

**DOG WHISTLE
POLITICS**

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

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The False Allure of Colorblindness

Why do so many whites respond to the dog whistle refrain that they, and not minorities, are today's most likely victims of racial discrimination? Colorblindness helps to legitimate the substance of dog whistle complaints because it promotes understandings of race and racism that obscure discrimination against nonwhites and magnify the ostensible mistreatment of whites.

“Is your baby racist?” The question blared from the cover of *Newsweek Magazine* in September 2009, eight months after the inauguration of the nation's first black president. The accompanying story reported on several recent studies showing that young children not only notice race, they repeat painful stereotypes. In one study, a researcher recruited roughly 100 families from Austin, Texas; all of the families were white, with children between the ages of five and seven. When the children were asked how many white people were “mean,” they commonly answered “almost none.” But when asked how many blacks were mean, many answered “some” or “a lot.” The thrust of the article seemed to be that children possess racial biases. However eye-catching the title, though, it pointed in the wrong direction—at infants and little children rather than adults. The core of the article focused on parenting strategies, and especially on the desire to raise children to be colorblind—to be blind to race. The parents were *not* teaching their children to be bigots. Instead, they were doing their utmost to teach their children to reject racism by studiously ignoring race. Yet, even in a liberal bastion like Austin, it wasn't working.

Today the dominant etiquette around race is colorblindness. It has a strong moral appeal, for it laudably envisions an ideal world in which race is no longer relevant to how we perceive or treat each other. It also has an intuitive

practical appeal: to get beyond race, colorblindness urges, the best strategy is to immediately stop recognizing and talking about race. But it is especially as a strategy that colorblindness fails its liberal adherents. We cannot will ourselves to un-see something that we've already seen. In turn, refusing to talk about a powerful social reality doesn't make that reality go away, but it does leave confused thinking unchallenged, in ourselves and in others. The Austin children exemplify this. Differences in race—including physical variation and its connection to social position—resemble differences in gender: they are plainly visible to new minds eager to make sense of the world around them. When unexplained, however, children (and our unconscious minds) are left susceptible to the power of stereotypes. As the *Newsweek* authors conclude, “children see racial differences as much as they see the difference between pink and blue—but we tell kids that ‘pink’ means for girls and ‘blue’ is for boys. ‘White’ and ‘black’ are mysteries we leave them to figure out on their own.”

We should also acknowledge that colorblindness has an additional appeal: it seems to provide a safe route through the minefield of race relations. Many whites are understandably nervous to talk about race at all, though especially in racially mixed company. What if they slip and say something that sounds ignorant, or worse, bigoted? Simply avoiding race altogether seems to offer a solution. Yet those who adopt a colorblind strategy often come across as *more* racially hostile, not less. Refusing to acknowledge obvious social differences creates an impression of suppressed dislike, and studies have shown that whites who studiously avoid mentioning race even when it is clearly relevant are perceived as more bigoted.² Perhaps this contributed to how the Austin children came to interpret their parents' racial attitudes, after their parents tried so hard to suppress references to race. Asked “do your parents like black people,” more than half either said “no, my parents don't like black people,” or simply answered, “I don't know.” The researchers remarked, “in this supposed race-free vacuum being created by parents, kids were left to improvise their own conclusions—many of which would be abhorrent to their parents.”³

If colorblindness seems to backfire, is there something that *does* help our children—and us—navigate the dangerous shoals of race? Yes: talking openly about racial differences and what they might mean. Psychological research shows that cognitive biases in social judgment “can be controlled only through subsequent, deliberate ‘mental correction’ that takes group status squarely into account.”⁴ The Austin researchers reached a similar conclusion, for they urged parents to use in the racial context the express methods they employ to help children overcome gender stereotypes. “Parents are very comfortable talking to their children about gender, and they work very hard to counterprogram

against boy-girl stereotypes. That ought to be our model for talking about race. The same way we remind our [children], ‘Mommies can be doctors just like daddies,’ we ought to be telling all children that doctors can be any skin color. It's not complicated what to say. It's only a matter of how often we reinforce it.”⁵ In other words, best practices in the area of race involve doing the opposite of what colorblindness seems to command. We must notice and talk about race, self-critically and carefully, in order to understand and attempt to set aside its power over our imaginations.

