

**DOG WHISTLE
POLITICS**

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

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Conclusion

To End Dog Whistle Politics

How can we bring dog whistle politics to an end? One perennial suggestion is to wait it out. This has not worked, and will not work. Instead, here are recommendations for proactive responses addressed to liberal politicians, civil rights organizations, progressive foundations and unions, and concerned individuals.

The summer after he took over the presidency from the slain John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson signed into law the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the most sweeping piece of civil rights legislation passed in the twentieth century. According to his aide, the president knew this was a historic accomplishment with a steep price to be paid: "When he signed the act he was euphoric, but late that very night I found him in a melancholy mood as he lay in bed reading the bulldog edition of the *Washington Post* with headlines celebrating the day. I asked him what was troubling him. 'I think we just delivered the South to the Republican party for a long time to come,' he said."² As a Southerner, Johnson expected there would be a significant but temporary backlash. He failed to anticipate that the GOP would purposefully construct a strategy around covert racial appeals that would encompass the whole country and would endure for more than half a century. Johnson himself won that fall, but his 1964 election marked *the last time* a majority of whites voted for a Democratic presidential candidate. Republicans have carried white majorities in every presidential election since, typically by commanding margins. When and how will it end?

■ DEMOGRAPHY WILL NOT SAVE US

The backlash conception popular a couple of decades ago intimated that dog whistle politics would dissipate as the older generation reared under open white supremacy passed from the scene. This didn't happen. Nevertheless, today we're being told much the same thing: take heart, for changing demographics will solve this problem. That's unlikely.

RACE AND THE REPUBLICAN PARTY

Conservatives cannot simply walk away from racial pandering, as they've been too successful in making race integral to modern conservatism. Pause for a moment and consider just how central race has become to the Republican Party. Nine out of ten of its voters are white, as are 98 percent of its elected officials across the country. And to be clear, that 98 percent figure comes from 2008, *before* the racially anxious Tea Party rebellion remade local Republican organizations.¹ More than one of every three residents of the United States today is not white. In that context, the level of homogeneity achieved by Republicans just doesn't happen by accident; it has taken tremendous effort to transmogrify the GOP into the "white man's party."

More fundamentally, the white identity of conservatism lies in a tendency to see the world in terms of race. It's not simply that the vast majority of Republicans have fair features and European ancestry. Rather, it's that many whites affiliate with the GOP because it resonates racially with how they perceive themselves, others, and government. Conservatives cannot and will not pivot on a dime, for dog whistle politics is not just a strategy; it's now a formative element of American conservatism. In the United States, race is now the single most powerful divide between liberal and conservative self-conceptions. According to Edward Carrines and James Stimson, two of the foundational scholars on the political realignment that has transpired over the past decades, "if we ask simply, what do we know if we know someone avows a position on the liberal-conservative continuum? we answer that more than anything else we know that person's views on race."² Race provides the filter through which most white conservatives make sense of society and its problems.

Beyond these numbers and the ideology that produced and sustains them, the racial identification of the Republican Party will endure even if, however unlikely, the national GOP genuinely seeks to dump dog whistle racism. The rapid racial changes in the United States make many people nervous. Whites who turned 50 in 2010 were born when the country was 90 percent white, and

they may well remember a homogenously white community from their youth. But if they live in California or Texas, or in any number of the nation's largest cities, they're already a racial minority. Many whites may be comfortable with these changes, or even welcome them, but many do not. This is especially true among older whites, who are less likely to personally know or be familiar with nonwhites, and are more likely to see themselves in direct conflict with them.³ The older population frets over whether the government will have the funds to cover Social Security and Medicare and worries that resources they need are being diverted to provide services for younger folks, more of whom are nonwhite. Among demographers, this looming conflict is expressed in short hand as "gray versus brown."⁴ For decades, the GOP has positioned itself as offering racial succor to those whites—elderly or otherwise—casting about for security. It's unlikely that state-level Republicans will set aside this comparative advantage in appealing to a demographic group that will likely remain anxious for some time, and this in turn will have long-term national ramifications.

EVOLVING DOG WHISTLE THEMES

Rather than fading from the scene, dog whistling will evolve. Since the days of George Wallace, demagogues have been quick to adapt when crafting new coded racial appeals, while the public has been slow to condemn these entreaties, typically failing to recognize them as racial until long after they've already done their damage. Crime, forced busing, welfare, taxes, affirmative action, immigration, terrorism—what's next? Current trends suggest education and China.

The public schooling of children has long been a focus of dog whistle politics. Public education provides easy race-baiting opportunities and in addition it is also a favorite bugaboo of anti-government conservatives. In terms of race-baiting, where once "forced busing" offered a favorite dog whistle, the fact that public schools now are highly segregated by race and in many areas primarily serve nonwhites has allowed public education to be recast as exemplifying white tax money being wasted on unruly minority youths. Then, in terms of conservative politics, schools constitute both the enemy and an opportunity. They are a natural target as an expensive social service, but the very funds going to education also represent an attractive opportunity to divert public money to private corporations. Schools are also well suited for the more camouflaged form of rightwing racial politics that seeks to push nonwhite faces at the fore; conservatives can argue that they are attacking public education because they care so deeply about protecting nonwhite kids.

