

DOG WHISTLE POLITICS

HOW CODED RACIAL APPEALS
HAVE REINVENTED RACISM AND
WRECKED THE MIDDLE CLASS

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Preface

■ LEARNING ABOUT RACISM AT HARVARD LAW

Two themes dominate American politics today: at the forefront is declining economic opportunity; coursing underneath is race. This book connects the two. It explains popular enthusiasm for policies injuring the middle class in terms of “dog whistle politics”: coded racial appeals that carefully manipulate hostility toward nonwhites. Examples of dog whistling include repeated blasts about criminals and welfare cheats, illegal aliens, and sharia law in the heartland. Superficially, these provocations have nothing to do with race, yet they nevertheless powerfully communicate messages about threatening nonwhites. In the last 50 years, dog whistle politics has driven broad swaths of white voters to adopt a self-defeating hostility toward government, and in the process has remade the very nature of race and racism. American politics today—and the crisis of the middle class—simply cannot be understood without recognizing racism’s evolution and the power of pernicious demagoguery.

I initially sketched the ideas elaborated here in the Sixteenth Annual Derrick Bell Lecture on Race in American Society, delivered at New York University in the fall of 2011. The professor honored by the lecture series, Derrick Bell, passed away less than a month before the lecture he had invited me to deliver. You may have heard of him. Leading up to the 2012 election, a rightwing media outfit promised a “bombshell” about President Barack Obama. It turned out to be a grainy video of Obama as a student at Harvard Law School introducing Bell at a rally, and then giving him a hug. The warm clasp, media provocateur Andrew Breitbart’s group claimed, symbolized Obama’s full embrace of an intellectual leader they described as “the worst Johnny Appleseed of a nasty racist legal theory [that argues] that the law is a weapon of the majority whites to oppress ‘people of color.’”¹

As a contemporary of Obama's at Harvard Law, let me add my voice to the chorus of those saying that Obama was no militant minority.² Obama did not study with Bell, nor take any course that focused on race and American law.³ On a campus highly polarized around racial issues, as it was in those years, this may have been an early harbinger of Obama's tendency to hold himself aloof from racial contentions. Then there was Obama's election to the prestigious presidency of the *Harvard Law Review*. It's widely known that Obama won as the consensus candidate after conservative and liberal factions fought themselves to exhaustion.⁴ Less well known is that these camps were racially identified, with almost all of the African American review members and their allies on one side. When conservatives threw their support to Obama, they ended a racial as well as political standoff.⁵ As others have observed, Obama's conciliatory above-the-fray political style from those years has carried over to his presidency. I would say the same regarding the approach to race Obama seemed to cultivate as a student—that one can heal racial divisions by standing apart from racial conflict, simply letting race play itself out. This is far from what Derrick Bell taught.

My focus at this point is not on Obama, though, but on Bell and my relationship with him. I had the enviable opportunity to study with Bell in the late 1980s and early 1990s, at the start of my own lifelong intellectual engagement with race and racism in the United States. This is not to say that I was close to Bell during my student days, or that I stayed in contact with him over the last two decades. On the contrary, I had hoped to use the lecture in his honor to finally fully repair a strained relationship. Over just the past few years I had been able to reconnect with Bell, and we had even joked about my having been a "difficult" student in one of the last courses he taught while still at Harvard. But we had never discussed the source of the estrangement—an estrangement so deep that mid-semester I simply stopped attending class. That long-ago conflict bears directly on my arguments in the pages that follow.

Bell taught his course through weekly engagements with chapters from a book he was then writing, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*.⁶ The crux was the subtitle. I thought then, and until the last several years, that Bell's central claim—that there had been little genuine progress in American race relations—was silly, even absurd. Bell explained his thesis thus: "Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary 'peaks of progress,' short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance."⁷ The end of slavery, and of Jim Crow segregation, were merely temporary peaks of progress sliding into irrelevance? The claim seemed ridiculous.

To explain away his thesis, I focused not on its substance but instead on Bell's psychology. He was then in a particularly challenging place: his beloved wife Jewel was dying of cancer. And as if that wasn't enough, two decades after becoming the first tenured black professor at Harvard Law, he was in the midst of protesting that school's insistence year after year that no woman of color qualified to serve on its august faculty. True to his background as a civil rights lawyer and activist, Bell had taken an unpaid leave of absence to pressure the institution, and we students staged rallies in support—including the event at which Obama introduced Bell. The school administration responded by demanding that Bell return to full-time teaching, or resign his tenured professorship. He resigned. I thought then that he was at a bitter point in life, infecting his insights and his pedagogy.

In retrospect, it was my mindset that mattered more. Young and liberal, I burned with impatience, emboldened by an “arc of history bends toward justice” certainty about the world. I didn't have much tolerance for deep pessimism. Plus, my own biography suggested that Bell was wrong. Like Obama (we overlapped at high school too), I grew up in Hawaii as a biracial kid, albeit white and Latino. Rarely encountering the racially pejorative views more common on the mainland, I learned to move easily among different groups. Also, I was privileged—not to the degree of most of my peers at HLS, to be sure, but after all wasn't I there walking its hallowed halls and studying in its storied classrooms? Wasn't my life, and indeed even Bell's Harvard professorship, proof positive that at least some progress had been made, clear evidence that the civil rights movement, though it hadn't achieved nearly enough, still had moved this country dramatically forward? I viscerally rejected Bell's dismal analysis, for it assaulted my confidence in the moral universe and drew into question the meaning and security of my own position.

Things came to a head the week we debated Bell's “space trader” allegory.⁸ Suppose, he said, aliens arrive from space and offer America riches to solve the debt problem, new technology to heal the environment, and a steady source of clean energy. In return, though, they ask for the nation's entire black population, and re-enslavement seems likely. Would America accept? I raised my hand and said “no,” unable to countenance a future for myself in a society still capable of selling blacks into slavery. The country would not again reduce people to property, not in the present, I protested. I remember distinctly Bell's rejoinder mocking my “pie-in-the-sky” optimism. He argued that, in many ways, metaphorically the United States has often sold nonwhites down the river to achieve short-term and short-sighted benefits for whites. Other students piped up to support his dire analysis. I fumed and thought they were all playing at being

radicals, with their unfairly biting attacks on a society that had already given me, us, so much. After that class, discouraged and upset, I left the course and did not return.

On a personal level, I now wince at my misplaced certitude and also lament squandering the chance to continue to learn from the best thinker on race and law in a tumultuous era. I also keenly regret never having taken a moment to talk about all of this with Bell, to seek some sort of closure on this faded conflict. But most especially, I'm sorry that my former professor did not live long enough to join me in rueful laughter following the lecture in his honor. After all, in that lecture I explained how I reluctantly came to conclude that he was correct all along about the permanence of racism.

My mistake had been to think that “permanent” meant fixed and unchanging. It did not. Rather, the key lay plainly visible in another phrase within Bell's thesis: “short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance *as racial patterns adapt* in ways that maintain white dominance.” Racial patterns adapt. Or, to switch from the passive voice, strategic individuals adapt race.

Dog Whistle Politics explains how politicians backed by concentrated wealth manipulate racial appeals to win elections and also to win support for regressive policies that help corporations and the super-rich, and in the process wreck the middle class. The book lays out the details. For now, though, the bottom line is that Professor Bell was correct: racism is not disappearing, it's adapting. True, by virtually every measure things aren't as bad as in the 1850s, when the southern half of the country was still a slavocracy and the northern half practiced ferocious racism. Even compared to the 1950s, things are much, much better. Today the routine bigotry of publicly endorsed white supremacy is largely past, and the country remarkably elected and re-elected a black president, a triumph against racism of incredible magnitude. But racial progress in the United States is not a steady march toward equality. Valleys of reversal follow peaks of progress, and after the promising advances of the civil rights era we are deep in one such valley now. Moreover—and here's the crucial point—nonwhites have not been the only victims of the recent slide. Instead, racism has been harnessed to a right-wing politics that bankrupts the middle class writ large. Someday I fervently hope to say—as the result of open-minded and careful analysis rather than self-protecting, self-deluding anger—that Bell has been proven wrong, that racism is no longer surreptitiously adapting but genuinely over. Today, though, that day seems further off even than it did two decades ago, when a young student precipitously abandoned Bell rather than confront a painful truth about our society and our future.

One final lesson from my law school days bears directly on this book: the realization that racists are often decent folks. Taking a year off from HLS, I spent the fall of 1988 researching human rights violations in apartheid South Africa. Ironically, my greatest education came when I stopped reading and writing and spent a month hitchhiking around South Africa and Namibia. With striking openness and sincerity, white drivers earnestly volunteered their racial views. They seemed eager to do so, perhaps because they worried that as a foreigner I might misunderstand the nature of apartheid. Also, they seemed to see me foremost as an American and therefore as a fellow white; despite my light brown skin tone, I was far from the color of the Africans who marked the opposite pole in their racial world. Almost invariably initiating the conversation on race, they spoke breezily, confident that the reasonableness of their reprehensible ideas would shine through.

Some conversations bordered on the farcical, as for instance when a kind couple asked about conditions in the United States, and shared their fear that the threat from blacks would soon be dwarfed by the troubles pouring across the southern border as Latin American hordes invaded. I couldn't help but highlight the folly of their assumption about their rider, and so I explained that I was unconcerned given my own Latin American heritage, with a mother from El Salvador.

Other conversations, however, completely upturned how I thought about racism. One in particular stands out. In Namibia, then under South African control and also an apartheid state, the towns were widely spaced in a desert of sere geologic beauty. A farmer who gave me a lift lived some hundred-plus kilometers outside of the next town, but recognizing that there would be little traffic and so virtually no chance that I could secure an onward ride, he drove on past his homestead in the fading sunlight. This generous act added hours of needless driving to an already long day for the farmer. As we got close to town, though, he apologized and explained he would have to drop me off several hundred meters from the outskirts. He had killed a "kaffir"—the local equivalent of "nigger"—for poaching, and the constable had asked him to stay out of town for a few weeks until pressure for his arrest subsided. I was stunned speechless. Then the routines of normal etiquette kicked in and carried me through a ritual of thanks, goodbye, good luck with your travels.