As the Austin families found out, colorblindness fails as a strategy for transcending race on an interpersonal level. It's bad advice for those genuinely endeavoring to eliminate racism from their lives.

It's also bad advice for those seeking to comprehend and respond to dog whistle politics. Dog whistling cannot be resisted by refusing to talk about race, for this only leaves constant racial insinuations unchallenged, operating in the background to panic many whites. Indeed, dog whistle racism is not only protected by colorblindness, it rests fundamentally on colorblind mythmaking.

Much more than a racial etiquette, colorblindness provides a powerful framework shaping how people think about race and racism, and in doing so it helps give credence to dog whistle themes. Part of the power of colorblindness comes from its liberal origins and its close association with civil rights heroes, a linkage conservatives constantly belabor. Beyond this, the potency of colorblindness comes from what it teaches about racial discrimination, lessons almost always gleaned at the level of commonsense. Under the umbrella of colorblindness, ideas regarding race and racism geared toward protecting the superior position of whites in society have evolved significantly since the civil rights era. After tracing the history and conservative hijacking of colorblindness, this chapter focuses on bringing to the surface the core stories colorblindness spins—about the end of discrimination against minorities, the blame they deserve for their inferior social positions, the innocence of contemporary whites, and their racial victimization. These narratives undergird dog whistle politics in its effort to portray nonwhites as threats and whites as imperiled.

■ COLORBLINDNESS: FROM RADICAL TO REACTIONARY

The term “colorblind” comes to us from Justice John Marshall Harlan's lone dissent in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the 1896 case that announced the “separate but equal” standard that sanctioned racial segregation throughout society.⁶ Louisiana had recently enacted a law requiring that black and white railroad passengers ride in

separate cars; turning back a challenge to this law as naked racial discrimination, eight justices voted to uphold it, thereby ensuring decades of group debasement symbolized and fortified by legally enforced segregation. Harlan dissented and declared—in what amounted to aspiration rather than description—that “Our Constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens.”⁷

Today, conservative advocates of colorblindness use this term as a shorthand for their opposition to affirmative action. They contend that colorblindness means government should never take race into account, not even as a way to promote racial equality. In 2007, the conservative Supreme Court justices blocked public school districts from considering race when assigning pupils to schools, even when seeking to maintain hard-won integration. Justifying this rigid rule, Justice Clarence Thomas proclaimed himself “quite comfortable with the company I keep. My view of the Constitution is Justice Harlan’s view in *Plessy*: ‘Our Constitution is color-blind.’”⁸

Thomas’ invocation of Harlan to oppose integration is misplaced. First, Harlan clearly never meant to proscribe *all* governmental uses of race. Rather, Harlan advocated colorblindness to limit excessive oppression, in the context of what he supposed would be the eternal reign of white supremacy. He began the very paragraph in which he invoked colorblindness as follows: “The white race deems itself to be the dominant race in this country. And so it is, in prestige, in achievements, in education, in wealth and in power. So, I doubt not, it will continue to be for all time.”⁹ Harlan approved of many government racial restrictions that codified what he perceived as the natural inferiority of blacks. Some years before *Plessy*, Harlan had voted to uphold an Alabama law forbidding interracial marriage.¹⁰ And two years after *Plessy*, Harlan wrote an opinion supporting a whites-only high school.¹¹ Harlan’s famous dissent was not a call that the country literally become blind to race; quite the contrary. Perceiving a world where racial hierarchy was fixed, Harlan interpreted the Constitution to allow society to mark boundaries around those naturally relegated to the bottom. Even so, unlike his brethren, he objected to extreme civic exclusion. Harlan opposed the segregated train cars at issue in *Plessy* because he felt they unfairly limited the capacity of blacks to participate in civil life and the marketplace, not because he opposed any governmental use of race, and certainly not because he thought, as contemporary colorblindness doctrine asserts, that the Constitution forbade state efforts to ameliorate racism.¹²

