

Introduction

On November 5, 2008, the nation awoke to headlines, such as that of the *New York Times*, that read “OBAMA. Racial Barrier Falls in Heavy Turnout.” For many, the near-prophetic election of an African American to the highest position in the land is a watershed moment that confirms the declining significance of both race and racism in the nation. Accordingly, a wide variety of activists, cultural critics, and political pontificators issued pronouncements to that effect. Just after the election, Adam Geller of *USA Today* wrote, “The principle that all men are created equal has never been more than a remote eventuality in the quest for the presidency. . . . [T]hat ideal is no longer relegated to someday. Someday is now.” Approximately a year later, just after Obama’s January 2010 State of the Union speech, MSNBC’s Chris Matthews blurted out, “I forgot he was black tonight for an hour. . . . I said wait a minute, he’s an African American guy in front of a bunch of other white people.”

Despite the utopian proclamations that we now live in either a “color-blind” or a “post-racial” country, social-scientific research illuminates the grim reality that racial biases are more entrenched than ever. For example, white hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan have been on an unprecedented rise, which many scholars attribute to the outcome of the 2008 election. In early 2011, Donald Trump built a run for the Republican Party’s presidential candidate almost exclusively on the racist and xenophobic notion that Barack Obama was not born in the United States and that his educational entrance to, and accomplishments at, Columbia and Harvard were neither merited nor authentic. By the fall of 2011, the *Washington Post* broke a story that GOP candidate Rick Perry’s family rented Texas property with “Niggerhead” painted across a large rock that sat at the property’s gated entrance. By February of 2012, a federal judge sent an admittedly racist e-mail about

Obama from his official courthouse e-mail account to several friends, and in June of 2012 the head of a Tea Party group in Arkansas stepped down after telling a racist joke at a political rally.

If all of these events are taken together, the core conclusion appears paradoxical. On the one hand, a positive change in dominant attitudes dislodges Jim Crow ideology and now calls for integration and equality. On the other hand, stereotypes of and prejudices toward African Americans pervade the populace. Thus, deep polarization over the appropriate social-policy response to racial inequality yields an ongoing legacy of tension and division.

In this book we set the “post-racial” claims into relief against a background of pre- and post-election racial animus directed at Barack Obama, his administration, and African Americans in general. In specific, we examine how racial fears, coded language, and explicit as well as implicit (automatic/subconscious) racism are drawn upon and manipulated by the political Right. Racial meanings are reservoirs rich in political currency, and the Right’s replaying of the “race card” still serves as a potent resource for “othering” the first black president in a context rife with nativism, xenophobia, racial fatigue, and white backlash.

We pay particular attention to racial discourse among those on the political Right and to how that discourse is employed to oppose and hinder the presidency of Barack Obama. Certainly, this unprecedented opposition, if not obstruction, on the part of one political party toward a president of the United States might be seen as a result of the staunch opposition to his policies and the direction in which he points the country. Some, certainly many on the political Right, will argue that race is an insignificant issue in our supposed “post-racial” era—or that, if it is an issue, it is one that works to Obama’s benefit. While American voters elected Obama president, some also cast a ballot as much for the washing away of what Condoleezza Rice termed America’s “birth defect” (slavery) and all that flowed from it. To counter this reading, we provide an analysis of the political Right and its opposition to Obama from the vantage point of its rhetoric, a history of the evolution of the two-party system and its relation to race, and social-scientific research on the relationship between race and political ideology. What we conclude is that while political conservatives may certainly disagree with Obama’s policies, their disagreement does not seem to account for the

outright hostility toward Obama expressed by both grass-roots conservatives and their political leaders. Accordingly, now Obama must govern a “post-racial” country that is anything but—one in which the opposition party, from the bottom up, may be heavily influenced by race and racial animus toward Obama.

