

RICHARD: For most Liberals and Progressives, the phrase Black Lives Matters is a rallying cry, and it's been broadly embraced. But many other Americans think of the phrase as a turnoff. Why not say All Lives Matter? We tackle that debate, discuss racism and reaching out to political critics with a prominent member of Black Lives Matter, a decentralized network of activists across the country.

This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. Our guest is Hawk Newsome, the Cofounder and Chair of Black Lives Matter Greater New York. He makes the case for a movement that's grown in scale and significance since widespread protests erupted last summer after the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

RICHARD: Hawk is a devout Christian who has spent much of his life campaigning for racial and social justice. Our conversation with him goes beyond simple labels of Left or Right and seeks common ground and solutions to realities faced by people and communities.

ASHLEY: We chatted with Hawk and also occasionally heard from his dog, Fillmore. Don't be surprised when the barking begins. But first, let's dive in with Richard's first question.

RICHARD: How do you think Black Lives Matter has changed America?

HAWK: I think that the ultimate purpose of Black Lives Matter as a movement is the liberation of Black people. But the specific task at hand was to wake America up or to get woke, to take these issues that America, that the government, that some people would like to keep in the shadows and push them right out to the forefront so everyone can see, so everyone can be moved by it, so everyone can be appalled by it and hopefully take action.

ASHLEY: What do you say to the skeptics who say, "Well, all lives matter. Why do we say Black Lives Matter because all lives matter?"

HAWK: All lives will matter when Black lives matter. There's so many examples. There's so many ways that I could poke holes in that theory, but I'll just point out the recent events of January 6th. White terrorists were able to go in and overthrow the Capitol, be it temporary. When there's a Black march, a march for Black people, we are greeted with military force. We're greeted with militarized police. When something happens a white woman... There was a white woman in Seattle who was a yoga instructor that walked up to a police car. Police claimed they felt threatened, and they shot her two times. Those police went to jail.

Now, when you have the same set of circumstances when it happens to Black people, there's always a reason why the police are not prosecuted. You talk about Black schools as opposed to white schools. You talk about banking and the disparities in

color. There's so many systems. That's why we call it systemic racism. There's so many systems in America that tell us that we are second-class citizens, and that's why we scream, "Black Lives Matter." That's why we scream, "We are human beings." That's why we fight for equity.

RICHARD: You mentioned the violent assault on January 6th. Compare the police and security response to those rioters with what happened during the Black Lives Matter protest in D.C. last August.

HAWK: My god. It's unbelievable. I think about when we protested in Washington, D.C. in the past. There is always this military presence, and they're outside protecting these buildings, and you get the sense, if you approach this building the wrong way, you will be shot and killed. But we looked at the attack on the Capitol on January 6th, and police were actually ushering people in. Police were taking pictures with folks who harmed and actually killed other police officers. You could just see the difference, and it's disconcerting. It hurts, but it feels good in the sense that it reaffirms everything we're saying.

We said that Donald Trump was aggressive, that Donald Trump and his followers were racist, and this is what they proved. They're talking about chopping off heads. I said, "We're going to burn down the system and replace it with a new one." Donald Trump accused me of treason, the only crime in America that's punishable by firing squad. He tweeted that, and you have people screaming, "We're going to put heads on pikes." It's amazing how blatantly racist America is. Let's not forget 70 million people voted for this. It's safe to say that America is a racist country.

ASHLEY: Going back in time a bit to where you come from and where your motivation comes from, to what extent are you inspired by the U.S. civil rights movement and Martin Luther King?

HAWK: I think that Martin Luther King, Jr., the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. was a brilliant strategist. He was one of the greatest orators we've ever seen. If we could get some footage on Jesus speaker, I think he'd reach Jesus level. That was a joke, but he was so persuasive, and the strategy that he employed was one of the greatest political strategies in the history of this country. My parents met during the Civil Rights March in 1969. So it's safe to say that Walter Hawk Newsome wouldn't be born if it wasn't for the civil rights movement, you know what I mean?