Consider the pitch on education offered by House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, a Tea Party favorite, put forward after the 2012 elections temporarily motivated the GOP to rebrand itself as committed to serving minorities: “I’ve talked about a man who is a dad here in the inner city of the District of Columbia who, all he wanted was to find a safe place for his kids to learn. . . . I think what we care about, and what he cares about, is his kids.”⁶ Cantor’s proffered solution? Provide direct funding to parents looking to pull their children out of public schools?⁷

This might seem to be an instance of genuine concern for families with children trapped in failing schools, but on a deeper level it harks back to the tactics of Clint Bolick, who in the 1990s proposed using black children as fronts in efforts to defund public schools.⁸ In this retooled version of conservatism, the use of young nonwhite faces obfuscates an agenda that remains unchanged: attack liberal government for wasting money on social services like education. Yes, pulling money out and giving it to parents might help some households, although the evidence shows charter schools on average perform more poorly than public schools. More fundamentally, direct subsidies to parents facilitate (white) flight from public schools, cripple funding for public school systems, and redirect state money into private hands.

Beyond helping to obscure this agenda, the use of nonwhite children also masks how dog whistling continues. For many whites, “public school” itself operates as a dog whistle term, connoting a dangerous nonwhite place that consumes vast resources yet fails to educate masses of young delinquents. This connotation traces back to the civil rights era when conservatives framed integration as making schools unsafe for white children, and over the decades—as whites fled, schools resegregated, and student bodies in many districts became almost exclusively nonwhite—this ulterior meaning has only grown more potent. The main problem, according to Cantor, is terrible schools in DC, and abysmal public education more generally. By saying he wants to help nonwhite children, Cantor adds another layer of veneer: how can this be racial pandering, when all he wants to do is help minorities? But beneath the veneer, conservative dog whistling blasts along: government serves minorities, and fails them; liberalism wastes white tax dollars; fear government, trust the market.

Economic competition with China may also soon mature into a major dog whistle theme. During the 2012 presidential debates, China constituted the one peril on which Mitt Romney and Barack Obama could agree, with both candidates taking aggressive swipes at that economic powerhouse. On one level, this reflected genuine conflicts of interest between the United States and China, implicating important domestic policy considerations. On another, though,

it risked capitalizing on xenophobia. All too easily, the economic threat from China can morph into a perceived racial one as well. Consider a particularly over-the-top 2012 Super Bowl attack ad by Republican Senate candidate Pete Hoekstra against Senator Debbie Stabenow. The ad ultimately provoked cries of insensitivity and even racism, apparently contributing to Hoekstra’s loss. Nevertheless, the commercial highlights the racial possibilities in barbs over trade with China. In the ad, set to Chinese music, an Asian actress wearing a conical wicker hat rides into view in a rice paddy; stopping in front of the camera, she smirks to the audience in broken English, “Thank you, Michigan Senator Debbie Stabenow! Debbie spend so much American money; you borrow more and more, from us. Your economy get very weak, ours get very good. We take your jobs.” Staying on script, when he was subsequently criticized for the ad Hoekstra retorted that he was not racist, while his campaign manager kicked back that “democrats talk about race when they can’t defend their records.”⁹

If the economy continues to stagger and if China continues to rise, we will likely see more and more dog whistling around China, and for similar reasons perhaps around India as well. In turn, along with these coded appeals we should also expect to see increasing hostility toward Chinese and Indian Americans, and—because racial animosities rarely prove especially discerning—likely toward Asian Americans in general. It has certainly happened before. In 1982, at the height of anti-Japanese rancor stoked by politicians warning of Japanese economic competition, Vincent Chin, a Chinese American, was murdered in a hate crime in Detroit. The perpetrators were white employees of a Chrysler plant that had recently laid off workers; the killers allegedly told Chin before bludgeoning him with a baseball bat, “it’s because of you little mother fuckers that we’re out of work.”¹⁰

RECRUITING NONWHITES

Dog whistle politics will also likely evolve in the direction of recruiting support from some segments among the nonwhite population. Those who anticipate demography rescuing the Democrats, for instance the political scientists Shaun Bowler and Gary Segura in their book *The Future Is Ours*, do so on the assumption that nonwhites will continue to support the Democratic Party at rates similar to those demonstrated in 2012. But even they concede that “if minority voters move even slightly in the direction of distributions that mirror those of whites, Democrats are sunk.”¹¹ In other words, small defections can tilt the balance sufficiently to create new openings for a GOP that repeatedly attracts a supermajority of whites. The election of a young black president may

have helped secure nonwhite loyalty and a sense of personal investment in the Democrats, but other trends suggest caution. For instance, there seems to be a long-term pattern of disaffiliation by African Americans from the Democratic Party, which has long taken their “captured” support for granted.¹² Between 1968 and 2004, the numbers of blacks identifying as Democrats fell from roughly 90 percent to 60 percent.¹³

