have of actually being able to work and grow together as well.

Tricia Johnson:

Anja Manuel, director of the Aspen Strategy Group, wraps up the conversation with one last question for Wes Moore.

Anja Manuel:

Thank you, Wes. Those are really inspiring words and really important at this time. Let me ask you, we've got very little time left, but maybe just in 30 seconds, leave us with some optimism. I know Robin Hood helps so many organizations that are at the core front of antipoverty efforts. What's the best innovation you've seen recently and what are they doing? In maybe in 30 seconds.

Wes Moore:

I say in 30 seconds, the most powerful thing that we can and are doing is how are we utilizing what we think is the most powerful element to the organization, which is our voice? Each and every one of us are going to have a collective impact and have an opportunity to have a true collective impact on our society right now. And we can pull together really special initiatives like we have one called the Power Fund, which is focusing on being able to address leaders of color because all the third party research and all of our research shows that people who are closest to the problems are oftentimes going to be closest to the solutions. We can do things like the Relief Fund and get capital and money out the door quickly to be able to address issues such as cash assistance and issues such as infrastructure rebuilding within the philanthropic sector.

Wes Moore:

But I think the other thing that we really want to be able to do is be able to align with community members, align with policymakers, align with philanthropists and say, "Now is a moment for all of us to say, what else can we do? How else can we push?" And I think one of the really exciting things that we're seeing right now in this moment is we are watching a response to that, that has just been truly, truly humbling. And so I'm hopeful for the future and I'm hopeful because we all are finding unique ways to have a vested interest in.

Anja Manuel:

Great. Thank you so much, Dina. Thank you so much, Wes.

Tricia Johnson:

Wes Moore is CEO of the Robin Hood Foundation, New York City's largest poverty fighting organization. He's the author of *Five Days: The Fiery Reckoning of an American City*. Dina Powell McCormick served as the US deputy national security advisor for strategy from 2017 to 2018. She sits on the board of directors for the Robin Hood Foundation. Their conversation was part of the Aspen Security Forum held by the Aspen Strategy Group.

Tricia Johnson:

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