Let us take a moment to clarify our intention in this book. We stand as neither hard-line apologists for, nor avid critics of, the Obama administration. From our standpoint, there is much about Obama’s policies to both celebrate and castigate. In some ways, Obama is the black face of American empire and hierarchy. He has stepped up imperialist policies in Afghanistan and other nations, supported drone attacks that violate constitutional freedoms and rights for citizens, engaged in mass immigrant deportation, stalled on the closing of Guantanamo prison and on ending “extreme interrogation methods,” and put forth a health care reform policy that will help some black and brown people (and those of any color among the lower class) but is a policy that was previously advocated by the Republican Party and that reflects some of the least progressive health-care legislation put on the table in quite some time. And in terms of race, he has moved gingerly and even in a reactionary way, no doubt fettered by his right-wing opponents, who would pounce on any racially progressive statement from his mouth. Hence, in his address to the NAACP centennial convention in July 2009, Obama stated that the United States possesses “structural inequalities” and is mired in a “legacy of discrimination” and yet bookended those realities with the conservative talking point that those barriers can be overcome with enough focused willpower and that “your destiny is in your hands.” Obama’s presidency represents a double helix, the national DNA of race. His presidency is polarized by boot-strapping hyper-individualism on the one hand and a robust commitment to collective equality on the other. For example, after the arrest of African American Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr., Obama said that the police acted “stupidly.” Days later (after outcry from the Right), he changed tack and said that he should “have calibrated those words differently,” and then days after that—in a moment of flaccid multiculturalism divorced from consideration of asymmetrical race relations—Obama called a “beer summit” at the White House with Gates, the arresting officer, and his vice president.

There is much to critique in Obama's "post-racial" persona. Our point is neither to uncritically support Obama or the Democratic Party nor to single out the GOP for criticism. Our analysis is not hampered or bounded by the divisions of electoral politics. Rather, we draw attention to the fact that in spite of Obama's tightrope act on the question of race, coupled with many of his right-leaning policies, the Right has actively critiqued him—and from a place of implicit racial bias. Now, it is certainly a mistake to focus *all* of our attention on the Birther movement, the Tea Party, and the radical right wing of the GOP. After all, an October 2012 poll by the Associated Press found that 51 percent of Americans express explicit antiblack attitudes (a rise from 48 percent in a similar 2008 survey). And when implicit racial attitudes were measured, the number of Americans with antiblack sentiments jumped to 56 percent—a 7 percent rise from 2008. Still, these antiblack biases were inflected by political worldviews. While 32 percent of Democrats expressed explicit racial prejudice against blacks and 55 percent held implicit antiblack biases, those numbers rose to 79 percent and 64 percent, respectively, for Republicans. Accordingly, our analysis dives into the heart of antiblack prejudice and should not be read as a dismissal of the subtle or liberal forms of racism among the Left and independents.

Grass-roots opposition to Obama has found expression and growth through implicit and explicit race baiting from the Right. The rise of the Birthers, and that of their cousin the Tea Party Movement, together signal the rise of a Second Southern Strategy—a replaying of the 1940s, '50s, and '60s GOP strategy of winning elections by exploiting anti-African American racism and fears of a growing federal government among southern white voters. As one of the key strategists for Nixon, Kevin Phillips, stated in 1968, "Who needs Manhattan when we can get the electoral votes of eleven Southern states?" Those eleven states were the Old Confederacy. Phillips continued, "Put those together with the Farm Belt and the Rocky Mountains, and we don't need the big cities. We don't even want them. Sure, Hubert [Humphrey] will carry Riverside Drive in November. La-de-dah. What will he do in Oklahoma?"¹

Over the past forty-plus years, the ground to nurture this strategy has already proven fertile. For example, during the 2008 primary and general election, there was already a strong rejection of Obama in counties (concentrated in the South) with high proportions of "unhyphenated

Americans”—whites who claim no foreign ethnic ancestry and identify simply as “American.” Right-wing grass-roots activism has relied heavily upon this voting bloc in mounting opposition to Obama and the Democratic Party. Such racial fear and apprehension is deeply embedded in our national culture. For centuries people have argued that blacks lack the capacity to govern. Right-wing reactions to the election of Obama, especially within the Birther movement, certainly have many facets, but at their core resides the implicit conflation of whiteness and citizenship that ipso facto marginalizes and “others” nonwhites from being the most cherished citizen in the land—citizen president, representative, and leader. Simply put, Barack Obama does not fit most Americans’ implicit idea of an authentic American.