With respect to Latinos and Asians, a distinct pattern emerges. These groups are comprised overwhelmingly of recent immigrants and their children. Beyond the heterogeneity this implies, it also means that significant segments within these populations have yet to be socialized into party affiliation, or even into political participation. Growing up, many white and black Americans develop an affinity for a political party around the dinner table; this happens with far fewer Asians and Latinos born in the United States to immigrant parents. As a result, Latinos and Asians are far less likely than whites or blacks to identify with either party. Recent surveys show that roughly one third of Latinos and Asians identify as Democrats. But half either identify as independents or indicate no preference between the parties.¹⁴ The political scientists who have done the greatest amount of work in this area conclude: “What this means is that the future of the minority vote, and consequently the balance of power in American politics, is still very much up for grabs. If either party wants to attain dominance, it ignores this segment of the American population at its own peril.”¹⁵ Recent history demonstrates the portable support among Latinos for the different parties. George W. Bush, who made a point of reaching out to Hispanics, won 35 percent of their vote in 2000, and 45 percent in 2004.¹⁶ Had Romney polled as well among Latinos, rather than raising their ire by calling for “self-deportation,” he may well have won the election. Making this point in scathing terms, on election eve Florida GOP operative Ana Navarro bitingly remarked, “Mitt Romney self-deported himself from the White House.”¹⁷

EXPANDING WHO COUNTS AS WHITE

In reaching out to Hispanics and Asians, the GOP may do more than reach out to nonwhite groups; it may contribute to a long-term transition in the very definition of who counts as white. Consider George Wallace’s evolution on this issue. A hundred years ago, firm racial lines elevated Anglo-Saxons over the supposedly degenerate races from southern and eastern Europe, lines that only dissolved in the North in the decades after World War II.¹⁸ The South, however, with fewer immigrants and a deeper commitment to an express ideology of white supremacy, clung more tightly to racially derogatory views of

“swarthy” European races. One can hear an echo of this in Wallace’s inaugural speech from 1963: just before he endorsed segregation now, tomorrow, and forever, he celebrated “his Cradle of the Confederacy, this very Heart of the Great Anglo-Saxon Southland.”¹⁹ As Wallace sought to move onto a national stage, though, he met resistance from those who accused him of disparaging eastern and southern Europeans as “lesser breeds.” To counteract this challenge, Wallace began touring the North with Alabamans of Polish, Greek, Jewish, and Italian descent in tow. He did so to reassure these groups that they too shared in a collective white identity: “Speaking as racial victim to racial victim, [Wallace] drew them into the collective identity he described, articulating their interests as whites who were being betrayed by the federal government and made vulnerable to blacks, who by definition became their political enemies, just as they were his.”²⁰ A pioneer of dog whistle racism, Wallace reconciled himself to pulling into the white fold those he seemingly regarded as “lesser breeds.” Perhaps this too is a lesson other dog whistlers will learn.

How might expansions in who counts as white play out demographically? The census predicts that whites, 65 percent of the population in 2010, will become a minority by 2045. But this assumes that no Latinos will be included in the white population, a striking assumption given that on the same census, 53 percent of those who identified as Hispanic also claimed to be white.²¹ When the census bureau returns its racial projections and includes white Hispanics in the total tally of whites, it predicts that in 2045, far from whites becoming a minority, whites will number nearly 72 percent of the country’s people.²² (To give some context to this number: in 2013, House Republicans represented districts on average 75 percent white.²³) In 2045 whites may account for 7 percent *more* of the population than they do today, depending on how white Latinos are counted. The current wisdom is that the white population in the United States is shrinking. But this depends on racial categories staying fixed, and more particularly, on Latinos continuing to be excluded from the white category. If, instead, a segment of the Hispanic population identifies and is seen as white, the next few decades may witness a surge in the country’s white population.

It’s not far fetched to imagine dog whistle appeals swinging a sizable portion of Latinos into the Republican camp. True, many or perhaps most Latinos—especially those with darker skin, less fluency in English, less education, and those who arrived more recently—will continue to form part of a racial underclass.²⁴ Notwithstanding this, significant numbers of Hispanics already consider themselves white, and this pattern bids likely to continue. Partly, this reflects conceptions of race that Hispanic immigrants bring with them, as Latin

American countries tend to have broader definitions of who counts as white.²⁵ Party, this trend reflects the choices that new immigrants and their children make as they acculturate to a society structured around a white/nonwhite divide that accords much greater status to whites.²⁶ In addition, there is already a history of some Hispanics organizing themselves as middle-class whites. In the 1950s, leading Mexican American civil rights organizations challenged racial discrimination not on the ground that Jim Crow was immoral, but on the ground that Mexican Americans were white.²⁷ Like other immigrant groups, they placed themselves on the white side of the color line and were willing to denigrate blacks, and even to support racial segregation, if it helped their own claim to belonging. These same civic groups also supported policies to exclude “wetbacks,” a racially derogatory term these leaders endorsed. Now as then, some Hispanics resent how the continuing arrival of new immigrants from Latin America heightens the sense that all Latinos are foreigners, and also fear that darker-skinned immigrants threaten their racial status.²⁸ GOP operatives often predict some success among Hispanics because of a supposed conservative strain in this group. Beyond that, though, racial dynamics among Latinos will also give dog whistlers some reason to hope, and to begin directing even more resources toward recruiting the right kind of Hispanics.

■ WHAT TO DO

Dog whistle politics is not going to evaporate on its own, not even under the sun of demographic change. To defeat race-baiting and to restore a liberal commitment to use government to help the middle class, proactive efforts are needed. How can different social actors, from politicians to average folks, move us forward?

POLITICIANS

Obama is not in a position to take on race directly. Many liberal politicians will have more leeway, especially if they are white and thus not doubly constrained by politics as well as racial identity. Even beyond directly contesting dog whistle politics, though, there are three things Obama, and by extension all liberal politicians, should be doing.