Like most, I had been conditioned to think of racism as hatred, and racists as pathologically disturbed individuals. To be sure, sadistic racists exist, and racism is frequently bound up with the emotional heat of fear and hatred. But as I began to intuit while hitchhiking through the landscape of apartheid, *most racists are*

good people. That bears emphasizing, since it runs so profoundly contrary to the dominant conception. Even the farmer who killed another human being for the petty act of poaching, I came to understand, was not a homicidal lunatic but a complex person capable of both brutal violence and real generosity.

What follows in this book is an effort to understand racism as it works in American society, and especially as it has evolved and impoverished the whole country over the last five decades. In the process, I will call out both Republican and Democratic politicians for being racial demagogues, and will rebuke individuals and organizations that craft racist appeals. But I will not conduct a witch-hunt for malevolent racists, nor demean whole groups as benighted bigots. Typically, those in thrall to racist beliefs are just people, reared and living in complicated societies that esteem human interconnection and also condone dehumanizing violence. This book is not about bad people. It is about all of us.

Introduction

Racial Politics and the Middle Class

Let's start with an open secret: Republicans rely on racial entreaties to help win elections. In 2010, the chairman of the Republican National Committee, Michael Steele, acknowledged that "for the last 40-plus years we had a 'Southern Strategy' that alienated many minority voters by focusing on the white male vote in the South."¹ Steele was echoing the remarks of another head of the Republican National Committee, Ken Mehlman. In 2005, he used a speech before the NAACP to admit that his party had exploited racial divisions, and had been wrong to do so. "By the seventies and into the eighties and nineties," Mehlman said from a prepared text, "Republicans gave up on winning the African American vote, looking the other way or trying to benefit politically from racial polarization. I am here today as the Republican chairman to tell you we were wrong."²

These apologies at once confess to racial pandering and also implicitly promise to sin no more. This is a promise that the GOP will struggle to fulfill, for this party is now essentially defined by race: it is almost exclusively supported by and composed of whites. In the 2012 presidential election, 88 percent of the voters who pulled the lever for the GOP candidate were white.³ That means that whites made up roughly nine out of every ten persons who threw in with Mitt Romney. Even more startling, among state-level elected Republican officials nationwide, 98 percent are white.⁴ Notwithstanding some prominent minority faces pushed to the fore to suggest otherwise, this is a party of white persons.

Yet this open secret receives surprisingly little attention. From conservatives, there's the occasional *mea culpa*, but much more typically there's a firm insistence that the GOP does not notice race, followed by the outraged retort that any suggestion otherwise is not only unfounded but a contemptible playing of the race card. From the Democratic Party, there's a resounding silence. Even from liberal commentators there's only murmured objections. A few point out GOP

demographics, but beyond noting the striking numbers and the challenge this poses for assembling majorities in an increasingly diverse society, they have little to say about how and why Republicans became a white party. A smaller handful go somewhat further, accusing Republicans of sometimes engaging in racial pandering. But even the most trenchant critics seem to treat race-baiting as a marginal dynamic—a vestigial remnant of ugly racial practices lingering from the pre-civil rights era, a despicable ploy that crops up at moments of electoral desperation, one more telltale sign of a party in decline, but never a central feature of American democracy today.

The pattern of perceiving GOP racial pandering as largely irrelevant can be seen in the impulse to mock that party for appealing to a small and shrinking sliver of the population—“middle-aged white guys,” in one version. Upon President Barack Obama’s re-election, the *New York Times* ran a generally celebratory piece that closed with a Republican operative lamenting, “there just are not enough middle-aged white guys that we can scrape together to win. There’s just not enough of them.”⁵ But the GOP did not win among only a narrow slice of whites: it triumphed among every major demographic cohort of whites. In 2012, Romney won 59 percent of the white vote, and compared to the previous election the GOP’s margin of victory among white voters almost doubled, from 12 percent to 20 percent. Moreover, while women as a whole voted Democratic, giving rise to talk of a “gender gap” that hurt the GOP, white women nevertheless favored Romney 56 percent to 42 percent—not that far off from the rate of white male support for Romney, at 62 percent. What about white youth? Obama won among those under 45, fueling an uplifting narrative about a post-racial youth free from the fears of their more racially tremulous elders. Yet even among the youngest age bracket of white voters, only 44 percent voted for Obama.⁶ Finally, what about by region? As *The Nation* reported, “If only white people had voted . . . Mitt Romney would have carried every state except for Massachusetts, Iowa, Connecticut and New Hampshire.”⁷ Among whites, race more than gender, age, and region drives how individuals vote, and across all these divisions whites overwhelmingly support the Republican Party.

So we need to be clear: the connection between race and the Republican Party is not accidental, vestigial, or comical, and it’s certainly not trivial. Instead, as we will see, over the last half-century conservatives have used racial pandering to win support from white voters for policies that principally favor the extremely wealthy and wreck the middle class. Running on racial appeals, the right has promised to protect supposedly embattled whites, when in reality it has largely harnessed government to the interests of the very affluent. The result is an economic crisis that has engulfed the nation, combining dramatic

increases in wealth at the very top along with severe strains for almost everyone else. Today's grossly unequal economy reflects decades of government policies favoring the very rich but justified as a response to threatening minorities. Republican racial pandering is an enormous problem for the country—and in particular for the middle class.

Some will be quick to retort that minorities overwhelmingly vote Democratic, implying that this symmetry undercuts the argument that there is any great problem with the GOP being identified almost exclusively with whites. But the important questions are, first, why different racial groups vote as they do, and second, whether they are helped or harmed by doing so. Many minorities vote Democratic because they have been repelled by the GOP and also because it's in their economic interests. As we will explore, many whites vote Republican out of racial anxiety and, as members of the broad middle, lose out when they do so.

Dog Whistle Politics aims to lay bare how race has become, and at least in the medium term will remain, central to American electoral politics and the fate of the middle class. Even when willing to concede that race matters when talking about the lives of poor minorities, members of the middle class nevertheless typically harbor an unfounded certainty that race holds little relevance to them or their future. They could not be more wrong, for race constitutes the dark magic by which middle-class voters have been convinced to turn government over to the wildly affluent, notwithstanding the harm this does to themselves. This book's primary goal is to grab the attention of middle-class readers, white and nonwhite alike, to awaken them to the importance of race to their fate. We will not pull government back to the side of the broad middle until we confront the power of racial politics.

■ BLOWING A DOG WHISTLE

How has the GOP managed to elicit racial loyalty despite a national revulsion toward racism? The answer lies in the GOP's use of coded language. Its racial entreaties operate like a dog whistle—a metaphor that pushes us to recognize that modern racial pandering always operates on two levels: inaudible and easily denied in one range, yet stimulating strong reactions in another.

The new racial politics presents itself as steadfastly opposed to racism and ever ready to condemn those who publicly use racial profanity. *We fiercely oppose racism and stand prepared to repudiate anyone who dares utter the n-word.* Meanwhile, though, the new racial discourse keeps up a steady drumbeat of subliminal racial grievances and appeals to color-coded solidarity. *But let's be honest: some*

groups commit more crimes and use more welfare, other groups are mainly unskilled and illiterate illegals, and some religions inspire violence and don't value human life. The new racism rips through society, inaudible and also easily defended insofar as it fails to whoop in the tones of the old racism, yet booming in its racial meaning and provoking predictable responses among those who immediately hear the racial undertones of references to the undeserving poor, illegal aliens, and sharia law. Campaigning for president, Ronald Reagan liked to tell stories of Cadillac-driving “welfare queens” and “strapping young bucks” buying T-bone steaks with food stamps. In flogging these tales about the perils of welfare run amok, Reagan always denied any racism and emphasized he never mentioned race. He didn't need to because he was blowing a dog whistle.

In general, using a dog whistle simply means speaking in code to a target audience. Politicians routinely do this, seeking to surreptitiously communicate support to small groups of impassioned voters whose commitments are not broadly embraced by the body politic. The audiences for such dog whistles have included, at different times, civil rights protesters, members of the religious right, environmentalists, and gun rights activists. Dog whistling has no particular political valence, occurring on the right and left, nor is it especially uncommon or troubling in and of itself. Given a diverse public segmented by widely differing priorities, it is entirely predictable that politicians would look for shrouded ways to address divergent audiences.

Throughout this book, I use “dog whistle politics” to mean, more narrowly, coded talk centered on race; while the term could encompass clandestine solicitations on any number of bases, here it refers to racial appeals. Beyond emphasizing race, racial dog whistle politics diverges from the more general practice because the hidden message it seeks to transmit violates a strong moral consensus. The impetus to speak in code reflects more than the concern that many voters do not embrace the target audience's passions. Rather, the substance of the appeal runs counter to national values supporting equality and opposing racism. Those blowing a racial dog whistle know full well that they would be broadly condemned if understood as appealing for racial solidarity among whites.

This makes racial dog whistling a more complicated phenomenon than other sorts of surreptitious politics. It involves, as we shall see, three basic moves: a punch that jabs race into the conversation through thinly veiled references to threatening nonwhites, for instance to welfare cheats or illegal aliens; a parry that slaps away charges of racial pandering, often by emphasizing the lack of any direct reference to a racial group or any use of an epithet; and finally a kick that savages the critic for opportunistically alleging racial victimization. The complex jujitsu of racial dog whistling lies at the center of a new way of talking about

race that constantly emphasizes racial divisions, heatedly denies that it does any such thing, and then presents itself as a target of self-serving charges of racism.