Viewing the matter in this light, it would be a mistake to dismiss the Right as either ignorant, irrational folks on the fringe or a cadre driven by intentional and conscious racial animus. Racism is neither the domain of a few irrational people nor is it predicated upon conscious intentions. Rather, a proper analysis looks to the ways political movements both rely upon and reproduce racist imagery, representations, and symbols (such as apes, witch doctors, fried chicken, watermelons, etc.) under the pretense that their cause is racially neutral or even color-blind.

For example, in December 2008, Chip Saltsman—candidate for chairman of the Republican National Committee—sent a compact disc to committee members featuring the song “Barack the Magic Negro,” a parody of the Peter, Paul, and Mary song “Puff the Magic Dragon.” In October 2008, the Chaffey Community Republican Women of Upland, California (an area in San Bernardino County) mailed a newsletter to two hundred club members that depicted Barack Obama on a ten-dollar “food stamp.” Also on the food stamp was a bucket of fried chicken, a piece of watermelon, spare ribs, and a pitcher of Kool-Aid—all stereotypes of “black” food that carry the racist connotation that blacks cannot control themselves from overconsumption of these items. The organization’s president, Diane Fedele, indicated that she had no idea why anyone would take offense to the image, stating, “It was just food to me. It didn’t mean anything else.” Around the same time, Los Alamitos, California’s Republican mayor, Dan Grose, was pressured to resign from his position after sending a racially coded e-mail labeled “No Easter egg

hunt this year.” The e-mail contained the picture of the White House lawn being decorated as a watermelon patch, rather than with the traditional colored eggs associated with Easter. Watermelons have been, since at least the nineteenth century, associated with blacks, as it was commonly believed that blacks could not resist them and would steal them given the chance. Grose, however, acted shocked that the e-mail was taken to be racist and claimed that the e-card was a commentary on the president’s fiscal plan.

Even those with presidential aspirations got into the mix. In the spring of 2011, Donald Trump cast himself as a Birther—questioning the legitimacy of Obama’s national origin—and also questioned whether he was a mere affirmative action beneficiary and not intellectually equipped to compete at Columbia University and Harvard Law School, Obama’s two alma maters. Prior to announcing his final position on whether or not he would run for the presidency, Trump launched an attack against Obama concerning his birthplace. By adopting claims made previously by other skeptics about the legitimacy of Obama’s constitutional rights to the presidency, Trump framed the focus of his presidential announcement. After forcing the release of not only the president’s Certification of Live Birth but also the Long Form Birth Certificate, Trump took pride in this “accomplishment” and in finally ending the controversial topic that prevented media highlighting of potential political agendas. Before these topics would be approached, however, Trump also insisted on testing the validity of the documents due to the president’s hesitancy about a public release. As the majority of conspiracies were disproven with the release of the two official birth documents, Trump moved from citizenship to academics. Now Trump, within months and even within days of the November 2012 election, demanded that the president’s transcripts be released in order to disprove Trump’s claims of Obama’s academic mediocrity and to dispel the supposed mysteries surrounding his educational background.

These brief examples are part of a trend in which conservative voices engage in opposition and obstruction toward a president of the United States. By “conservative,” we mean Republican, Libertarian, Tea Party, and other officially unaffiliated, yet decidedly right-wing, groups and individuals, and we outline the way they use racialized fears, code words, and animus to advance a specific political cause. That cause is

often detailed by a political agenda supportive of brands of evangelical Christianity (that favor school prayer and oppose both abortion and homosexuality), principles of limited regulation (that desire small government, low taxes, and free-enterprise capitalism), and generally support restrictions on immigration, favor a strong military, and are skeptical of scientific thought.