First, Obama must both articulate and govern according to a positive liberal vision. Either one, without the other, is insufficient. A message without action comes across as politics as usual, while there’s also a risk to acting

without an accompanying story. Too often, liberals craft programs that provide much-needed assistance but hide government’s helping hand, facilitating later attacks by conservatives seeking to convince voters that liberal programs do nothing for them. To give renewed energy to liberalism requires crafting a positive message of where we want to go as a society and how we can get there, and then matching that with corresponding action. Obama began this process in his second inaugural address:

We do not believe that in this country freedom is reserved for the lucky or happiness for the few. We recognize that no matter how responsibly we live our lives, any one of us at any time may face a job loss or a sudden illness or a home swept away in a terrible storm. The commitments we make to each other through Medicare and Medicaid and Social Security, these things do not sap our initiative. They strengthen us. They do not make us a nation of takers. They free us to take the risks that make this country great.

Having started to voice a liberal vision, Obama now must pursue the initiatives that show people that government makes a positive difference in their lives.

Second, Obama and liberal politicians must give a consistent and coherent account of who the real culprits are. Yes, mobilizing people with an uplifting vision is key, but so too is explaining who is holding us down, and even pushing us downward. With so much hardship in their lives, people want to know whom to blame: as two social critics recently put the point, “resentment abhors a vacuum.”²⁹ Dog whistle politicians, conservative think tanks, and rightwing media sources have made assigning blame their principal task. Liberals should not engage in scapegoating, and indeed should take care to clarify that it is not great wealth itself, or corporations writ large, that are the problem. But by the same token, liberals cannot shy from identifying self-interested billionaires and giant corporations that attempt to distort the democratic process to serve their own narrow interests. Teddy Roosevelt, the great capitalist crusader for progressive government, captured this spirit when lambasting “malefactors of great wealth.” Wealth was not their sin. Far from it, the patricians—like Roosevelt himself—had a role to play in contributing to society. But vast inequalities corrode social solidarity, and we must warn against the robber barons—individuals as well as corporations—that use their power and influence to promote only their own interests, with no regard for the damage they do to the rest of us.

Here’s the third basic task: liberal politicians must encourage their appointees and allies to address race. If Obama has reason not to speak on race directly,

others need to take up that task, both inside and outside the administration. Attorney General Eric Holder and Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor have taken some heat but have used their positions to stave off attacks from the right and to give voice to concerns about racial discrimination. These sorts of appointments should be more aggressively pursued, even at the cost of some political capital. Beyond that, Obama should support—or at the very least stop discouraging—voices outside the administration willing to raise issues of racial injustice and racial demagoguery. Jesse Jackson wasn't popular with whites who had fled the Democratic party or with the Democratic establishment, but once he criticized the racial politics of the Willie Horton ads, those ads lost some of their power, and support for the Republican candidate stopped climbing. Dog whistle politicians will adjust to increased criticism, perhaps by stepping up their charges that liberals shamelessly play the race card. Yet the research is clear that putting race front and center in voters' consciousness, rather than leaving it operating in the background, helps reduce the power of coded racial appeals.²⁶

Beyond the research, recent history shows that by staying silent, liberals do not evade race-baiting but merely cede the public square to racial demagogues and their coded trumpeting about race and liberal governance. In today's dog whistle political climate, silence on race spells defeat for liberalism and the middle class.

This is not to say that race is the only social division used to target liberalism. The broader history of culture war politics involves interwoven campaigns assailing gender, abortion rights, sexual orientation, same-sex marriage, religion, the environment, global warming, and guns, among other attacks. Defending liberalism will require more than thinking about how race has evolved over the last half-century. In addition, sustained attention must also be given to other targets of demagogic campaigns, and about how best to respond on those fronts as well.

CIVIL RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS

In the battle against dog whistle politics, civil rights groups should pursue two distinct goals, one centered on promoting liberalism and the other on sparking a new civil rights movement.

In terms of liberalism, civil rights organizations should aim to clear space for its resurgence, and they can best do so by revitalizing the left pole in American politics. Fortuitously, civil rights groups can reinvigorate the left and create maneuvering room for liberalism precisely by pursuing their core mission of combating racial inequality. Imagine three positions regarding racial justice: a left commitment to directly addressing racial inequalities; a rightwing agenda of

reversing civil rights and preserving the status quo; and in the middle, universal liberal programs that only indirectly help minorities. By staying silent on race, the left effectively disappeared: no one was arguing for direct responses to racial injustice. Without a true left, what had been the middle (universalism) came to appear as instead the counterweight to the right's insistence that nothing should be done. This made it easier for conservatives to paint universalism as a left-leaning, radical agenda, and this is where we find ourselves today, with even universalism in peril as Democrats fear being identified with "left" programs that would help everyone. In the short term, then, whether the White House gives its blessing or not, civil rights organizations must vociferously raise racial justice issues, shoving the left back away from the middle. Democrats have long seen civil rights activism as jeopardizing their prospects. But in reality, for Democrats to return to liberalism, they need an angry racial left against which to posture.