A final important difference between routine coded political speech and racial dog whistling lies in what the target audience hears. To be sure, some voters clearly perceive a message of racial resentment and react positively to it; *politician W is with us and against those minorities*, they may say to themselves. But many others would be repulsed by such a message, just as they would reject any politician who openly used racial epithets. For these voters, the cloaked language hides—even from themselves—the racial character of the overture. Terms like gangbanger and sharia law superficially reference behavior and religion. Even as these terms agitate racial fears, for many voters this thin patina suffices to obscure from them the racial nature of their attitudes. Consider Tea Party supporters: “They are all furious at the implication that race is a factor in their political views,” writes *Rolling Stone* journalist Matt Taibbi, “despite the fact that they blame the financial crisis on poor black homeowners, spend months on end engrossed by reports about how the New Black Panthers want to kill ‘cracker babies,’ support politicians who think the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was an overreach of government power, tried to enact South African-style immigration laws in Arizona and obsess over . . . Barack Obama’s birth certificate.”⁸ No doubt very few of the Tea Partiers stampeded by race are racist in the hate-every-black-person sense; indeed, the overwhelming majority are decent folks quick to condemn naked racism. But this is a far cry from saying that racial fears do not motivate them. Dog whistle entreaties often hide racism even from those in whom it triggers strong reactions.

■ RACE AND LIBERAL GOVERNMENT

It would be bad enough if race provided a routine way to win elections; but beyond this, dog whistling underlies efforts to dismantle government commitments essential to supporting a vibrant and growing middle class. As we learned in response to the last great economic calamity to confront the country, to ensure broad prosperity government has four crucial roles to play: first, to help people weather the vicissitudes that easily plunge families into poverty, for instance job loss or ill health; second, to provide escalators of upward mobility, such as quality schooling, higher education, and mortgage assistance; third, to build the nation’s infrastructure, thus laying the groundwork for the next great economic boom; and fourth, to rein in marketplace abuses through regulation, and to prevent excessive concentrations of wealth through progressive taxation.

This is the New Deal liberal vision that propelled the largest expansion of the middle class ever seen, and that once enjoyed broad support across the whole country. Throughout this book, I use “middle class” in a manner inspired by the New Deal and its conception of those it sought to help: as a term that encompasses persons in the broad economic middle as well as those in poverty struggling to gain economic security.

These basic liberal commitments are now under sustained attack, and the weapon of choice is race. The New Deal itself was originally limited largely to whites, until under pressure from the growing number of black voters outside the South as well as the burgeoning civil rights movement, beginning in the 1960s the Democratic Party began to fold nonwhites into the broad middle that government sought to help.⁹ But sensing an opportunity, Republicans moved in the opposite direction: they began to stoke hostility toward integration in schools and neighborhoods and to enflame resentment toward government initiatives to help nonwhites move into the middle class.

This racial strategy succeeded in winning white votes; more direly, it also worked to turn whites against liberal government. New Deal opponents had long repeated a tired mantra: the undeserving poor abuse government help, robbing hardworking taxpayers. This tale had little traction when whites saw themselves as the beneficiaries of government help, but once convinced that government aimed to shower minorities with their hard-earned tax dollars, this suddenly propelled many whites to reject liberalism. Attacks on integration quickly segued into broadsides against an activist state that funded welfare, schooling, job training programs, and so forth. Hostility toward the New Deal surged among whites—once it came to be seen as a repudiation of lazy, threatening nonwhites and the big government that coddled them.

As an example of how conservatives continue to frame political choices in racial terms, consider two telling responses to Obama’s re-election. On election eve 2012, as swing states one by one went for Obama, Fox News commentator Bill O’Reilly rationalized the looming outcome this way: “There are 50 percent of the voting public who want stuff. They want things and who is going to give them things? President Obama. He knows it and he ran on it. Twenty years ago President Obama would have been roundly defeated by an establishment candidate like Mitt Romney. The white establishment is now the minority.”¹⁰ Parroting this analysis at the highest level of the Republican Party, Romney himself a few days later privately justified his loss by saying, “the Obama campaign was following the old playbook of giving a lot of stuff to groups that they hoped they could get to vote for them and be motivated to go out to the polls, specifically the African American community, the Hispanic community and young people.”¹¹ As it has

for the last five decades, casting whites as victims of an activist government that rains gifts on grasping minorities remains the most potent rhetoric available to conservatives.

■ THE STAKES

The present economic catastrophe confronting the middle class shows what's at stake. Look at median family income. According to the US Census Bureau, the average family income in 2011 was \$50,054.¹² This represents an 8 percent decline since the Great Recession began in 2008. It also represents almost no movement since 1970, when dog whistle politics first gathered steam on the national stage and when the average family's income hovered around \$45,000 a year. Rather than reflecting at least some stability, this actually betrays considerable lost ground. On average, when adjusted for inflation the pay of a typical male worker was lower in 2010 than in 1978.¹³ Only because so many women have entered the workplace have middle-class families in the United States maintained their incomes.¹⁴

The hardship imposed on the middle class becomes even more unpardonable when compared to the increasing wealth at the very top of the income scale.¹⁵ In the 1970s, the chief executives of major corporations earned roughly 40 times what an average worker made. In 2013, CEOs at the top 500 corporations averaged compensation packages totaling 354 times the typical worker's pay—in other words, they made each day what most workers earned in a whole year.¹⁶ And even beyond chief executives, there's the obscene money going to those who manage money. In 2012, four hedge fund bosses each received payouts of over \$1 billion—just one carried off \$2.2 billion, thus averaging over \$6 million every single day.¹⁷ Or put it this way: if he clumsily dropped a \$100 bill, that would represent just over a second of his time, and in the seven seconds it took him to bend down to pick it up, he would have made another \$500. The six heirs to the Wal-Mart empire currently hold the same amount of wealth, roughly \$90 billion, as the poorest 30 percent of Americans combined—something possible not only because the rich are so rich, but because the poor are so poor.¹⁸ No wonder escalating economic insecurity dominates the public's fears. Not since the gilded years preceding the Great Depression has the United States been so economically unequal, and so financially precarious for those in the middle.

But is dog whistle racism really to blame for the economic calamity confronting the middle class, or is it something else? For instance, do structural changes to the economy or the increasing penetration of money in the political

system better explain middle class vulnerability? One answer is that it's impossible to say, since these developments cannot be disaggregated from dog whistle politics. Race-baiting shoved the entire political culture rightward, reflecting but also contributing to other large scale changes in politics and the economy.

But here's a more definitive response: whether it matters most, dog whistle racism matters tremendously because party politics matters tremendously. Notwithstanding other large scale dynamics, whether a Democrat or a Republican occupies the White House directly shapes the economic destiny of the middle class as well as the poor. Noting that "a great deal of economic inequality in the contemporary United States is specifically attributable to the policies and priorities of Republican presidents," Princeton political scientist Larry Bartels reports that, "on average, the real incomes of middle-class families have grown twice as fast under Democrats as they have under Republicans, while the real incomes of working poor families have grown *six times* as fast under Democrats as they have under Republicans."¹⁹ Dog whistle politics is central to the GOP's success, and thus central to the fate of the middle class.

We are in the midst, not at the tail end, of a sustained attack against liberal government. Much has been lost, yet much remains under assault. This is true at the national level, as evident in the agenda of the Republican-dominated House of Representatives, though perhaps it is most obvious at the state level. Look at what has happened where Republicans have captured both the executive and legislative branches, including in states like Wisconsin and North Carolina that until recently stood out as relatively progressive. Despite large public demonstrations protesting GOP extremism, Republicans have set to destroying liberal achievements with a vengeance, slashing funding to education, attacking unions, and gutting unemployment insurance, while ramping up efforts to further disenfranchise minority and working-class voters. How did these extremists come to power in the first place, and what makes voters support their cruel agendas? All too often the answer is race-baiting and other cultural provocations, for instance around abortion, guns, or gay marriage. This book's ultimate goal is to lay bare dog whistle politics, the better to help protect and revive a government that cares for people, provides routes for upward mobility, invests in infrastructure, and regulates concentrated wealth.

■ A BRIEF OUTLINE

In the pages that follow I offer five narrative chapters detailing dog whistle politics from the 1960s to the present, interweaving these with four chapters providing deeper conversations about racism. The narrative chapters proceed

chronologically but eschew a steady pace through the last five decades of presidential politics, instead emphasizing turning points in coded race-baiting's development that illuminate the most salient features of contemporary dog whistle politics. Interspersed with the narrative chapters, I braid in complementary chapters that parse evolutions in racism directly connected to political dog whistling.

Chapter One begins with the 1960s, a decade that culminated in the emergence of the Southern strategy and Richard Nixon's election. Examining the decision by politicians to turn to racial demagoguery, Chapter Two follows by introducing the notion of "strategic racism"—the cold, calculating decision to use racial divisions to pursue one's own ends—and argues that this forms the heart of dog whistle politics.

Chapter Three focuses on Ronald Reagan, showing that dog whistle politics centrally involves using race to attack liberal government. Reagan's presidency also corresponded with the conservative popularization of colorblindness, which urges everyone to avoid race as the surest way to get past racial problems. This racial etiquette is widely embraced, including among liberals, yet as Chapter Four shows, colorblindness bolsters dog whistle politics in numerous ways.

Chapter Five explores two important evolutions in dog whistling: first, its adoption by many Democrats, including Bill Clinton; and second, a critical shift during the presidency of George W. Bush in the minority groups presented as threats to whites. Today, Latinos cast as illegal aliens and Muslims portrayed as terrorists are as likely as African Americans to be assigned the role of racial specter. Exploring the developing racial rhetoric used by demagogues, Chapter Six details how dog whistlers constantly manage to trade on racial stereotypes, and also how they defend themselves in a culture that strongly condemns racism.

The last two narrative chapters grapple with the racial politics enveloping the nation's first black president: Chapter Seven places the Tea Party as well as Mitt Romney within the larger trajectory of anti-government racial demagoguery; Chapter Nine explores how Obama seeks to sidestep, and yet ultimately reinforces, dog whistle politics. Sandwiched between these, Chapter Eight uses the notion of "commonsense racism" to answer perhaps the most pressing question raised by dog whistle politics: how race convinces many whites to vote against their own apparent interests.

Dog Whistle Politics concludes with a solutions chapter that warns against complacently assuming that demographic changes alone will resolve dog whistle racism. Organized around agendas for different social actors, this chapter offers a way forward for politicians, civil rights groups, liberal foundations, and unions,

as well as for individuals in their daily lives. The proffered suggestions stop well short of asking everyone concerned with escalating economic inequality to work on racial issues first and foremost. But all who care about our society's well-being must understand the role racism plays in garnering votes, and more particularly its role in attacking liberalism and wrecking the middle class. We must hear the dog whistle for what it is if we are to repudiate its constant use to foment a populist hysteria against good government. We are all the victims of dog whistle politics. This book's project is to explain how so—and also, what we can do to fight back.