Notwithstanding Harlan’s own limited conception of colorblindness, as the civil rights movement gathered steam in the 1940s, its leading lawyers seized on “colorblindness” to challenge Jim Crow. The phrase “Our Constitution is

color-blind” carried important rhetorical force, for in its simple declarative form it seemed to command an immediate end to all government laws mandating racial segregation. Thurgood Marshall, as lead counsel for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, repeatedly encouraged his colleagues to cite Harlan’s famous aphorism. One lawyer recalled that the *Plessy* dissent was Marshall’s “Bible to which he turned during his most depressed moments. . . . I do not believe we ever filed a major brief in the pre-*Brown* days in which a portion of that opinion was not quoted. Marshall’s favorite quotation was, ‘Our Constitution is color-blind.’ . . . It became our basic creed.”¹³ Clarence Thomas uses “colorblindness” more in the manner of Thurgood Marshall than John Harlan, as an argument against *all* government uses of race. Yet there is a crucial difference: Marshall did so when states overwhelmingly used race to humiliate and exclude; Thomas does so now that government virtually only employs race to remedy centuries of racism.

In 1954, the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* overturned *Plessy* and formally ended school segregation. Notably, though, the justices did *not* adopt a colorblind bar on all government uses of race. Adopting strict colorblindness would have battered apart the entire edifice of segregation laws at once. The Supreme Court preferred to dismantle segregation “with all deliberate speed.”¹⁴ Put bluntly, this reflected a decision to temporize: the Court feared taking on too much too rapidly. If particularly sought to avoid abruptly declaring unconstitutional the emotional core of white supremacy—the ban on interracial marriage. Just after *Brown*, the Court used a procedural feint to avoid deciding a miscegenation case.¹⁵ Only piecemeal and over time did the Court extend *Brown* to completely outlaw segregation, waiting over 13 years before it finally knocked down laws banning marriage between whites and persons of different races in *Loving v. Virginia*.¹⁶

Ironically, while the Court initially eschewed colorblind reasoning in order to protect segregation from too sudden an assault, over time the decision not to flatly prohibit government distinctions based on race came to seem wise for the goals of racial justice. By the mid-1960s, it was clear that through state subterfuge and social convention, racial segregation readily continued even absent laws expressly mandating it. As late as 1965, 11 years after school segregation was declared unconstitutional, fewer than 1 in 100 black students in the South attended schools formerly white by law, and the number of whites in predominantly black schools was infinitesimally small.¹⁷ Though absolute colorblindness had been their watchword for decades, in the late 1960s civil rights lawyers dropped this demand. Instead, they began to stress the necessity of actively taking race into account to promote meaningful integration. This meant more

than getting the Court to move faster than “with all deliberate speed.” It meant actively pursuing integration through measures that used race as a tool, including through race-conscious placements of students, teachers, and administrators, and through the race-conscious allocation of resources.

Race-conscious efforts to promote integration reflected a basic insight about racial inequality: outlawing mistreatment was a step in the right direction, but by itself would not significantly correct settled disadvantage. Martin Luther King, Jr., expressed this idea using the metaphor of a foot race. In his 1964 book *Why We Can't Wait*, King lamented:

whenever the issue of compensatory or preferential treatment for the Negro is raised, some of our friends recoil in horror. The Negro should be granted equality, they agree; but he should ask for nothing more. On the surface, this appears reasonable, but it is not realistic. For it is obvious that if a man is entered at the starting line in a race three hundred years after another man, the first would have to perform some impossible feat in order to catch up with his fellow runner.¹⁸

For King, and for the civil rights movement more generally, the goal was not merely to end formal segregation, but to break the deep connection between race and disadvantage. Simply declaring segregation laws illegal would not make African Americans “equal” in the eyes of a society steeped in degrading views of nonwhites. Nor would the end of formal segregation by itself equip a people hobbled by centuries of oppression to singlehandedly overcome the economic legacy of racism, especially in a society still accustomed to reserving the best jobs, neighborhoods, and schools for whites. Widespread acceptance of the supposed inferiority of blacks and the concrete realities of a stratified society combined to limit the life chances of those glibly declared “equal” and “free” the moment Jim Crow laws were struck down. As King recognized, true equality would be a long-term, arduous process. In this effort, policies and programs that used race as a basis for planning, for the distribution of resources and contracts, and for the allocation of spots in universities and workplaces, provided the most direct way to begin the process of social repair.

