

The Freedom from Want Medal

On this, the fifth day of October 2019, the Franklin D. Roosevelt Freedom from Want Medal is awarded to: Franklin Thomas

In the words of our laureate, my friend Franklin Thomas, "If the struggle of the last decades was against the colonialism that allowed one nation to rule another, the current and future struggle will be about the internal colonialism that allows one race or one sex to dominate another."ⁱ

At the Ford Foundation, a central question underpins the work: How do you change things that are unequal?ⁱⁱ

I was born in South Africa and spent a lot of my childhood there and in a segregated St. Louis. What I came to understand as a child is what you have always taught: that when there is deep inequality and prejudice, everyone suffers from that. Everyone is a captive.

It really takes people with courage, moral courage, to try to change that.ⁱⁱⁱ

It takes people like you, Frank. As you've shown throughout your life and career, you can't address inequality without changing power dynamics. And the most effective way to change power dynamics and tackle structural racism is by building our communities, our economies, and our democracies—from the ground up.

All across the world, you have done just that, empowering individuals and strengthening communities. As president of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, you led efforts in job creation, community-building, and neighborhood redevelopment. At Columbia University, you worked with the NAACP to increase university admissions of black students.^{iv} And your vision and influence helped set the stage for the MacArthur Foundation's incredible investment in Chicago's vitality, now going forty years strong.^v

I can also say from personal experience that you have made the Ford Foundation what it is today. As the foundation's first black president, you transformed the organization into a force for social justice, targeting poverty, racism, and sexism at their roots and focusing on the structural power dynamics of inequality.

You have always understood the power of community-building—one job, business, or home at a time. You have also recognized the importance of our global community, expanding Ford's reach and championing human rights from Russia to China to my home country of South Africa.^{vi}

Dismantling inequality is a lifelong struggle. But through your courageous and visionary leadership, you've taught us that building a better world is well within our reach. I am honored to present you with the 2019 Freedom from Want Medal.

ⁱ Gloria Steinem Facebook post - March 2015 - <https://www.facebook.com/GloriaSteinem/photos/with-gratitude-to-franklin-thomas-former-president-of-the-ford-foundation-who-wa/10152598779257854/>

ⁱⁱ *Faith & Leadership* Q&A - January 2019 - <https://faithandleadership.com/hilary-pennington-when-there-deep-inequality-and-prejudice-everyone-suffers>

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^{iv} Columbia University alum bio - <https://blackhistory.news.columbia.edu/people/franklin-thomas>

^v Anecdote courtesy of Rebecca Riley, former Vice President for Community Affairs, MacArthur Foundation

^{vi} Ford Foundation bio - <https://www.fordfoundation.org/about/about-ford/our-origins/>