■ A WORD ON “WHITES”

Before turning to the main text, a last word seems warranted regarding the awkwardness of so much talk about “whites,” for instance in the ubiquitous references to white voters and a white political party. Partly, there may be a sensitivity to references to whites accentuated by the context, a book that aims to contest racism. Anti-racist efforts have sometimes gone astray in critiquing whites. Yet even when they haven't done so, repeatedly they have been accused of promoting anti-white prejudice. As a result, today some hear almost any reference to whites coming from minorities or the political left as betraying a supposed “hate whitey” undercurrent. Also, discussing whites may come across as jarring because it violates an increasingly stringent norm that race should not be discussed openly. This preference for colorblindness, for a public blindness surrounding all things connected to race, holds broad attraction across the political spectrum. Yet conservatives have converted colorblindness into an ideology that facilitates and also protects dog whistling. We cannot assess how appeals to white identity shape modern politics without carefully talking about whites, and also without transgressing—and parsing—colorblindness.

Yet even tempered references to whites may generate discomfort: the term seems to treat as a monolith a group that comprises tens of millions of unique individuals who relate to their racial identity in innumerable, complicated ways. Thus, to be absolutely clear, in repeatedly talking about whites (and nonwhites) in the aggregate, I do not mean to imply a false uniformity that treats all group members as if they hold an identical relationship to race. Like all major social torsions, race influences individuals in myriad ways, some less, some more, some almost not at all. Nevertheless, “white” identity—complex, historically produced, constantly evolving—remains a potent social force, one we can only grapple with by naming and discussing it. In *Dog Whistle Politics*,

we are principally concerned with voters who respond to appeals directed to their sense of themselves as white persons. Even as we take care to respect the complicity of this phenomenon, we can hardly move forward without treating white identity as socially meaningful. “White” in this book serves as a necessary shorthand for a colossally powerful social entanglement.

A final thought: the constant references to whites stimulated by race-baiting may lead some readers to say, *all this talk about white voters is not about me*. Staunch liberals may feel that since they will never vote Republican, the whites at the center of this book’s analysis are others, not them. They may especially hold this conviction if they already consider themselves wise to the dog whistle game, because this puts them on the outside looking in (and perhaps down) on the victims of the con. With even more certainty that they are not implicated, nonwhites may read these pages as an anthropological tour of unfamiliar others perceived as permanently on the other side of an impassable racial boundary. But as the Preface cautions, this book is about all of us. The pages that follow show that many confirmed liberals, white and nonwhite alike, subscribe to racial ideas that help empower dog whistle politics. Moreover, we will also see that racial pandering is evolving to pull in some minorities. Just as “white” does not denote a monolithic entity, neither does it denote a safely distant essence. The very complexity and dynamism of whiteness ensures that we are all caught to some extent within its morass.



1

The GOP's Rise as “the White Man's Party”

Dog whistle politics originates with two politicians in the 1960s, and each reveals a core feature of modern race-baiting: George Wallace illustrates the drive to use racial appeals to garner votes; Barry Goldwater evidences race's potential to turn whites against New Deal liberalism. Racial pandering during this era culminates in the “Southern strategy” adopted by Richard Nixon. This term remains in circulation today as a way to describe dog whistle politics, but it carries serious conceptual limitations.

Few names conjure the recalcitrant South, fighting integration with fire-breathing fury, like that of George Wallace. The central image of this “redneck poltergeist,” as one biographer referred to him, is of Wallace during his inauguration as governor of Alabama in January 1963, before waves of applause and the rapt attention of the national media, committing himself to the perpetual defense of segregation.¹ Speaking on a cold day in Montgomery, Wallace thundered his infamous call to arms: “Today I have stood, where once Jefferson Davis stood, and took an oath to my people. It is very appropriate then that from this Cradle of the Confederacy, this very Heart of the Great Anglo-Saxon Southland . . . we sound the drum for freedom. . . . In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth, I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny . . . and I say . . . segregation now . . . segregation tomorrow . . . segregation forever!”²

The story of dog whistle politics begins with George Wallace. But it does not start with Wallace as he stood that inauguration day. Rather, the story focuses on who Wallace was before, and on whom he quickly became.

Before that January day, Wallace had not been a rabid segregationist; indeed, by Southern standards, Wallace had been a racial moderate. He had sat on the board of trustees of a prominent black educational enterprise, the Tuskegee

Institute. He had refused to join the walkout of Southern delegates from the 1948 Democratic convention when they protested the adoption of a civil rights platform. As a trial court judge, he earned a reputation for treating blacks civilly—a breach of racial etiquette so notable that decades later J.L. Chestnut, one of the very few black lawyers in Alabama at the time, would marvel that in 1958 “George Wallace was the first judge to call me ‘Mr.’ in a courtroom.”³ The custom had been instead to condescendingly refer to all blacks by their first name, whatever their age or station. When Wallace initially ran for governor in 1958, the NAACP endorsed him; his opponent had the blessing of the Ku Klux Klan.

In the fevered atmosphere of the South, roiled by the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision forbidding school segregation, the moderate Wallace lost in his first campaign for governor. Years later, the victor would reconstruct the campaign, distilling a simple lesson: the “primary reason I beat [Wallace] was because he was considered soft on the race question at the time. That’s the primary reason.”⁴ This lesson was not lost on Wallace, and in turn, would reshape American politics for the next half-century. On the night he lost the 1958 election, Wallace sat in a car with his cronies, smoking a cigar, rehashing the loss, and putting off his concession speech. Finally steeling himself, Wallace eased opened the car door to go inside and break the news to his glum supporters. He wasn’t just going to accept defeat, though, he was going to learn from it. As he snuffed out his cigar and stepped into the evening, he turned back: “Well, boys,” he vowed, “no other son-of-a-bitch will ever out-nigger me again.”⁵

Four years later, Wallace ran as a racial reactionary, openly courting the support of the Klan and fiercely committing himself to the defense of segregation. It was as an arch-segregationist that Wallace won the right to stand for inauguration in January 1963, allowing him to proclaim segregation today, tomorrow, and forever. Summarizing his first two campaigns for governor of Alabama, Wallace would later recall, “you know, I started off talking about schools and highways and prisons and taxes—and I couldn’t make them listen. Then I began talking about niggers—and they stomped the floor.”⁶

Wallace was far from the only Southern politician to veer to the right on race in the 1950s.⁷ The mounting pressure for black equality destabilized a quiescent political culture that had assumed white supremacy was unassailable, putting pressure on all public persons to stake out their position for or against integration. Wallace figures here for a different reason, one that becomes clear in *how* he upheld his promise to protect segregation.

During his campaign, Wallace had vowed to stand in schoolhouse doorways to personally bar the entrance of black students into white institutions.

In June 1963, he got his chance. The federal courts had ordered the integration of the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, and US Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach flew down from Washington, DC, to enforce the order. More than 200 national reporters and all three of the major broadcast networks were on hand for the promised confrontation. From behind a podium, Wallace stood in the June heat and raised his hand to preemptorily bar the approach of Katzenbach. Then he read a seven-minute peroration that avoided the red-meat language of racial supremacy and instead emphasized “the illegal usurpation of power by the Central Government.” In footage carried on all three networks, the nation watched as Wallace hectored Katzenbach, culminating with Wallace declaiming, “I do hereby denounce and forbid this illegal and unwarranted action by the Central Government.”⁸ It was pure theater, even down to white lines chalked on the ground to show where the respective thespians should stand (Katzenbach approached more closely than expected, but ultimately that only heightened the drama). Wallace knew from the start that he would back down, and after delivering his stem-winder, that is what he did. Within two hours, as expected, the University of Alabama’s first two black students were on campus.



Lecturing US Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach on states’ rights, Governor George Wallace stands in the schoolhouse door blocking integration at the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa. Library of Congress (Warren K. Leffler, photographer)

Over the next week, the nation reacted. More than 100,000 telegrams and letters flooded the office of the Alabama governor. More than half of them were from outside of the South. Did they condemn him? Five out of every 100 did. The other 95 percent praised his brave stand in the schoolhouse doorway.⁹

The nation's reaction was an epiphany for Wallace, or perhaps better, three thunderbolts that together convinced Wallace to reinvent himself yet again. First, Wallace realized with a shock that hostility toward blacks was not confined to the South. "He had looked out upon those white Americans north of Alabama and suddenly been awakened by a blinding vision: 'They all hate black people, all of them. They're all afraid, all of them. Great god! That's it! They're all Southern. The whole United States is Southern.'¹⁰ Wallace suddenly knew that overtures to racial resentment would resonate across the country.

His second startling realization was that he, George Wallace, had figured out how to exploit that pervasive animosity. The key lay in seemingly non-racial language. At his inauguration, Wallace had defended segregation and extolled the proud Anglo-Saxon Southland, thereby earning national ridicule as an unrepentant redneck. Six months later, talking not about stopping integration but about states' rights and arrogant federal authority—and visually aided by footage showing him facing down a powerful Department of Justice official rather than vulnerable black students attired in their Sunday best—Wallace was a countrywide hero. "States' rights" was a paper-thin abstraction from the days before the Civil War when it had meant the right of Southern states to continue slavery. Then, as a rejoinder to the demand for integration, it meant the right of Southern states to continue laws mandating racial segregation—a system of debasement so thorough that it "extended to churches and schools, to housing and jobs, to eating and drinking . . . to virtually all forms of public transportation, to sports and recreations, to hospitals, orphanages, prisons, and asylums, and ultimately to funeral homes, morgues, and cemeteries."¹¹ That's what "states' rights" defended, though in the language of state-federal relations rather than white supremacy. Yet this was enough of a fig leaf to allow persons queasy about black equality to oppose integration without having to admit, to others and perhaps even to themselves, their racial attitudes.