THE RISE OF CONSERVATIVE COLORBLINDNESS

Brown's command to end segregation provoked fervent opposition in the South, including political posturing by demagogic politicians like George Wallace and race riots by whites—and it also engendered a conservative reworking

of colorblindness. Marshall himself had worried that colorblindness had an Achilles heel. While a colorblind ruling had the potential to overturn at once all segregation laws, it seemed to require no more than an end to such laws, not actual integration.¹⁹ For the government to be technically colorblind, it need do nothing more than avoid direct references to race in its laws. This insight was scarcely lost on the recalcitrant South. A federal district court in South Carolina articulated a colorblind argument against integration as early as 1955: “The Constitution . . . does not require integration. It merely forbids discrimination. It does not forbid such segregation as occurs as the result of voluntary action. It merely forbids the use of governmental power to enforce segregation.”²⁰ From here, it was but a short logical jump to the contention that colorblindness *prohibited* race-conscious integration measures. In 1965, the same court approvingly quoted the conclusion that “the Constitution is color-blind; it should no more be violated to attempt integration than to preserve segregation.”²¹ Thus by 1965, a conservative form of colorblindness had emerged: according to the newest friends of the theory, the Constitution forbade any state use of race, whether to segregate or—and this was the real agenda—to integrate.

Among these new proponents of colorblindness was Barry Goldwater. In October 1964, Goldwater was preparing to give his first full address to the nation on civil rights. He had been campaigning in the South on the strength of his vote against the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and now he faced a high-wire routine: On the one hand, he needed the votes of defiant whites and could not risk jeopardizing their support. On the other, he could not afford to come off as a redneck cowboy before the nation as a whole. Goldwater struck a balance: he would stick to his opposition to integration, but would dress it up in a tuxedo and give it a haircut. He decided to deliver his remarks at a \$100-a-plate fundraiser, anticipating that the well-heeled assembly would avoid awkward outbursts supporting segregation.

To costume his position, Goldwater sought assistance trimming his language, enlisting a Phoenix lawyer named William Rehnquist to help write the speech.²² Rehnquist was an outspoken critic of civil rights, with a track record going back to *Brown* itself. When that case was first argued, Rehnquist had been a law clerk to one of the justices hearing it, and had written a memo urging that segregation be upheld, averring that “*Plessy v. Ferguson* was right and should be re-affirmed.”²³ But in the decade since, Rehnquist had moderated his language, and by 1964 he couched his opposition to civil rights as support for property rights (that is, the right of property owners to discriminate racially), making him an ideal choice to help Goldwater recalibrate his message. Entitled “Civil

Rights and the Common Good," the talk reprised the property rights argument, but also took another rhetorical turn, masterfully co-opting the language of civil rights to oppose integration as a moral evil. "It has been well-said that the Constitution is color-blind," Goldwater began, before according that hallowed phrase its perverse new meaning: "And so it is just as wrong to compel children to attend certain schools for the sake of so-called integration as for the sake of segregation."²⁴ His audience knew what he meant: government should not use race to impose integration on unwilling whites. Despite their polished cufflinks and pearls, the crowd roared approval, "letting loose a hail of wolf whistles and throaty cries that raised the roof."²⁵

When this reactionary version of colorblindness first reached the Supreme Court, it met unequivocal rejection. By this time, the Court included Thurgood Marshall, who had been appointed by Lyndon Johnson. In 1971, a unanimous Court overturned a North Carolina law requiring "color blind" school assignments, deeming it merely the latest stragem to avoid integration. Seeing through this cynical maneuver, the Court warned against laws that "control school assignment plans by directing that they be 'color blind'; that requirement, against the background of segregation, would render illusory the promise of *Brown v. Board of Education*." The Court explained, "Just as the race of students must be considered in determining whether a constitutional violation has occurred, so also must race be considered in formulating a remedy. To forbid, at this stage, all assignments made on the basis of race would deprive school authorities of the one tool absolutely essential to fulfillment of their constitutional obligation to eliminate existing dual school systems."²⁶

This stand against reactionary colorblindness did not hold. Nixon appointed four justices to the Court. We've now met two. The first was Lewis Powell, the author of the memorandum urging corporations to create their own indebted intelligentsia. The second was William Rehnquist, the *Plessy* supporter and Goldwater speechwriter—and, it bears adding, Ronald Reagan's eventual choice to serve as Chief Justice, a post he held from 1986 until his death in 2005. These appointments sharply changed the Court's political composition, especially with regard to civil rights. By 1978, now on the losing side, Justice Marshall found himself urging his new colleagues to reject race-blindness as a bar on affirmative action: "It is because of a legacy of unequal treatment that we now must permit the institutions of this society to give consideration to race in making decisions about who will hold the positions of influence, affluence, and prestige in America."²⁷ Marshall did not prevail, either for colorblindness as a NAACP lawyer fighting segregation, or against it as a Supreme Court justice seeking to protect an essential means of promoting integration. Instead

over the last few decades conservative justices have steered the Court toward a colorblind vision in which, as we see next, racism against minorities is over while racism against whites is rampant.