To be sure, this is a far cry from the Democrats returning to a commitment to racial justice, and providing a foil for liberal posturing should be understood as an emergency strategy. In the longer term, civil rights organizations must push liberals to directly engage with race again. Liberals must recommit to an ideal of activist government unskewed by racial antipathies. This is not to argue for a post-racial or colorblind universalism, though, but instead for what race scholar John Powell calls "targeted universalism."²⁷ Racial groups are situated differently in the United States in their access to housing, education, decent jobs, professional networks, health care, healthy food, and so on. Solutions to these structural inequalities can be universal in their aspirations—decent opportunities along these dimensions for all—but the policies that will make this a reality inevitably must take into account the differing situations and needs of various groups. Correcting gross racial inequalities is necessary to make good on our social obligation to get beyond racism, and also honors the liberal ideal of helping especially the most vulnerable in society. Beyond the idealism, however, *ameliorating racial inequality is a precondition to ending racial politics*. So long as society remains riven by racial divisions, racial demagoguery will remain a threat to the middle class.

Building on this insight, the broad middle class will best be helped if civil rights organizations set their sights on sparking a new racial justice movement. This will require that they rethink their response to contemporary racism. For decades, racial organizations have assumed that to fight racism they must defend the civil rights achievements of the 1960s, and so they have been conducting an extended rear-guard action in the courts and in Congress. Suffering defeats and constantly falling back to fight again, these organizations are presently regrouping

from drubblings around affirmative action and voting rights. But these repeated pull backs, combined with the drive to salvage what they can by declaring each rout instead a victory, have combined to skew the vision of civil rights leaders. They increasingly see their core strengths in terms of legal expertise and access to the halls of government, and identify their overarching mission principally in terms of defending civil rights remedies that are ever more wounded, weak, and ineffectual. As a result, year by year civil rights groups have lost sight of how their power ultimately depends on an energized constituency mobilized around racial justice issues, and have also lowered their gaze from more ambitious conceptions of racial equality.

To understand the depths of the changes that need to be made, civil rights activists must recognize that our current situation is less like the 1970s than the 1920s—not in the degree of oppression, but rather, in its *invisibility*. In the 1970s, fights over racial injustice occupied center stage, and even in the face of sharp differences among groups about what to do, all sides conceded that racism was a pressing problem. Today, the right insists that racism against nonwhites is over, most whites seem to agree, and post-racialism convinces even many liberal allies that fighting racism is an unwise distraction. This resembles the 1920s, an era when most whites thought the great racial issue confronting the country—slavery—was safely resolved, and the NAACP campaigned to bring the horrors of widespread lynching into public consciousness as a goal to recognizing the depths of continued racial oppression. Present civil rights organizations need to commit themselves to rebuilding a widespread sense that racism continues to blight society. We should no longer see ourselves as fighting to preserve past successes. Instead, we should envision ourselves at the start of a new civil rights movement, one that must begin by convincing the public that racism yet remains a societal scourge.

The core precondition here is to reclaim and reinvigorate the language of “racism.” Liberals have been urging flight from this word for decades, warning over and over that it is divisive and counterproductive—and so it is, if the goal is to assuage the anxieties of Wallace voters and Reagan Democrats. But if the goal is rebuilding a liberal coalition, the word “racism” must be used. The term carries so much power because at root it is a moral indictment: to call something racism is to say it is wrong and society must come together to change it. It’s this very power that has made “racism” an object of such fierce struggle over the last half century. In the 1960s, society widely understood “racism” to apply to fundamental structural inequalities; today, for most it means malice and nothing more. This reversal reflects a conservative effort to choke the meaning of racism in a decades-long campaign that went largely unopposed by liberals afraid of

losing white votes. Yet they largely lost those votes anyway, or regained them principally by abandoning minorities and liberalism too. The meaning of “racism” goes directly to society’s obligations regarding racial justice—and also, to how liberalism is attacked. If liberals don’t fight to define what this word means, the right will only too gladly define it for the whole society.

As a particular skirmish in this larger battle, reconsider the phrase “dog whistle racism.” In Chapter Two, I defended this term as analytically accurate, but deferred the question of whether it was politically advisable. Let’s pick up that point now. When in 1963 the GOP wrestled with the idea of becoming the white man’s party, this violated the mores of many party leaders, making some sick at heart. They understood clearly the racial import of the party’s actions. “I’m very much afraid,” said one Republican official, “we’re well on the road to becoming the white supremacy party, and there’s no turning back.”³² Where is this sentiment now among Republicans? Two chairs of the Republican National Committee have apologized for the party’s use of the “Southern strategy.”³³ Where’s the apology for preserving notions of white superiority? And outside the GOP, how widespread and how deeply felt is the outrage over conservative racial pandering? As one race scholar notes, even the term “Southern strategy” is a “race-denying euphemism used by Republican operatives, mainstream media analysts, and academic researchers” to occlude what is fundamentally a “white racist strategy.”³⁴ Racism has been at the core of Republican politics for decades, but because “racism” has been truncated to mean malice, and few want to be divisive or counterproductive, almost everyone has shied from naming and protesting this obvious fact. The cost, however, is that this rank injustice continues as normal practice year after year. Civil rights activists and liberals must fight to redefine racism to include unconscious racism, structural racism, commonsense racism, strategic racism and—last but very far from least—dog whistle racism.