In specific, in this book we move step by step through the process by which racialized discourse is used in subtle and sometimes overt ways, generally reproducing a dangerous and white-supremacist ideology and practice. This process has at least four dimensions. First, people of color, especially African Americans in general and Barack Obama in specific, are reconstructed as dysfunctional, pathological, social pariahs that threaten the very foundations of Western democracy and civilization. Second, specific performances of white racial identity are deemed the manifestations of morality and are often conflated with authentic and moral forms of US citizenship and patriotism. Third, whites are constructed as the proper administrators and caretakers of an increasingly diverse society. Here, whiteness emerges as the paternalistic savior of the nation, if not the world, and whites should be left to their own devices to govern and decide what is best for others. Fourth, white people and white culture are framed as the embattled victims of a politically correct and totalitarian society in which whites can't simply speak their mind or exercise basic human rights under the leadership of Obama. These dimensions of black dysfunction, white patriotism, white paternalism, and white victimhood together reveal the existence of a *Herrenvolk* (white master race) democracy in the midst of the supposed "post-racial" era of Barack Obama.

To explore how these dimensions have played out in conservative discourse about Obama, we present a multifaceted approach. Chapter 1 presents a brief overview of race and the Republican Party that covers the evolution of the US two-party system and the central role that racial identity, conflict, and politics have played in that evolution. Chapter 2 examines the latest stage in overt right-wing responses to Obama in the forms of the Birther and Tea Party movements. Chapter 3 then takes on the right-wing media—from cable TV to conservative radio—to examine how the discursive structure of this institution maps anti-Obama racial discourse onto political debates. Chapter 4 provides an overview

of how the GOP—in the context of attitudinal support for racial equality—reengineered overt racist messaging into subtle and implicit racial appeals throughout political campaigns over the past forty years. Chapter 5 affords a review of the social-science research on political ideology and racial attitudes to demonstrate the effectiveness of racial messages in influencing human action and attitudes. We cover how racial bias quite often resides in the minds of even those who profess racial egalitarianism, with 70–90 percent of whites and even 35–65 percent of blacks harboring automatic/unconscious racial biases in favor of whites and against blacks. And while there is little distinction between liberals and conservatives in implicit racial attitudes, research indicates that conservatives appear to sit more comfortably than liberals with the racial biases they hold. In chapter 6, the penultimate in our treatise, we make four key arguments about racial bias and the law: (1) lawsuits alleging that Obama is not a US citizen are undergirded by unconscious biases that more easily associate whites, versus blacks, with symbols of America; (2) unconscious racial bias is a primary predictor of opposition to Obama's efforts to pass various forms of legislation; (3) images of Obama associating him with various forms of primates serve to unconsciously dehumanize him among onlookers, putting him at greater risk for assassination; and (4) Obama's election and the resulting backlash demonstrate, more than ever, the continued significance of race in electoral politics, which likely reverberates to congressional elections. And in conclusion, we argue that much of the aftermath of the 2012 reelection of Obama demonstrates the continued conflation of whiteness with US citizenship.

But such racial ideology does not permeate the ether. An unvarying form of racism does not robotically control us or lurk evenly within all our heads. While there is some social-scientific work out there that would come close to making such claims, we find such a view untenable. Expressed racial biases, whether conscious or unconscious, do not exist in ahistorical or acultural vacuums and, as a result, are rarely automatic. Rather, the political racism we cover in this book is indicative of a shared, intersubjective, and cultural phenomenon that is often measurable through implicit and explicit bias tests, as well as within the rhetoric and discourse expressed in the context of political debates, and in the materially unequal society we call the American economy.

Racialized politics are certainly hegemonic and widely shared, but such systematic racism is institutionalized in our political processes and discourse inasmuch as it exists in our shared ideological frameworks. And on the macro and the micro levels both, racism's presence and salience vary by context, by interaction, by institution, and certainly by what different political ideologies are at play and what interests are known to be at stake.