"Wallace pioneered a kind of soft porn racism in which fear and hate could be mobilized without mentioning race itself except to deny that one is a racist," a Wallace biographer argues.¹² The notion of "soft porn racism" ties directly to the thesis of *Dog Whistle Politics*. Wallace realized the need to simultaneously move away from supremacist language that was increasingly unacceptable, while articulating a new vocabulary that channeled old, bigoted ideas. He needed a new form of racism that stimulated the intended audience without overtly

transgressing prescribed social limits. The congratulatory telegrams from across the nation revealed to Wallace that he had found the magic formula. Hardcore racism showed white supremacy in disquieting detail. In contrast, the new soft porn racism hid any direct references to race, even as it continued to trade on racial stimulation. As a contemporary of Wallace marveled, “he can use all the other issues—law and order, running your own schools, protecting property rights—and never mention race. But people will know he’s telling them ‘a nigger’s trying to get your job, trying to move into your neighborhood.’ What Wallace is doing is talking to them in a kind of shorthand, a kind of code.”¹³

Finally, a third bolt of lightning struck Wallace: he could be the one! The governor’s mansion in Montgomery need not represent his final destination. He could ride the train of revamped race-baiting all the way to the White House. Wallace ran for president as a third-party candidate in 1964, and then again in 1968, 1972, and 1976. It’s his 1968 campaign that most concerns us, for there Wallace ran against a consummate politician who was quick to appreciate, and adopt, Wallace’s refashioned racial demagoguery: Richard Nixon. We’ll turn to the Wallace-Nixon race soon, but first, another set of weathered bones must be excavated—the remains of Barry Goldwater.

■ THE RISE OF RACIALLY IDENTIFIED PARTIES

The Republican Party today, in its voters and in its elected officials, is almost all white. But it wasn’t always like that. Indeed, in the decades immediately before 1964, neither party was racially identified in the eyes of the American public. Even as the Democratic Party on the national level increasingly embraced civil rights, partly as a way to capture the growing political power of blacks who had migrated to Northern cities, Southern Democrats—like George Wallace—remained staunch defenders of Jim Crow. Meanwhile, among Republicans, the racial antipathies of the rightwing found little favor among many party leaders.¹⁴ To take an important example, *Brown* and its desegregation imperative were backed by Republicans: Chief Justice Earl Warren, who wrote the opinion, was a Republican, and the first troops ordered into the South in 1957 to protect black students attempting to integrate a white school were sent there by the Republican administration of Dwight Eisenhower and his vice president, Richard Nixon. Reflecting the roughly equal commitment of both parties to racial progress, even as late as 1962, the public perceived Republicans and Democrats to be similarly committed to racial justice. In that year, when asked which party “is more likely to see that Negroes get fair treatment in jobs and housing,”

22.7 percent of the public said Democrats and 21.3 percent said Republicans, while over half could perceive no difference between the two.¹⁵

The 1964 presidential election marked the beginning of the realignment we live with today. Where in 1962 both parties were perceived as equally, if tepidly, supportive of civil rights, two years later 60 percent of the public identified Democrats as more likely to pursue fair treatment, versus only 7 percent who so identified the Republican Party.¹⁶ What happened?

Groundwork for the shift was laid in the run-up to the 1964 election by right-wing elements in the Republican Party, which gained momentum from the loss of the then-moderate Nixon to John F. Kennedy in 1960. This faction of the party had never stopped warring against the New Deal. Its standard bearer was Barry Goldwater, a senator from Arizona and heir to a department store fortune. His pampered upbringing and wealth notwithstanding, Goldwater affected a cowboy's rough-and-tumble persona in his dress and speech, casting himself as a walking embodiment of the Marlboro Man's disdain for the nanny state. Goldwater and the reactionary stalwarts who rallied to him saw the Democratic Party as a mortal threat to the nation: domestically, because of the corrupting influence of a powerful central government deeply involved in regulating the marketplace and using taxes to reallocate wealth downward, and abroad in its willingness to compromise with communist countries instead of going to war against them. Goldwater himself, though, was no racial throwback.¹⁷ For instance, in 1957 and again in 1960 he voted in favor of federal civil rights legislation. By 1961, however, Goldwater and his partisans had become convinced that the key to electoral success lay in gaining ground in the South, and that in turn required appealing to racist sentiments in white voters, even at the cost of black support. As Goldwater drawled, "We're not going to get the Negro vote as a bloc in 1964 and 1968, so we ought to go hunting where the ducks are."¹⁸

This racial plan riled more moderate members of the Republican establishment, such as New York senator Jacob Javits, who in the fall of 1963 may have been the first to refer to a "Southern Strategy" in the context of repudiating it.¹⁹ By then, however, the right wing of the party had won out. As the conservative journalist Robert Novak reported after attending a meeting of the Republican National Committee in Denver during the summer of 1963: "A good many, perhaps a majority of the party's leadership, envision substantial political gold to be mined in the racial crisis by becoming in fact, though not in name, the White Man's Party. 'Remember,' one astute party worker said quietly . . . 'this isn't South Africa. The white man outnumbers the Negro 9 to 1 in this country.'"²⁰ The rise of a racially-identified GOP is *not* a tale of latent bigotry in that party. It is instead a story centered on the strategic decision to use racism to become "the White Man's Party."

That same summer of 1963, as key Republican leaders strategized on how to shift their party to the far right racially, the Democrats began to lean in the other direction. Northern constituents were increasingly appalled by the violence, shown almost nightly on broadcast television, of Southern efforts to beat down civil rights protesters. Reacting to the growing clamor that something be done, President Kennedy introduced a sweeping civil rights bill that stirred the hopes of millions that segregation would soon be illegal in employment and at business places open to the public. Despite these hopes, however, prospects for the bill's passage seemed dim, as the Southern Democrats were loath to support civil rights and retained sufficient power to bottle up the bill. Then on November 22, 1963, Kennedy was assassinated. His vice president, Lyndon Johnson, assumed the presidency vowing to make good on Kennedy's priorities, chief among them civil rights. Only five days after Kennedy's death, Johnson in his first address to Congress implored the assembly that "no memorial oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory than the earliest possible passage of the civil rights bill for which he fought so long."²¹ Even under these conditions, it took Johnson's determined stewardship to overcome three months of dogged legislative stalling before Kennedy's civil rights bill finally passed the next summer. Known popularly as the 1964 Civil Rights Act, it still stands as the greatest civil rights achievement of the era.

Indicating the persistence of the old, internally divided racial politics of both parties, the act passed with broad bipartisan support and against broad bipartisan opposition—the cleavage was regional, rather than in terms of party affiliation. Roughly 90 percent of non-Southern senators supported the bill, while 95 percent of Southern senators opposed it. Yet, heralding the incipient emergence of the new politics of party alignment along racial lines, Barry Goldwater also voted against the civil rights bill. He was one of only five senators from outside the South to do so. Goldwater claimed he saw a looming Orwellian state moving to coerce private citizens to spy on each other for telltale signs of racism. "To give genuine effect to the prohibitions of this bill," Goldwater contended from the Senate floor, "bids fair to result in the development of an 'informer' psychology in great areas of our national life—neighbor spying on neighbor, workers spying on workers, businessmen spying on businessmen."²² This all seemed a little hysterical. More calculatingly, it could not have escaped Goldwater's attention that voting against a civil rights law associated with blacks, Kennedy, and Johnson would help him "go hunting where the ducks are."

Running for president in 1964, the Arizonan strode across the South, hawking small-government bromides and racially coded appeals. In terms of the latter, he sold his vote against the 1964 Civil Rights Act as a bold stand in favor of "states' rights" and "freedom of association." States' rights, Goldwater

insisted, preserved state autonomy against intrusive meddling from a distant power—though obviously the burning issue of the day was the federal government's efforts to limit state involvement in racial degradation and group oppression. Freedom of association, Goldwater explained, meant the right of individuals to be free from government coercion in choosing whom to let onto their property—but in the South this meant first and foremost the right of business owners to exclude blacks from hotels, restaurants, movie theaters, and retail establishments. Like Wallace, Goldwater had learned how to talk about blacks without ever mentioning race.

No less than Wallace, Goldwater also demonstrated a flair for political stagecraft. A reporter following Goldwater's campaign through the South captured some of the spectacle: "to show the country the 'lily-white' character of Republicanism in Dixie," party flaks filled the floor of the football stadium in Montgomery, Alabama, with "a great field of white lilies—living lilies, in perfect bloom, gorgeously arrayed." To this tableau, the campaign added "seven hundred Alabama girls in long white gowns, all of a whiteness as impossible as the greenness of the field." Onto this scene emerged Goldwater, first moving this way and then that way through "fifty or so yards of choice Southern womanhood," before taking the stand to give his speech defending states' rights and freedom of association. If these coded terms were too subtle for some, no one could fail to grasp the symbolism of the white lilies and the white-gowned women. Much of the emotional resistance to racial equality centered around the fear that black men would become intimate with white women. This scene represented "what the rest of his Southern troops—the thousands in the packed stands, the tens of thousands in Memphis and New Orleans and Atlanta and Shreveport and Greenville—passionately believed they were defending."²³ Goldwater made sure white Southerners understood he was fighting to protect them and their women against blacks.

How would Goldwater fare in the South? Beyond his racial pandering, that depended on how his anti-New Deal message was received. The Great Depression had devastated the region, which lagged behind the North in industry. Federal assistance to the poor as well as major infrastructure projects, such as the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) that brought electricity for the first time to millions, made Southerners among the New Deal's staunchest supporters. Yet despite the New Deal's popularity in the South, Goldwater campaigned against it. While he was willing to pander racially, Goldwater also prided himself on telling audiences what he thought they needed to hear, at least as far as the bracing virtues of rugged individualism were concerned. Thus he made clear, for instance, that he favored selling off the TVA, and also attacked other popular

programs.²⁴ As recounted by Rick Perlstein, a Goldwater political biographer, at one rally in West Virginia, Goldwater "called the War on Poverty 'plainly and simply a war on your pocketbooks,' a fraud because only 'the vast resources of private business' could produce the wealth to truly slay penury." Perlstein singled out the tin-eared cruelty of this message: "In the land of the tar-paper shack, the gap-toothed smile, and the open sewer—where the 'vast resources of private business' were represented in the person of the coal barons who gave men black lung, then sent them off to die without pensions—the message just sounded perverse. As he left, lines of workmen jeered him."²⁵

Another factor also worked against Goldwater: he was a Republican, and the South reviled the Party of Lincoln. If across the nation neither party was seen as more or less friendly toward civil rights, the South had its own views on the question. There, it was the local Democratic machine that represented white interests, while the GOP was seen as the proximate cause of the Civil War and as the party of the carpetbaggers who had preemptorily ruled the South during Reconstruction. The hostility of generations of white Southerners toward Republicans only intensified with the Republican Eisenhower's decision to send in federal troops to enforce the Republican Warren's ruling forbidding school segregation in *Brown*. Most white Southerners had never voted Republican in their lives, and had vowed—like their parents and grandparents before them—that they never would.