[DOG BARKING] I'm sorry. Go, Fillmore. I have a little dog who thinks he's a lion and pushes us around. You see what I mean?

And we have the luxury of looking back in the past and taking from the Black Panthers, who were super cool in black leather and their berets. They had these political philosophies, but the Panthers were big on feeding the people, healing the people, and teaching the people, and also defending the people. Malcolm X did something that they called fishing, where he would take people who society would deem as

undesirable. He would go after the alcoholics and the heroin addicts. He would take them, make them dedicate their lives to Allah—I'm a Christian, but I respect the faith—clean up their lives, get them off drugs, find jobs, dress in a very dignified way, and just... Oh, man, he did this across the country.

He convinced so many people to change their lives from something that was negative to something that was positive. And then our brother, Malcolm X, didn't eff around. He said, "If you touch me, I'll touch you back." I think that was a great contrast to the messaging of Dr. King. We could just look back and pick and pull and build something that's new.

RICHARD: Is that something you're building motivated by love?

HAWK: It's all love. I never liked conflict growing up. I never liked to fight. I would do everything to avoid fights. In the third grade, I'd give people quarters not to fight me. I'd run from fights, and I always fought when it was the last alternative, whether it was self defense or something like that. So everything that we do... We're launching an organization called Black Opportunities, which is focused on empowering the people, similar to the way the Black Panthers did it, and it's all love. It's all love.

I love all people, but I really love Black people. I really fight to liberate Black people, and there's a lot of people who might get turned off by that sentiment and say, "Hey, why can't you love everybody equally?" Well, I feel like I was put on this planet to fight for the liberation of Black people, and a lot of our white allies understand that. A lot of white folk are like, "How can we help you?" It's not always about money, although the money helps. It's about resources. White people have networks that we generally don't have access to.

The number one killer of our people is not the police. It's not violence or things people might imagine. It's heart disease and diabetes, and I want to get people healthy and steer them away from red meat. So, on Juneteenth, which is a holiday, we fed an entire housing complex. We gave away 5,000 Impossible Burgers. We rented food trucks so they could be prepared. We gave away 90 boxes of fruit. It was music. It was painting. It was beautiful, but everybody who I see with the burger, and these are hardcore Bronxites who might not know the difference between veganism and socialism—I'm kidding—and I'm like, "What do you think about that burger?"

"This is pretty good."

I'm like, "You know it's plant-based, right?"

"Yeah."

"Would you try it in the future?"

"Yeah, I think I might."

But that's what it's about. It's about getting people healthy and changing their ways. But what I want is Black people to be able to build wealth and do business within their communities and do business with outsiders but seek to take care of home first.

RICHARD: Why is that important?

HAWK: You look around our neighborhoods, and we don't own the businesses. We don't own the homes we live in. I want to change that. You think about changing a habit, and you think about violence and incarceration in our communities, area codes with the highest murder rates have the highest unemployment rates. So, if we make our people healthier, they'll be less prone to violence. If we make our people more employable, they won't feel the need to go and commit crimes to raise money. It just opens up so many doors for us.

ASHLEY: You're clearly passionate about helping people. What's the line, do you think, between passion and civility? And do you think there should be one?

HAWK: It's hard to be civil with people who only respect barbarism. When America was discovered, there was a genocide of the indigenous people. When America has problems with countries overseas, when we want their oil or we want to decrease their power, we don't go in on peacekeeping missions.

[DOG BARKING] Come here, dog. It's okay.

Sorry. If you took a step back and really looked at how this country operates, America only respects power and force. Clear, clear example of this, Black Lives Matter has been in existence five, six years peacefully. There's been a minimal amount of riots, and the progress was so slow. George Floyd's death didn't make corporate America and the government realize that Black lives matter. It was the people in the streets who were angry, some of whom were destroying property, that made this country say, "Whoa, we better do something."