Perhaps the existing civil rights organizations will take the lead, or perhaps new organizations taking new forms and adopting new tactics will emerge. This incipient anti-racist effort will not have a popular message—how could it, since it must aim to dispel the popular beliefs rooted in colorblindness that racism is largely over and that we are already a racially just society? But this new movement will take heart in the experience of Martin Luther King, Jr., remembering that he was not widely popular among his contemporaries. Especially as he moved from fighting the formal racism of Jim Crow to the more entrenched versions that endure into our times, his message stirred great insecurity and opposition. This will be the experience of any new civil rights movement attempting to disrupt settled patterns. Crafting a message that polls well is exactly what civil rights organizations must *not* do. Rather, they must lead and they must educate.

Most likely, the place to start lies with nonwhite communities, which have also largely acceded to the idea that racism is yesterday's problem. Even those who are victims of structural racism, trapped by large-scale forces beyond their control, tend to blame themselves. The rage that sparked the civil rights movement seems to have turned inward now that people no longer seem able to situate themselves within a broader history. The malice conception of racism contributes to this, making the impact of race almost impossible to identify in daily interactions that may involve few if any whites, let alone any malevolent bigots. Nonwhite communities also provide crucial organizing targets because conservatives seeking to adjust to the new demographic landscape will increasingly seek to recruit certain sectors within them. Under revamped race-baiting, especially Latino and Asian communities are likely to see their more well-off members enticed by appeals for a new allegiance with whites. Responding to current racial patterns and anticipating likely evolutions both counsel for working immediately in minority communities to reinvigorate outrage over "racism."

FOUNDATIONS AND UNIONS

Liberal foundations and unions have their own work to do. Like civil rights groups, they must help create space in the middle by staking out a more aggressive racial justice stance. In addition to helping liberalism in general, this will help these organizations fulfill their own missions. All too many progressive groups have adopted a version of post-racialism, deciding to ignore racism as a major force in deepening the social problems they are otherwise committed to solving, for instance in education, health, environmental degradation, and the welfare of children. Like other liberal institutions, many foundations have been heavily influenced by the Democratic Party's flight from race, following suit and leaving race behind as well. Unions have their own histories, with some taking more progressive stances on racial issues, and others struggling with unfortunate legacies. Most, however, have also retreated from directly engaging with racial justice.

Yet if the issues these groups care about touch at all upon poverty—and almost all do—then they also inevitably intersect with race. Moreover, if these groups seek help from government, then whatever solutions they propose will certainly be contested in racial terms. Race-baiting is the principal language used to oppose most liberal reforms, and progressive organizations cannot successfully lobby for helpful policies—even seemingly universal or race-neutral initiatives—without being challenged by racial narratives of government gone loco. Public unions in particular today find themselves the targets of aggressive

attacks. Some of these are couched in economic terms, for instance highlighting the costs to taxpayers of fulfilling pension obligations. But courting underneath is also a racial refrain that pains many unions, especially public ones, as havens for unproductive minorities. To protect themselves, and also to make progress on the issues they care most deeply about, unions and liberal foundations must recognize how they too have been stymied by dog whistle racism.

Beyond this, perhaps the principal work that these groups must embrace involves a long-term project to restore luster to liberalism itself. More ambitious than clearing space for liberalism in the short run, foundations and unions must begin an enduring campaign to rebuild a liberal consensus regarding how to help the middle class. For two reasons, progressives have largely stopped defending liberalism. First, paralleling their response to the Democratic demand to back off from race, many have acceded to similar pressure from the Clinton and Obama administrations to tone down demands for New Deal-style solutions to economic challenges. As the country has shifted rightward, many foundations and unions have followed suit, in the process abandoning advocacy for precisely the effective liberal solutions most able to restore the middle class.

Second, and curiously given the country's rightward lurch, many seem to hold a complacent sense that liberalism actually needs little defense. An attenuated version of liberalism still operates as a default position among the nation's intelligentsia, not only among unions and foundations, but from policy groups to the liberal media establishment to college campuses across the country. Partly for this reason, progressive groups seem convinced that, in the marketplace of ideas, liberalism will win out on its own strength.

And most likely liberalism would win out, all other things being equal. But as the ascendancy of rightwing think tanks and media conglomerates show, in today's political economy bad ideas thrive with sufficient resources behind them, and good ideas wither from neglect. Following Powell's recommendations and the examples set by the likes of Joseph Coors and the Koch brothers, hundreds of millions of dollars have flowed into promoting notions that primarily serve the interests of the very wealthy. Liberals must acknowledge the skewed nature of the marketplace of ideas, and foundations and unions must step up their commitments to supporting advocacy organizations, think tanks, and grassroots groups motivated to re-engage the increasingly one-sided debates and to bolster liberal ideals.