Ultimately, however, these handicaps barely impeded Goldwater's performance in the South. He convinced many Southern voters to vote Republican for the first time ever, and in the Deep South, comprised of those five states with the highest black populations, Goldwater won outright. The anti-New Deal Republican carried Louisiana, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and South Carolina, states in which whites had *never* voted for a Republican president in more than miniscule numbers. This was a shocking transformation, one that can only be explained by Goldwater's ability to transmit a set of codes that white voters readily understood as a promise to protect racial segregation. It seemed that voters simply ignored Goldwater's philosophy of governance as well as his party affiliation and instead rewarded his hostility toward civil rights. In this sense, Goldwater's conservatism operated in the South less like a genuine political ideology and more like Wallace's soft porn racism: as a set of codes that voters readily understood as defending white supremacy. Goldwater didn't win the South as a small-government libertarian, but rather as a racist.

If in the South race trumped anti-government politics, in the North Goldwater's anti-civil rights attacks found much less traction. Opposing civil rights smacked too much of Southern intransigence, and while there was resistance

to racial reform in the North, it had not yet become an overriding issue for many whites. That left Goldwater running on promises to end the New Deal, and this proved wildly unpopular. To campaign against liberalism in 1964 was to campaign against an activist government that had lifted the country out of the throes of a horrendous depression still squarely in the rear view mirror, and that had then launched millions into the middle class. More than that, though, to campaign against liberalism in 1964 was to attack government programs still largely aimed at whites—and that sort of welfare was broadly understood as legitimate and warranted.

Goldwater's anti-welfare tirades produced a landslide victory, but for Lyndon Johnson. Voters crushed Goldwater's last-gasp attack on the New Deal state. Outside of the South, he lost by overwhelming numbers in every state except his Arizona home. Voters were offended by his over-the-top attacks on popular New Deal programs as well as by his penchant for saber rattling when it came to foreign policy. Goldwater especially suffered after the release of "Daisy," a Johnson campaign ad that juxtaposed a little girl picking the petals off a flower with footage of a spiraling mushroom cloud, sending the message that Goldwater's militarism threatened nuclear Armageddon. In the end, the Democrats succeeded in making Goldwater look like a loon. "To the Goldwater slogan 'In Your Heart, You Know He's Right,' the Democrats shot back, 'In Your Guts, You Know He's Nuts.'"²⁶ The country as a whole, it seemed, had solidly allied itself with progressive governance, and big-money/small-government conservatism was finally, utterly dead.

Or at least, this was the lesson most people took from the 1964 election. But like the clang of a distant alarm barely perceptible against the buzzing din of consensus, a warning was rising from the South: racial entreaties had convinced even the staunchest Democrats to abandon New Deal liberalism. If race-baiting had won over Southern whites to anti-government politics, could the same work across the country?

■ RICHARD NIXON

Notwithstanding the emerging racial strategy initiated by Goldwater, when Richard Nixon secured the Republican nomination in 1968, the new racial politics of his party had not yet gelled, either within the party generally, or in Nixon himself. Indeed, the moderate Nixon's emergence as the party's presidential candidate reflected the extent to which the Goldwater faction had lost credibility in the wake of their champion's disastrous drubbing. Nevertheless, the dynamics

of the presidential race would quickly push Nixon toward race-baiting. Nixon's principal opponent in 1968 was Johnson's vice president, Hubert Humphrey. But running as an independent candidate, George Wallace was flanking Nixon on the right. By October 1, just a month before the election, Wallace was polling more support in the South than either Humphrey or Nixon. Nor was his support limited to that region. Wallace was siphoning crucial votes across the country, and staging massive rallies in ostensibly liberal strongholds, for instance drawing 20,000 partisans to Madison Square Garden in New York, and 70,000 faithful to the Boston Common—more than any rally ever held by the Kennedys, Wallace liked to crow.²⁷ Republican operatives guessed that perhaps 80 percent of the Wallace voters in the South would otherwise support Nixon, and a near-majority in the North as well.²⁸

Late in the campaign, Nixon opted to publicly tack right on race. He had already reached a backroom deal with South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond—an arch-segregationist who had led the revolt against the Democratic Party in 1948 when it endorsed a modest civil rights plank, and who switched to become a Republican in 1964 to throw his weight behind Goldwater. Nixon bought Thurmond's support during the primary season by secretly promising that he would restrict federal enforcement of school desegregation in the South.²⁹ Now he would make this same promise to the nation. On October 7, Nixon came out against "forced busing," an increasingly potent euphemism for the system of transporting students across the boundaries of segregated neighborhoods in order to integrate schools. Mary Frances Berry pierces the pretense that the issue was putting one's child on a bus: "African-American attempts to desegregate schools were confronted by white flight and complaints that the problem was not desegregation, but busing, oftentimes by people who sent their children to school every day on buses, including mediocre white private academies established to avoid integration."³⁰ "Busing" offered a Northern analog to states' rights. The language may have referred to transportation, but the emotional wallop came from defiance toward integration.

Nixon also began to hammer away at the issue of law and order. In doing so, he drew upon a rhetorical frame rooted in Southern resistance to civil rights. From the inception of the civil rights movement in the 1950s, Southern politicians had disparaged racial activists as "lawbreakers," as indeed technically they were. In the Jim Crow regions, African Americans had long pressed basic equality demands precisely by breaking laws mandating segregation: sit-ins and freedom rides purposefully violated Jim Crow statutes in order to challenge white supremacist social norms. Dismissing these protesters as criminals shifted the issue from a defense of white supremacy to a more neutral-seeming concern

with “order,” while simultaneously stripping the activists of moral stature. Demonstrators were no longer Americans willing to risk beatings and even death for a grand ideal, but rather criminal lowlifes disposed toward antisocial behavior. Ultimately, the language of law and order justified a more “quiet” form of violence in defense of the racial status quo, replacing lynchings with mass arrests for trespassing and delinquency.³¹

By the mid-1960s, “law and order” had become a surrogate expression for concern about the civil rights movement. Illustrating this rhetoric’s increasingly national reach, in 1965 FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover denounced the advocacy of nonviolent civil disobedience by civil rights leaders as a catalyst for lawbreaking and even violent rioting: “‘Civil disobedience,’ a seditious slogan of gross irresponsibility, has captured the imagination of citizens. . . . I am greatly concerned that certain racial leaders are doing the civil rights movement a great disservice by suggesting that citizens need only obey the laws with which they agree. Such an attitude breeds disrespect for the law and even civil disorder and rioting.”³² This sense of growing disorder was accentuated by urban riots often involving protracted battles between the police and minority communities. In addition, large and increasingly angry protests against the Vietnam War also added to the fear of metastasizing social strife. Exploiting the growing panic that equated social protest with social chaos, one of Nixon’s campaign commercials showed flashing images of demonstrations, riots, police, and violence, over which a deep voice intoned: “Let us recognize that the first right of every American is to be free from domestic violence. So I pledge to you, we shall have order in the United States.” A caption stated boldly: “This time. . . . vote like your whole world depended on it . . . NIXON.”³³

Nixon had mastered Wallace’s dark art. Forced bussing, law and order, and security from unrest as the essential civil right of the majority—all of these were coded phrases that allowed Nixon to appeal to racial fears without overtly mentioning race at all. Yet race remained the indisputable, intentional subtext of the appeal. As Nixon exulted after watching one of his own commercials: “Yep, this hits it right on the nose . . . it’s all about law and order and the damn Negro-Puerto Rican groups out there.”³⁴

Nixon didn’t campaign exclusively on racial themes; notably, he also stressed his opposition to anti-war protesters, while simultaneously portraying himself as the candidate most likely to bring the war to an end. Nevertheless, racial appeals formed an essential element of Nixon’s ’68 campaign. Nixon’s special counsel, John Ehrlichman, bluntly summarized that year’s campaign strategy: “We’ll go after the racists.” According to Ehrlichman, the “subliminal appeal to the anti-black voter was always present in Nixon’s statements and speeches.”³⁵

NIXON’S SOUTHERN STRATEGY

Nixon barely won in 1968, edging Humphrey by less than one percent of the national vote. Wallace, meanwhile, had captured nearly 14 percent of the vote. Had Nixon’s coded race-baiting helped? Initially there was uncertainty, and in his first two years in office Nixon governed as if he still believed the federal government had some role to play in helping out nonwhites. For instance, Nixon came into office proposing the idea of a flat wealth transfer to the poor, which would have gone a long way toward breaking down racial inequalities.³⁶ But over the course of those two years, a new understanding consolidated regarding the tidal shift that had occurred.