TODAY'S REACTIONARY CONSTITUTION

In the late 1960s, a structural conception of racism began to take hold, briefly influencing equality law. For instance, this view gained national prominence in 1968 when the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders published what became popularly known as the Kerner Report. Seeking to explain the devastating riots marching across the country, from Los Angeles in 1965, to Chicago in 1966, to Newark in 1967, the report famously warned that the United States was "moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal." Butressing this claim, the report detailed the punishing reality confronting African Americans, compiling over 500 pages of evidence on the extreme material hardships of overt discrimination, segregated and inferior schooling, inadequate housing, lack of access to health care, systemic police violence, and labor market exclusion. More than simply painting the harrowing circumstances confronting blacks, the report identified its root cause not in blacks themselves but in American racial dynamics. Focusing particularly on the ghetto, the report stated on its first page that "segregation and poverty have created in the racial ghetto a destructive environment totally unknown to most white Americans. . . . White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it."²⁸

This conception of structural racism began to penetrate the legal field, for instance with a key decision in 1971 holding that outcomes, not just intentions, mattered in cases challenging discrimination. In *Griggs v. Duke Power*, a large Southern employer had long expressly restricted blacks to menial work, organizing its workforce to ensure that no black would earn as much as the lowest-paid white employee. After Congress enacted the 1964 Civil Rights Act forbidding racial discrimination in employment, the company complied only nominally, adopting hiring requirements that on their face no longer referred to race but that effectively preserved the established racial hierarchy. Still, the company's new procedures were technically neutral, and this challenged the courts to look behind the surface at actual social patterns, including outcomes. In *Griggs*, the Supreme Court found the company liable for discrimination, warning that "good intent or absence of discriminatory intent does not redeem employment procedures or testing mechanisms that operate as 'built-in headwinds' for minority groups."²⁹ By condemning "built-in headwinds," the decision seemed

to herald a concern with structural discrimination in addition to express exclusion and naked bigotry.

As it turned out, *Griggs* represented the high-water mark for antidiscrimination law. Over the remainder of the decade, conservatives on the Court, including Powell and Rehnquist, chipped away at the standard for proving discrimination against nonwhites. By 1979, the Court had embraced the "racism as hate" model we continue to struggle under today, demanding proof of malice on the part of a culpable actor.³⁰ This bar is almost insurmountable. Absent a recorded use of a racial epithet or an in-court confession, malice is virtually impossible to prove. For instance, in a 1987 death penalty case the Court weighed a Georgia system that was 22 times more likely to impose capital punishment on an African American convicted of murdering a white victim than a black victim.³¹ The Court deemed this stark racial disparity irrelevant. It also dismissed as immaterial that this statistical pattern strongly correlated with social practices of white-over-black hierarchy stretching back to slavery. Refusing to even engage this evidence, the conservatives on the Court stubbornly maintained that the sole measure of racism was proof of malice, and then they upheld Georgia's death penalty machinery. Under the Court's approach to discrimination against nonwhites, only a bullheaded bigot who publicly vows to harm minorities should worry; no one else need fret. Since the Supreme Court adopted the malice test in 1979, it has never found discrimination against nonwhites under that approach, not even once.³² As far as the Court is concerned, racism against nonwhites must involve proclaimed animus, and that has all but disappeared.

What, then, of supposed discrimination against whites? In 1977 the Court for the first time fully considered a challenge to race-conscious affirmative action when it weighed the legality of New York's decision to create a majority-nonwhite voting district. The Court applied its developing intentional harm rule. Then, saying it could discern "no racial slur or stigma with respect to whites or any other race," the Court easily upheld this corrective use of race.³³ The constitutional law seemed clear: all allegations of racial discrimination, whether against nonwhites or whites, would have to meet the same test of intentional harm. But this rule had an unfortunate consequence: at least from the conservative justices' point of view: it readily upheld affirmative action plans. After all, such efforts were designed to remedy racism rather than to oppress whites. If there were incidental harms, these were akin to the ancillary harms that accompany virtually every regulation—matters for legislators to weigh, but far from the sort of purposeful group oppression that the Court demanded nonwhites prove in order to show unconstitutional discrimination.