I just wish that things didn't have to get to the point where American politicians are rushing to put out this fire. So they're trying to figure out answers, and they're passing legislation, and they're doing all these things to show Black people they care. Why did they not listen when people were asking for these things peacefully?

RICHARD: And yet, you've said, "At some point, we will have to talk to the other side."

HAWK: Absolutely.

RICHARD: And you do believe in the search for common ground, right?

HAWK: I would love to sit down with poor white folk in rural settings across America and talk to them about classism and really have an open discourse and draw parallels

on how we're worried about the same things. We're worried about our kids' educations. We're worried about rent or mortgages, how we're worried about health care. And then we could sit back and come to the conclusion that it is the 1% and the people that they hire to represent them... I'm sorry, the government, who are keeping us pitted against each other.

I would love to find common ground with people who have open hearts and open minds. I'm not going to sit there and have a discourse with people who only want to hear things that they want to hear. I tried that. I dedicated a year out of my life to these conversations, and a lot of them did not want to hear anything that they didn't want to hear. But for folks who really want to see change, for folks who really want to see this government be governed by the people and for the people, I'm always willing to sit down.

ASHLEY: Are there some members of Black Lives Matter, your group, who disagree with what you just said, who think that you shouldn't talk to the other side, however you see that other side?

HAWK: We disagree over everything. Some of us went and took the vaccine while the rest of us are like, "You're out of your mind," and there's a lot of diversity in our organization. So we don't agree on everything, and we don't believe in wasting time. So, if there's a group of folks who just...

[DOG BARKING] Come here, dog. Come here. It's okay. It's okay. I'm glad you protecting the house, but I just need you to chill out.

ASHLEY: Hawk Newsome at home with his pet dog in New York.

RICHARD: More coming up on Hawk's mentors, his views about the media, and what happened in 2017 when Hawk suddenly stood up in front of a rowdy crowd of Trump supporters?

ASHLEY: This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. Let's Find Common Ground is produced for Common Ground Committee. One of our slogans is More Progress, Less Division. We believe it's possible, and on our website, we show you how.

ASHLEY: Go to commongroundcommittee.org to learn more about our mission and our work. Sign up for our newsletter.

RICHARD: Also, get advance notice on our public programs, webinars, and the themes we discuss in this podcast.

ASHLEY: Our website again is commongroundcommittee.org. Now back to our interview with Hawk Newsome.

RICHARD: I asked Hawk about people who had given him helpful advice in his work, mentors.

HAWK: One was Jewish, one was Italian, older men, multi-millionaires. One was the head of one of the biggest law firms in the country, and the other was the head of a Wall Street investment firm. And our politics were complete opposites, but we saw eye-to-eye on a lot of things, and we had great relationships. I'm thankful for their guidance. I truly believe it helped guide me to this point where we are today.

With that being said, a lot of times, Democrats don't like us as much as they like other activists, and that's because a lot of our views might be deemed Conservative. I believe that the welfare system should be a crutch. I believe that the welfare system should help you get through a troubled time until you get back on your feet. There's no reason that three generations of people should be on welfare. Something's just wrong with that system. There's no reason that three generations of people should be living in public housing. There's something wrong with that.

I see the way Democrats funnel money into communities, and they're community centers and basketball and games for kids. How about you keep that and set up some computer labs so you can teach our people coding? You want to talk about these single mothers? Build a place where you have a nursery where their children can be watched while they go and learn job skills and get accredited with different types of certificates. I see that Democrats are super pro-Black Lives Matter during election cycles. But in between, I can't get them to say anything. So the Democrats, they exploit Black people.

ASHLEY: Is that what you meant when you said politicians stand in the way of true progress?

HAWK: Absolutely. Absolutely. Republicans will take away all your civil liberties, but they'll tell you they won't kill babies. They won't give you universal health care when God knows your family needs health care. But they won't kill babies. I just see the constant manipulation, and it hurts. A lot of times, I'm really so angry that it's hard for me to speak to the other side.