This need to support liberal ideas extends to supporting universities, starting with the liberal arts programs that help foster the values and critical thinking that undergird liberalism's endorsement of mutual obligation, and extending to professional schools like law, business, and medicine that train many of the

country's leaders. Conservatives have been especially effective at pouring money into winning the battle of ideas in law schools. Since the New Deal era, these schools have been fairly liberal in their political orientation. Recognizing this, in the early 1980s conservative funders like the Olin Foundation began a concerted effort to change the character of law schools, principally by using the "law and economics" movement. Their approach was surprisingly simple and effective: provide resources for workshops to create a sense of shared enterprise along with prizes and fellowships to signal professional accomplishment; and simultaneously fund faculty positions for law and economics programs at the most elite schools. In turn, because just a handful of schools produce the vast bulk of law professors hired across the country, this helped to shape the entire legal academy.³⁴

How did liberal funders respond? So far, they have not, likely reflecting complacency about the supposedly secure status of liberalism in the idea-generating sectors of society. But this confidence is dangerously naive, for liberalism is quite fragile at present. Liberal ideas are losing ground not because they lack merit, but because they receive thin backing, even as concentrated funding flows toward promoting conservative views. There's a specific, well-funded political project to defeat liberalism among society's thought leaders. A specific, well-funded political project is now necessary to support liberalism in those institutions that directly shape the perspectives and values of tomorrow's elected officials and tomorrow's voters.

THE REST OF US

Finally, what can individuals do to defeat dog whistle racism? The most basic step is to consciously consider race. The research is clear that colorblindness does not help us overcome racism; on the contrary, colorblindness as a strategy (rather than as a goal) forms part of the problem. Attempting to ignore what one has inevitably already noticed only makes it more difficult to recognize and thus control internalized racial stereotypes. Likewise, averting one's eyes to how race might be operating only makes one more susceptible to dog whistle manipulation. The racial subterfuge of coded appeals that has done so much to wreck the middle class is easy to pierce, but only if one consciously mulls over how race might be involved.

Once the basic step of watching out for race is taken, the next is to raise one's voice. Rightwing racial attacks on liberalism depend on cowing into silence those opposed to continuing racial demonization, thus allowing dog whistle columnies to spread unchallenged. Connected to this, colorblindness also

operates as an etiquette that treats talking about race as impolite and even racist. Those who discuss racism are accused of being the real racists—again, as if pulling a fire alarm means one set the fire, or dialing 911 means one committed the crime. Refusing to be silenced, to defeat dog whistle racism and restore government to the side of the middle class will require as many of us as possible to go ahead and sound that alarm.

For persons of color, this is likely to be especially risky. For minorities in largely white spaces (a description that fits virtually all elite settings), beyond colorblind etiquette there's additional pressure to stay silent. Just as James Baldwin in the 1960s found himself constantly forced to soothe whites made uncomfortable when his skin color drew into consciousness their racial position, so too today. For nonwhites, the price of access to elite environments typically takes the form of a Faustian bargain: receive a warm welcome at least partially offered to show that race no longer matters, but only so long as one does or says nothing that might show that race still matters.³⁵ Breaking this bargain can carry a steep penalty, including ostracism and an end to professional advancement. Yet accepting the deal makes one an accomplice to social practices that deny, and thus protect, the continued power of racism in society. Challenging dog whistle narratives and, longer term, building a renewed racial justice movement requires raising our voices against a silence that legitimizes racism.

Shifting to the political front, opposing dog whistle racism does not simply mean we should try to elect more Democrats. Virtually every academic critic of dog whistle politics focuses on how the GOP uses race to its advantage, in turn measuring the successful rebuttal of dog whistle appeals by whether Democrats nevertheless manage to retain or gain office. This is the wrong metric. It fails to take account of the extent to which Democrats themselves prevail by picking up the whistle. And it fails to recognize that dog whistle politics has been harnessed to a war on liberalism, a war in which Democratic politicians can be found on both sides. The ultimate goal is not to reassemble a winning Democratic majority. Rather, the goal is to restore a political consensus that sees government not as a handmaiden to mooching nonwhites, but as a powerful tool for promoting liberty and opportunity for all.

To that end, we have to be smarter about whom we support. Initially, the goal of restoring liberalism will entail supporting Democrats, because at least relative to current Republican politicians, on average the Democrats are not so hostile to progressive governance, nor so thoroughly indebted to concentrated wealth. Yet a new and durable Democratic majority carries a distinct risk. If a new Democratic coalition including people of color does emerge—and it may have already—this will be heralded as evidence that the country has fully

triumphed over racism. This will reduce the sense of urgency regarding, and indeed will likely increase pressure to stay away from, potentially divisive racial issues that might destabilize the new coalition. In addition to leaving undressed the enormous challenges confronting nonwhite communities, the net effect of a renewed liberal consensus to ignore race would be to hold at arm's length liberalism itself. Already we see some leading liberals suggesting that Democrats must continue to "moderate[] their economic and social message," the better to avoid rekindling the "widespread popular disgust with the extremes to which liberal Democrats and New Left movements had gone in the late sixties and the seventies."⁵⁶ Arguments like these merely reinvigorate the advice Democratic pundits have been offering since the 1970s: flee from race and flee from liberalism and the middle class too.

Politicians respond to pressure, so we must pressure Democrats to return to liberalism. Some pushing should occur within the party's institutional structures, and some at the ballot box in primary fights between more and less liberal candidates. In addition, generating this pressure will require a renewed commitment to street politics. There's evidence of popular energy poised to surge. Obama's 2008 campaign mobilized a broad coalition of folks ready to fight for progressive governance, though many subsequently sunk back toward frustrated passivity when Obama tacked right. Another demonstration of popular ardor can be found in Occupy Wall Street and its many iterations across the country. Occupy demonstrated that tremendous passion exists around issues of economic inequality, and also showed that social media is creating new mobilizing opportunities and tactics. This insurgency deserves applause, as does the voluntarism that often followed, for instance in response to Hurricane Sandy. Yet Occupy also ultimately had little effect on the country, in significant part because it refused to engage in party politics. Just as the Tea Party formed an insurgency both outside and inside the GOP that forced that party to the right, a renewed commitment to liberalism will require an energized social movement on the streets willing to push, but also willing to accept major financial backing and committed to remaking the Democratic Party from both without and within.