The next year in *University of California v. Bakke*, Justice Lewis Powell changed the rules. He concluded that in affirmative action cases, intentions did not matter. It was irrelevant, he said, whether a program was motivated by malice or benevolence. Paralleling the Southern use of colorblindness to oppose integration, Powell instead insisted that the constitutional harm occurred the moment that government took express notice of race.³⁴ After *Bakke*, the constitutional law around racial discrimination bifurcated. If the state expressly mentioned race—common almost exclusively in affirmative action programs—then the Court would review the legislation with extreme skepticism, in virtually every case overturning the challenged program. If, however, the government avoided any direct invocation of race—the new normal in discrimination cases—then the Court would demand proof of malice, an insuperable hurdle. A reactionary form of colorblindness became king: quick to condemn all correctives of race, but blind to racial discrimination against minorities.

■ COLORBLINDNESS, RACE, AND RACISM

The contemporary constitutional law on race is a disaster, and yet colorblindness likely does far more damage to the country politically than it does legally, for colorblind conceptions of race and racism bolster dog whistle politics. To fully grasp how so requires a sense of how colorblindness defines race and racism, and this in turn necessitates reviewing how these core concepts continue to evolve.

NATURE OR SOCIETY?

As Harlan's casual endorsement of white supremacy demonstrates, through the nineteenth century the belief in white superiority was pervasive, even among those opposed to dominant forms of racial oppression. During this era, "race" was understood to reflect nature and/or divine command, not human practices. Moreover—and this will be especially important to our discussion of reactionary colorblindness and dog whistle politics—from the outset, race was believed to involve both physical differences *and* distinctions in culture, behavior, and ability. Consider slurs common when Harlan wrote, like "lazy nigger," "dirty Mexican," or "sneaky Chink." These vile terms inseparably conjoined biology and behavior: physical distinctions supposedly corresponded to innate behavioral and cultural deficiencies. Indeed, as a way to justify inequality, race did its most destructive work by emphasizing temperament and ability rather than mere differences in

integument. More than skin pigment, it was nonwhite laziness, filth, mendacity—and, correspondingly, white industry, hygiene, and honor—supposedly explained inferior and superior positions in society.

Related to the belief that races reflected divine intention, or the order, the notion of “racism” was literally unknown at the time. And that concept is a sense of moral censure: racism is unjust. But belief that racial inequality could not be perceived as morally evil until they were as factually wrong. This was impossible to imagine for persons steeped in belief that racial hierarchy was natural or divinely ordained. Thus, Heidegger did not see his own views about the permanent superiority of whites as racism. Racial inequality was simply an obvious fact of life.

As the nineteenth century closed, however, the settled ideas regarding race began to founder. In part, the developing break with supernaturalism reflected increasing problems with racial categories. In North America, people like white, black, and red had long sufficed. They made sense in a world of supposed division of humans according to the world’s continents. Fundamentally, they fulfilled the social need for which they were created: to justify slavery and the usurpation of Native American lands. But the nineteenth century brought Americans into increasing contact with a world full of different peoples, and the inability to fit everyone into formerly self-evident categories began to draw the whole operation into question. Where did persons like the Indian subcontinent belong, or from the Middle East or Polynesia? It was evident that people looked different, did sharp boundaries exist? Obviously, reproductive isolation played a large role in shaping human population groups in close contact often developed shared appearance. Those further apart bore less resemblance. Didn’t these shifts occur naturally, for instance as one moved across the Eurasian landmass, and not necessarily lines suggested by the sharp division between white and yellow? Myrdal and others began to push anthropologists toward skepticism that the world’s people divided neatly into the few overarching racial groups that dominated popular imagination.