On the Democratic side, in 1970 two pollsters, Richard Scammon and Ben Wattenberg, published *The Real Majority*, cautioning their party that “Social Issues” now divided the base. “The machinist’s wife in Dayton may decide to leave the Democratic reservation in 1972 and vote for Nixon or Wallace or their ideological descendants,” Scammon and Wattenberg warned. “If she thinks the Democrats feel that she isn’t scared of crime but that she’s really a bigot, if she thinks that Democrats feel the police are Fascist pigs and the Black Panthers and the Weathermen are just poor, misunderstood, picked-upon kids, if she thinks that Democrats are for the hip drug culture and that she, the machinist’s wife, is not only a bigot, but a square, then good-bye lady—and good-bye Democrats.” How, then, could the party get ahead of these issues? Scammon and Wattenberg were frank: “The Democrats in the South were hurt by being perceived (correctly) as a pro-black national party.” The solution was clear: the Democratic Party had to temper its “pro-black stance.”³⁷

On the Republican side, a leading Nixon strategist had come to the same conclusion about race as a potential wedge issue—though, predictably, with a different prescription. In 1969, Kevin Phillips published *The Emerging Republican Majority*, arguing that because of racial resentments a historical realignment was underway that would cement a new Republican majority that would endure for decades. A young prodigy obsessed with politics, Phillips had worked out the details of his argument in the mid-1960s, and then had gone to work helping to elect Nixon. When the 1968 returns seemed to confirm his thesis, he published his research—nearly 500 pages, with 47 maps and 143 charts. Beneath the details, Phillips had a simple, even deterministic thesis: “Historically, our party system has reflected layer upon layer of group oppositions.” Politics, according to Phillips, turned principally on group animosity—“the prevailing cleavages in American voting behavior have been ethnic and cultural. Politically, at least, the United States has not been a very effective melting pot.”

As to what was driving the latest realignment, Phillips was blunt: “The Negro problem, having become a national rather than a local one, is the principal cause of the breakup of the New Deal coalition.” For Phillips, it was almost inevitable that most whites would abandon the Democratic Party once it became identified with blacks. “Ethnic and cultural division has so often shaped American politics that, given the immense midcentury impact of Negro enfranchisement and integration, reaction to this change almost inevitably had to result in political realignment.”³⁸ Phillips saw his emerging Republican majority this way: “the nature of the majority—or potential majority—seems clear. It is largely white and middle class. It is concentrated in the South, the West, and suburbia.”³⁹

The number crunchers had spoken. The Southern strategy, incipient for a decade, had matured into a clear route to electoral dominance. The old Democratic alliance of Northeastern liberals, the white working class, Northern blacks, and Southern Democrats, could be riven by racial appeals. Beginning in 1970, Richard Nixon embraced the politics of racial division wholeheartedly. He abandoned the idea of a flat wealth transfer to the poor. Now, Nixon repeatedly emphasized law and order issues. He railed against forced busing in the North. He reversed the federal government’s position on Southern school integration, slowing the process down and making clear that the courts would have no help from his administration. But perhaps nothing symbolized the new Nixon more than his comments in December 1970. Reflecting his initially moderate position on domestic issues, early in his administration Nixon had appointed George Romney—a liberal Republican and, incidentally, Mitt Romney’s father—as his secretary of housing and urban development. In turn, Romney had made integration of the suburbs his special mission, even coming up with a plan to cut off federal funds to communities that refused to allow integrated housing.⁴⁰ By late 1970, however, when these jurisdictions howled at the temerity, Nixon took their side, throwing his cabinet officer under the bus. In a public address, Nixon baldly stated: “I can assure you that it is not the policy of this government to use the power of the federal government . . . for forced integration of the suburbs. I believe that forced integration of the suburbs is not in the national interest.”⁴¹ That dog whistle blasted like the shriek of an onrushing train.

In 1963, Robert Novak had written that many Republican leaders were intent on converting the Party of Lincoln into the White Man’s Party. The following year, Goldwater went down in crushing defeat, winning only 36 percent of the white vote. Even so, less than a decade later, the racial transmogrification of the Republicans was well underway. In 1972, Nixon’s first full dog whistle campaign netted him 67 percent of the white vote, leaving his opponent, George McGovern, with support from less than one in three whites. Defeated by the

Southern strategy, McGovern neatly summed it up: “What is the Southern Strategy? It is this. It says to the South: Let the poor stay poor, let your economy trail the nation, forget about decent homes and medical care for all your people, choose officials who will oppose every effort to benefit the many at the expense of the few—and in return, we will try to overlook the rights of the black man, appoint a few southerners to high office, and lift your spirits by attacking the ‘eastern establishment’ whose bank accounts we are filling with your labor and your industry.”⁴² McGovern erred in supposing that the Southern strategy pertained only to the South. Nixon had already learned from Wallace, and then later from the number crunchers, that coded racial appeals would work nationwide. Other than that, especially in its class and race dimensions, McGovern had dog whistle politics dead to rights.

■ THE SOUTHERN STRATEGY RECONSIDERED

The Southern strategy is surrounded by a whole slew of misconceptions that combine to diminish its seeming importance. It’s thus crucial to be clear that dog whistle politics has always: transcended the South; involved Democrats as well as Republicans; extended beyond race to include other social issues as well as class; comprised much more than a simple backlash; and appealed not only to the white working class but also to white elites. With these misunderstandings stripped away, it becomes far easier to see how dog whistle racism has wrought fundamental changes in American party politics.

A national strategy. The most common misconception of the Southern strategy—though an understandable one, given its name—is that this is a regional dynamic that tells us little about areas outside the peculiar South.⁴³ Race is especially potent in the former Confederacy, of course, but even in 1970 dog whistling was a national, not regional, strategy. Recall Wallace’s epiphany that “the whole United States is Southern.” Kevin Phillips also saw clearly that success lay in stimulating racial antipathies among whites across the country. For Phillips, if there was a regional dynamic at work, it was instead an anti-Northeast one: he predicted that the whole country except the Northeast (and also the sparsely populated and largely white Northwest) would soon turn reliably Republican.⁴⁴ Phillips argued that those trending Republican included “Southerners, Borderers [those living in border states straddling the North and South], Germans, Scotch-Irish, Pennsylvania Dutch, Irish, Italians, Eastern Europeans and other urban Catholics, middle-class suburbanites, Sun Belt residents, Rocky Mountain and Pacific Interior populists.” In contrast, he

anticipated that the Democratic Party would soon be restricted to representing “silk-stocking Megalopolitans, the San Francisco-Berkeley-Madison-Ann Arbor electorate, Scandinavian progressives and Jews,” in addition to the “Northeastern Establishment” and blacks.⁴⁵ Regarding white voters, Phillips proved largely prescient. While in the South whites vote much more aggressively for Republicans than in other regions, in every region except in the Northeast majorities of whites continue to vote Republican with very rare exceptions.⁴⁶

There’s a further reason to avoid dismissing the Southern strategy as merely regional: doing so tends to invite the dismissal of the South itself, as a backward, morally stunted area that we can safely ignore, or even insult.⁴⁷ Yes, the South inherits an ugly strain of racism, and nowhere is dog whistle politics more fecund. After 2012, Republicans controlled all 11 state legislatures of the former Confederacy, and their campaign tactics centered more than ever on depicting themselves as the white party and Democrats as beholden to minorities.⁴⁸ But this is a far cry from saying that what happens in the South stays there. On the contrary, the Republican’s political dominance in the South, combined with its racial roots, ensures an outsize influence for racial politics nationally, especially in Congress. Moreover, beyond politics, since the 1970s, Southern white culture—in the form of country music and the adoption of a faux working class sensibility that embraces pick-up trucks, fishing holes, cheap beer, NASCAR, and “you know you’re a redneck when . . .” humor—has spread throughout the nation.⁴⁹ The South’s influence on the country’s direction is increasing rather than diminishing, and the racial politics that plays well there inescapably affects us all. We should not think that the Southern strategy applies only to the South; and neither should we suppose that the South does not influence national culture and politics.

A bipartisan strategy. The Southern strategy is also mistakenly diminished when it is attributed only to Republicans. On the contrary, dog whistle politics originated with and continues to find a home in the Democratic Party. It was the Southern Democrats, not the GOP, that had been the white man’s party for generations—using state law and party rules, and also economic coercion and violent mayhem, to disenfranchise blacks. Campaigning in 1946, Mississippi senator Theodore Bilbo intimated how Democrats kept politics white: “You and I know what’s the best way to keep the nigger from voting. You do it in the night before the election. I don’t have to tell you any more than that. Red-blooded men know what I mean.”⁵⁰ As this bald language became publicly unacceptable, it was other Democrats such as George Wallace who pioneered more clandestine rhetoric. When Republicans first began to speak in the masked terms of states’ rights and law and order, they were simply parroting

the evolving language of the Southern Democrats. Though popularly associated with the Republicans, from the outset *both* parties adopted a Southern strategy based on dog whistle racism.⁵¹ This is key, because as we'll see, the Democrats themselves would soon pick up the whistle at the national level, especially in the figures of two Southern politicians, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton. They could blow that whistle more easily because race-baiting lay deeply embedded in their party's DNA.

Beyond white and black. Another classic misunderstanding posits that the Southern strategy involves only white-black dynamics, or more generally, only race. On the contrary, Phillips was clear that whites would flee the Democratic Party in revulsion at "blacks *and* browns," citing in particular the ascendant Mexican American community in the Southwest.⁵² To be sure, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, the portrayal of African Americans as criminals and welfare cheats provided the central themes in dog whistle assaults. Even during these decades, though, racial bogeymen varied by region, with Latinos in the Southwest, Asians in certain metropolitan areas, and Native Americans in the upper Midwest and in other pockets of the country also serving as racial scapegoats. The prominence of these other groups in racial demagoguery would increase over this period, and after the 2001 World Trade Center attacks, Muslims as potential terrorists and Latinos as illegal aliens would become core archetypes in dog whistle narratives. Dog whistling comes out of the South and its preoccupation with blacks, but it always involved equal opportunity racism, and never more so than today.

