

IAN HANEY LÓPEZ

DOG WHISTLE POLITICS

HOW **CODED RACIAL APPEALS** HAVE
REINVENTED RACISM & **WRECKED THE MIDDLE CLASS**



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*To family members across four generations,
each compassionate and generous in his or her own manner:
in memory of my father, Terry, and brother, Garth;
and for my stepdaughter, Chelsea, and granddaughter, Lennea.*

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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 overwhelming 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 peremptorily 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)