Beyond the categorical problem, a more fundamental attack on one that challenged the assumed link between biology and character. At the end of the nineteenth century, social scientists like Franz Boas and William Ogburn increasingly labored to repudiate the supposedly innate connection between physical differences and individual or group capacity. Attempting to bridge the two, they argued that race amounted only to superficial physical differences. As to evident inequalities in group condition—the dominant in every social sphere, and the degraded condition of most non-

whites led to such divergences. In other words, they reversed the causal relationship, rather than inherent differences producing unequal social conditions. These insurgent race critics claimed that social custom created the differences between groups.

In the early twentieth century, these ideas came to define liberal understandings of race. Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma*, published in 1944 to mark the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, marked this ascendance. Myrdal argued that race amounted to superficial differences such as “skin color,” and had little or nothing to do with intelligence, morals, culture, or behavior. Instead, he laid inequalities out as a direct result of differences in social organization, and more specifically, the power of whites over blacks: “Practically all the economic, social, and political power is held by whites. . . . It is thus the white majority group that determines the Negro’s ‘place.’ All our attempts to reach scientific explanations of why the Negroes are what they are and why they live as they do are applied to determinants on the white side of the race line.”³⁵ (One of the most famous Kerner Commission drawings on this insight when it later wrote about “white institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white institutions condones it.”)

Myrdal’s book made the fictional connection between biology and group position a central theme. It was for the widespread emergence of the idea that racial practices were not natural. In other words, ground began opening for the popular acceptance of the notion of “racism.” Meanwhile, at mid-century strong impetus in the United States came from Europe and Asia, where the United States was consistently nations that made racial supremacy central to their propaganda. In Europe, the “Aryan race” was the central concept of Nazi ideology. In Asia, the “Yellow Race” was the central concept of Japanese ideology. In a way that whites had not appreciated when the violent subjugation of darker-skinned nonwhites involved, the utter dehumanization and mass extermination of Jews and Gypsies discredited ideas of racial supremacy. The suddenly obvious evil of the Holocaust was a word into the popular vocabulary of the United States: “Racism.” In his history of that phenomenon, concludes that “the word first came into common usage in the 1930s when a new word was needed to describe the theories on which the Nazis based their persecution of Jews and Gypsies.”³⁶ “Hitler gave racism a bad name.”³⁶

BLOOD, RACISM AS “DIFFERENT TREATMENT”

The colorblindness today draws upon, but also betrays, the liberal understanding of race and racism from the mid-twentieth century. It draws upon

liberal race theory by conceptualizing race as only a superficial physical characteristic. But it betrays liberal thinking on race by rejecting the deep *social* connection between race and group differences. Boas, Du Bois, and Myrdal were not arguing that race was exclusively a matter of skin color and nothing more. They were rebutting the idea that the evident differences between groups—the wealth and power held by many whites, and the misery many nonwhites endured—reflected innate dispositions. Race *did* connect to group position and individual capacity, they argued, but as a result of social practices, not biology. Colorblindness today jettisons this key insight: that social dynamics give race tremendous salience in the lives of individuals and the trajectories of communities. Instead, it simplistically insists that race is only a matter of superficial differences, an idiosyncratic tic like blood type that has no bearing on the dimensions of individual lives or group situations.

Consider Justice Antonin Scalia's argument against affirmative action, made while still a law professor: "I owe no man anything; nor he me," Scalia protested, "because of the blood that flows in our veins."⁷⁷ "Blood" is a powerful metaphor with important liberal antecedents, for instance in the aphorisms: that we all bleed the same, or that everyone's blood is the same color. Used in this way, references to blood emphasize our shared humanity. Scalia proceeds differently. He presents affirmative action as a racial debt ostensibly owed by whites; and objects that it's wrong to hold whites indebted merely because of biology. But no individual or group is held responsible on the basis of biology. Rather, social practices tied to race place racial groups in different relationships to affirmative action. If whites are not directly aided under affirmative action programs, it's because of their social position, not their hemoglobin. As used by Scalia, blood is not an endorsement of our shared humanity so much as a way to posit the complete independence of each individual from the social history around race. References to blood or skin color become techniques for neatly disjointing race from social context and instead portraying race as simply an accident of nature, a distinctive birthmark with no bearing on any particular individual's lived circumstances, nor any connection to hundreds of years of social dynamics. Race-as-blood denies context and history.