RICHARD: You've talked about reaching out to the other side, and you did a really brave thing in September of 2017, speaking to a rally of Trump supporters. Some of them had been shouting at Black Lives Matter supporters, and the atmosphere at this event was really tense. What happened that day when you jumped up on stage?

HAWK: That was divine intervention, I promise. We walked up there. We were called every racial slur you could imagine. People were like, "If you don't like it, leave the country."

We're like, "No, our people built this country." You get the picture.

But the funniest part was the police. There were two cops there that ran up to us like, "Please, just move over there," and they were sweating because they knew that if these people collapsed on us, they would've had to take some sort of stand. It was just the way everything was set up with the cameras and everything, they would've had to take some sort of stand. That was hilarious.

Then one fellow was like, "You want to come up on stage and say your piece?"

We looked at each other. We're like, "Yeah."

[BEGIN MEDIA CLIP]

HAWK: My name is Hawk Newsome. I'm the President of Black Lives Matter New York. I am an American. And the beauty of America is that, when you see something broke in your country, you can mobilize to fix it. So you ask why there's a Black Lives Matter? Because you can watch a Black man die and be choked to death on television, and nothing happened. We need to address that. You need to fix it."

[END MEDIA CLIP]

HAWK: So, when I went up on stage, I just wanted them to get an understanding of who we are, and I used two things that they held very dear to them. You have to know your audience. That was the Constitution and the Bible, two irrefutable documents to a lot of us, myself included. I believe in the Constitution, if we make it work the way it was intended to work, the way it's supposed to work. It was a beautiful moment, but a lot of activists were upset at me.

RICHARD: Why?

HAWK: Because we were up there with Trump supporters. We were up there with some really angry people who were white supremacists. In that moment, we saw eye-to-eye. I was able to walk away from that with some great relationships that opened up a lot of doors of us to walk in a room that we previously wouldn't have been invited in, and really talk about the things we're discussing today. So that was good.

ASHLEY: You have criticized the media for acting against positive change. Can you talk for a minute about what you think the responsibility of journalists is in this?

HAWK: The media's a business, and you have to sell what your audience. If your audience wants to believe that Black people are criminals, Black people are lazy, then you're going to sell that to them. If your audience wants to hear that Conservatives are Satan, then you're going to sell that to them.

RICHARD: A final question: what kind of progress do you think is being made by Black Lives Matter, and are you hopeful about the coming months, the coming years?

HAWK: In my heart, I believe that we've seen the worst of the worst. I believe that better days are ahead of us. I believe that, even though people don't support Black Lives Matter because of their principles, they understand now that racism exists. They understand that systemic racism exists. I believe that more people have come to this conclusion than ever before. But the nugget, the silver lining, the true treasure in this is there are teenagers now, there are infants now. Well, the teenagers have spent the last six years of their life hearing about social justice and equity. So these are growing up during this new civil rights movement.

The future is bright. We're dismantling white supremacy, and this is what these kids are growing up on. They're living that every day. We're talking utopia type of stuff happening on the horizon. Things will be great, but we just have to stay the course. We pray that God just keeps us on this path, and we just have to stay the course.

RICHARD: Hawk Newsome, and your dog, Fillmore, thank you very much for joining us.

HAWK: Thank you.

ASHLEY: Thank you. Hawk Newsome, Cofounder and Chair of Black Lives Matter Greater New York.

RICHARD: There's a fascinating profile of Hawk and what he does in his spare time, when he has it, in The New York Times. We have a link to that article on our podcast webpage for this episode.

ASHLEY: More on this show and others at commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: I'm Richard Davies, and thanks to our producer, Miranda Shafer, and members of our podcast team including Erik Olsen, Bruce Bond, Donna Vislocky, Mary Anglade, and Olivia Adams.

ASHLEY: Thanks so much for listening.