In addition to mistakenly eschewing partisan politics, the Occupy movement also erred in supposing it could challenge economic inequality without engaging racism. It was a curious spectacle, for instance, to see so many white youths in Oakland up in arms about economic injustice but resistant to talking about racism, in a city where wealth and poverty correlate so closely with color. Given the correlation, helping poor people requires addressing racism. More fundamentally, because dog whistle politics has spent half a century building

support for reactionary policies through hostility toward nonwhites, addressing racism is now a precondition to helping the broad middle class.

Toward the end of his life, Martin Luther King, Jr., proposed a Poor People's March on Washington that arose out of the black civil rights movement but became a multiracial movement for economic justice:

There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life. . . . We will move on to Washington, determined to stay there until the legislative and executive branches of the government take serious and adequate action on jobs and incomes. . . . in fact, a new economic deal for the poor.⁵⁷

Since King proposed the Poor People's March, the need for a multiracial economic justice movement has only become more exigent. In the intervening years, dog whistle politicians have repeatedly used racial frames to blame poverty on its victims, nonwhites and more recently poor whites too, and also to justify tearing down the government programs that aimed to provide a route upward.⁵⁸ For activists ready to take to the streets to confront the rising oligarchy, a specific concern with racism must be central to their agenda.

What should we be working toward? In his 1944 State of the Union address, Franklin Roosevelt urged a "second Bill of Rights," including "the right to earn enough to provide adequate food and clothing and recreation," "the right of every family to a decent home," "the right to adequate medical care and the opportunity to achieve and enjoy good health," "the right to adequate protection from the economic fears of old age, sickness, accident, and unemployment," and "the right to a good education." These are the rights that Roosevelt saw undergirding a prosperous and secure middle class. These are the goals to which we as a nation should recommitt.

It may seem that by holding aloft King's 1968 Poor People's March, or extolling Roosevelt's second Bill of Rights from 1944, the driving political vision here is backward looking, even perhaps a naïve celebration of a romanticized past. It is not. Instead, my principal call is to restore an interrupted future. In the wake of the Great Depression, we came to appreciate the value of mutual responsibility tied to a model in which government corralled concentrated wealth and served everyone. We came to embrace liberalism in the same way that at the country's founding we tightly clasped liberty, and after the Civil War, equality. We seized on these not just as values, but as aspirations to guide us. Yet

as with liberty and equality, so too with liberalism: we failed to live up to our ideals. Among the greatest stumbling blocks in each case, and still today, was race. The years between FDR's first election in 1932 and the end of Johnson's presidency in 1968 marked a giant step forward as US society committed to a vision of government dedicated to building the middle class. But this monumental step nevertheless remained fatally shackled to racism. When dog whistle politics pulled that chain tight, we stumbled in our progress and fell backward. It's time to renew our commitment to moving forward, resolved more than ever to making sure racism doesn't continue to bind our greatest aspirations.

It took me a long, long time to appreciate Derrick Bell's fundamental insight. A literal reading of his claim that racism was permanent distracted me. Of course racism is not permanent in the sense of unchanging; nevertheless, racism endures and evolves. Also, in rejecting Bell's teaching, I was thinking about myself and about the privileges that I enjoyed. Racism certainly didn't seem fixed and oppressive in my fortunate life. Yet beyond recognizing that racism adapts, Bell also possessed a gentle humanity that led him to measure racism in the lives of the least privileged among us. He could see racism in the lives of the poor and hungry, the incarcerated, the deported, in the lives of those trapped by social forces beyond their control, both white and nonwhite. More than that, Bell insistently connected the fates of the disadvantaged and the privileged, showing how their diminishment threatened to drag us down and, more uncomfortably, how our status helped to justify their misery. Bell believed, ultimately, in mutual responsibility as a command that we look well beyond ourselves to see our connection to suffering. Coming to his scholarship from the front lines of civil rights work in the Jim Crow South, Bell studied, wrote, and taught about race as a way to touch humanity's pain—its affliction, its endurance, its resistance. Only from there did he seek, all the years he taught, to carve a way forward.

Was he dismayed, even embittered, as I thought when I was a student? He had a right to be. By then, conservative appointees to the Supreme Court and the Reagan administration had undone many of the advances Bell fought for as a lawyer and scholar, and there was no nadir in sight. But in the same book that bemoaned in its title the permanence of racism, Bell closed with an epilogue entitled "Beyond Despair." It seems fitting to award Bell the final word here too, as the best possible response to the deep and evolving challenge of dog whistle racism: "Somehow, as the legacy of our spirituals makes clear,

our enslaved ancestors managed to retain their humanity as well as their faith that evil and suffering were not the extent of their destiny—or of the destiny of those who would follow them. Indeed we owe our existence to their perseverance, their faith. In these perilous times we must do no less than they did: fashion a philosophy that both matches the unique dangers we face, and enables us to recognize in those dangers opportunities for committed living and humane service."³⁹