Culture wars. Beyond race, Phillips joined with the Democratic strategists Scammon and Wattenberg in seeing a host of "social issues" as driving a permanent wedge through the Democratic Party. Phillips looked forward to a "great electoral bastion of a Republicanism that is against aid to blacks, against aid to big cities and against the liberal life style it sees typified by purple glasses, beards, long hair, bralessness, pornography, coddling of criminals and moral permissiveness run riot."⁵³ Here we see a distinct meaning of "liberal" emerge: now not as a stance regarding good government and the dangers of concentrated wealth, but liberalism as "moral permissiveness," especially around issues of crime, gender, sexual orientation, and religion.⁵⁴

As one among a range of "social issues" used by conservatives, racial dog whistle politics can be understood as a part of a larger effort to flimflam voters by substituting one meaning of liberalism for another. Demagogic politicians hector voters to oust the permissive liberals who coddle nonwhites, women, gays, criminals, and atheists, though often the actual target is the liberal policies that help the middle class and temper capitalism.⁵⁵ Righteously attacking social

liberalism becomes a surreptitious way to defeat economic liberalism. This is not to portray race as simply one among many issues, each with equal weight; instead, race has been the principal weapon in the right's arsenal against New Deal liberalism. More than any other single concern, over the last half-century racial issues have transformed American politics.⁵⁶ Even so, however, racial appeals exist within a larger pattern wherein conservatives stoke cultural divisions as cover for a politics that primarily serves the very wealthy. The full assault on good government can only be understood by recognizing the many inter-related fronts in the culture wars.

Class. A related misapprehension is that the Southern strategy involves only race, but not class.⁵⁷ This fundamentally misses how dog whistle politics fuses together class and race in the term “middle class,” a topic to which we will return in later chapters. Here, note that dog whistle politics has a strong class component in whom it blames and whom it exonerates.

Consider Kevin Phillips' class analysis of the tectonic shift in American politics: “For a long time the liberal-conservative split was on economic issues. That favored the Democrats until the focus shifted from programs which taxed the few for the many, to things like ‘welfare’ that taxed the many for the few.”⁵⁸ This dialectical phrasing only works because of an important switch in who counted as the “few,” and in turn this elision reveals the alchemical core of dog whistle politics: the “few” who threatened the middle class changed from the malefactors of great wealth to blacks and Latinos, Asians, and Muslims. We can see this by taking apart Phillips' phrasing.

Start with the first half of Phillips' statement, the claim that economic issues favored the Democrats when government programs “taxed the few for the many.” This represents 1964, when Goldwater assailed the New Deal and lost in a landslide. To this point, liberalism still comprised programs primarily geared toward helping whites. Thus, the “many” were the white middle-class beneficiaries of government programs, and the “few” were the rich who were asked to pay more in taxes. But then Phillips flipped the order, and argued that Democrats began to lose when they began promoting “‘welfare’ that taxed the many for the few.” Here he was talking about the Johnson administration's effort to extend government aid across the color line, and the white hostility that ensued. Note what happened, though. While the “many” stayed the same, still referring to the white middle class, the “few” changed: it no longer referred to the rich who were to be taxed, but now to nonwhites who were consuming taxes.

Conservative dog whistling made minorities, not concentrated wealth, the pressing enemy of the white middle class. It didn't seem to matter that the actual monetary transfers to nonwhites were trivial. If all of the anti-poverty and social

welfare dollars paid to blacks during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations had instead been given to low- and middle-income whites, it would have added less than three-eighths of 1 percent to their actual disposable income.⁵⁹ What mattered was the sense that blacks were getting more than they deserved, at the expense of white taxpayers. The middle class no longer saw itself in opposition to concentrated wealth, but now instead it saw itself beset by grasping minorities. And note a further, related shift evident in Phillips' phrasing: what had been liberal "programs" when they helped whites became "welfare" when extended across the colorline. Racial attacks on liberalism shifted the enemy of the middle class from big money to lazy minorities, and transmuted economic programs that helped to build the nation into welfare for undeserving groups.

Another element of Southern strategy class politics bears mention. In addition to reviling poor minorities at the bottom of the class hierarchy, dog whistle politicians also targeted those at the top—not the very rich, though, but instead cultural and intellectual elites. Phillips, for instance, saw the Southern strategy as especially involving class- and culture-based resentments against Northeastern blue bloods—whom he derided as "Yankee silk stockings," "mandarins of Establishment liberalism," and "limousine liberals."⁶⁰ Nixon too saw himself as leading a middle-class revolt against the country's Eastern establishment. This hostility against intellectual and cultural elites had antecedents in Senator Joseph McCarthy's attacks in the 1950s, and arguably more generally forms a persistent streak in American politics.⁶¹ In terms of culture war politics, though, the result is a particularly ironic charade. Politicians, themselves often quite wealthy, do the bidding of the wealthiest segments of society—all while posturing as defenders of the common man against the greed of the grasping poor and the high-handed dictates of Eastern snobs.⁶²

Beyond backlash. Many commentators mistakenly view dog whistlers as merely taking advantage of a naturally occurring reaction to social upheaval. An important example can be found in Thomas and Mary Edsall's *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (1991), a book accepted by many among the Democratic Party's intelligentsia as *the* guidebook for understanding the Southern strategy. As a metaphor, backlash treats racial reaction as if it were an act of nature: push too fast with civil rights and the extension of liberal programs, the backlash imagery implies, and a hostile eruption ineluctably follows. Thus the naturalistic title: *Chain Reaction*. Once unleashed, like atomic forces, racial backlash violently explodes with an enormous blast-radius and decades of lethal fallout. Beyond the liberals who shoved too hard, no one is really at fault, a backlash story says, for these surging forces are largely beyond control and fully to be expected.

This story distorts reality, first by blaming liberalism while downplaying racism. “At the extreme,” *Chain Reaction* contended, “liberalism inflamed resentment when it required some citizens—particularly lower-class whites—to put homes, jobs, neighborhoods, and children at perceived risk in the service of bitterly contested remedies for racial discrimination and segregation.”⁶³ The ostensible culprit is liberalism’s bitterly contested remedies which asked too much of whites. Yet this ignores the long history, in the North as well as the South, of white opposition to virtually any easing in racial oppression. Even modest efforts at ameliorating discrimination generated intense opposition, a phenomenon that played out repeatedly in the 1940s and 1950s. It did not require extreme liberal positions during the Johnson administration to generate white hostility; almost all efforts to improve the status of nonwhites generated resentment.⁶⁴

Beyond absolving racism, the backlash story also exonerates demagoguery. True, *Chain Reaction* recognized that “this backlash was . . . fostered and driven for partisan advantage by the Republican opposition.”⁶⁵ But by this the authors seem to mean principally that Republicans seized the moment and made the most of the situation. They thus diminish the role of dog whistle politicians, presenting them as mere opportunists rather than bold strategists. Racism undoubtedly generated intense resentment, but political entrepreneurs worked long and hard to stoke this fury and then to channel it into hostility toward liberal government in general. In addition, the reactionary think tanks that would prove so crucial to Southern strategy triumphs—a phenomenon we will explore later—are largely missing from the backlash story. Dog whistle racism certainly has elements of reaction to it, but it is much more than an inchoate flare-up of latent hostility. Instead, as we shall come to see, the Southern strategy represents first and foremost the *strategic* manipulation of racism; indeed, its purposeful reinvention.

The backlash metaphor is also dangerous because it suggests self-defeating short- and long-term solutions. The story it offers seems to counsel that the best immediate response to dog whistle politics is mimicry. Reasoning pessimistically that white resentment inevitably results when liberalism helps minorities, the defeatist conclusion follows that Democrats should pull back from helping nonwhites. The choice is often framed as staying true to liberal principles and losing elections, or winning by strategically pulling back from unpopular groups and liberalism too. As we shall see, this is precisely the “lesson” Democrats learned from *Chain Reaction*, for the year after the book came out, Bill Clinton opted to “win” by translating the Edsalls’ logic into campaign slogans and governing policies that adopted dog whistle politics.

In contrast to its pessimism about short-term dynamics, backlash theory is naively optimistic about long-term prospects, which leads it to suggest that the best long-range response to dog whistling is to do nothing. In picturing racism as largely static and reactive, the backlash metaphor also implies that it is generationally bounded.⁶⁶ We're told that those who grew up under white supremacy, inculcated to a deep loathing of nonwhites, will naturally revolt against liberal efforts to foster racial equality. But take heart, the thesis suggests, for this generation will eventually pass, to be replaced by those reared with racially egalitarian values. Ostensibly, all will be well with the simple passage of time: the bigots will eventually die off. Imagine the dismay, then, when Obama's support among whites plummeted from 2008 to 2012. The backlash thesis cannot explain the persistence of racial politics past, say, 15 or 20 years after the civil rights movement shifted American race relations. But 50 years after George Wallace began blowing the whistle, racial demagoguery is as powerful as ever.

Liberal elites. A final misapprehension must be addressed, and this one may be the most damaging of all. According to most commentators on the Southern strategy, racial bias is a problem among backward whites—but not amid the commentators themselves or their esteemed peers. Often this manifests in analyses that attribute racial resentment exclusively to whites in the South, or to working-class whites. But sympathy for the stereotypes prevalent in dog whistle politics can be found among whites across the country and across classes, including among liberal elites. Liberal thought leaders have long identified with the racist grumblings undergirding the Southern strategy, and this has skewed how they respond to dog whistle racism.

Reconsider the backlash thesis itself. Why were so many liberal thinkers quick to accept the claim that white defection from the Democratic Party stemmed from liberalism's excesses? What made them so readily disposed to treat dog whistle politics as a predictable response to their own errors, leading them to favor retreat and even mimicry? One answer might be basic, disheartening pragmatism: they thought they couldn't win by challenging dog whistle racism, so they picked up the whistle themselves. But a deeper and more unsettling answer is that many liberal elites shared the sense that racial equality *was* disruptive, rather than morally just and long overdue.⁶⁷ Among elites, too, the dog whistle harping on welfare, forced busing, and law and order struck powerful chords, making it that much harder for Democratic leaders to see coded race-baiting for what it was—a strategy, not a natural reaction.

Challenging the Southern strategy must involve more than calling upon Wallace voters to examine their beliefs and self-defeating voting patterns. It also requires that committed liberals face their seeming sympathy for grievances framed and expressed in racist narratives. This sympathy is sometimes given voice. Perhaps more often, though, and with much greater significance, it finds expression in a silent acquiescence to dog whistle narratives. Like most in society, liberals often unwittingly accept and even routinely draw on racism in their thinking. When confronting dog whistle racism, this is a tremendous problem—for even those liberals who continue to vote Democratic often sympathize with the racial complaints animating the core attacks on their party's values. In turn, this sympathy largely incapacitates their response, inhibiting confrontation and instead engendering often silence and sometimes mimicry.