This is more than an analytic error; it is a political strategy that undergirds attacks on affirmative action. First, race-as-blood undercuts the liberal arguments for using race to promote integration. Affirmative action seeks to promote integration, which in turn is designed to combat negative stereotypes and to foster interracial solidarity. It also aspires to compensate groups that have long suffered exclusion from schools, neighborhoods, unions, and employment opportunities. Race-conscious remedies also respond to present

structural discrimination and implicit bias, forcing the consideration of race in circumstances where racial disadvantage may be operating. Finally, affirmative action aims to break down structures of inequality that through inertia are otherwise likely to continue into the future. Each of these rationales, though, turns on the connection between race and social practices. Colorblindness denies this connection, discrediting justifications for race-conscious remedies by insisting that race has no relationship whatsoever to social patterns. Then, having shorn affirmative action of its basic rationales, conservatives ridicule it as no more than an effort to assemble a pleasing color palette. It is thus that Clarence Thomas mocks affirmative action as "racial aesthetics," jeering universities for seeking "a certain appearance, from the shape of the desks and tables in its classrooms to the color of the students sitting at them."⁷⁸ By reducing race to blood and thus defining it as strictly and superficially biological, racial reactionaries do not engage so much as sidestep the core arguments supporting affirmative action as a mechanism to correct destructive social hierarchies.

Next, race-as-blood redefines affirmative action as racism against whites. By divorcing race from social context, conservatives can describe racism as merely treating someone *differently* on the basis of race. Racism need not involve abuse or subordination, for the socially irrelevant character of blood suggests that *any* differential treatment is morally wrong. Colorblindness shifts the harm of racism from degradation, exclusion, and exploitation, to being treated differently on the basis of a socially irrelevant characteristic—no matter how benign the motive. Expressing this startling view, Thomas argues that "government-sponsored racial discrimination based on *benign* prejudice is just as noxious as discrimination inspired by *malicious* prejudice. In each instance, it is racial discrimination pure and simple."⁷⁹ Is affirmative action the same thing as Jim Crow segregation? Or the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II? Or Native American genocide? Of course not. Racism's harm lies in dehumanization and violence, not in mere differentiation, and certainly not in racial distinctions made in order to repair racism's painful legacies. The "different treatment" produced by affirmative action lies a chasm apart from the racial violence of segregation, internment, or genocide. Yet by defining race as a superficial characteristic and racism as any use of race, colorblindness misrepresents affirmative action as the moral equivalent of racial oppression.

For however nonsensical, the colorblind conflation of affirmative action and racism has tremendous rhetorical punch. Partly, the power of colorblindness stems from the resonance of the rhetoric itself. Because colorblindness has strong liberal roots, icons of racial justice can be found extolling colorblind ideals. Examples include not only Thurgood Marshall, but Martin Luther King, Jr. His

exhortation that people be judged not "by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" is a favorite among conservatives. Obviously when heralding Marshall and King, today's colorblind partisans neglect to mention that these heroes argued strongly *for* race-conscious remedies. Likewise, conservatives fail to admit that the colorblindness of today does not descend directly from the sanctified civil rights era, but from the unrepentant South, which deployed colorblindness to fight integration tooth and nail. Despite these omissions, or rather because of them, colorblindness has strong appeal insofar as it *sounds* racially enlightened, not racially reactionary.

Beyond this, the popularity of colorblindness stems from casting whites as victims of racism, and from its practical implications in preserving the racial status quo. As Goldwater recognized, like states' rights, colorblindness is a dog whistle. It invokes a higher principle, yet also communicates sympathy for supposedly imperiled whites. The lofty goal behind colorblindness, we are continually reassured, is racial justice. But in practice, just as with states' rights, colorblindness translates into opposition to integration. There are some well-meaning liberals who continue to cling to colorblindness out of loyalty to a utopian vision of a raceless society. But for most fans of colorblindness, its attraction lies in that it sounds fair—even as it fosters the impression that discrimination against whites is rampant, and works assiduously to defeat policies actually geared to achieving integration.

■ ETHNICITY, CULTURE, AND BEHAVIOR

Depicting race as mere skin color helps present affirmative action as racism against whites, but it also leaves racial conservatives in several binds. First, how can they explain what we see all round us? Our society is obviously stratified by race. Look at our ghettos and barrios—or the halls of Congress and the nation's boardrooms. Clearly something must explain white dominance, but what? Maybe continued inequalities reflect some lingering vestige of racism, which in turn implies a social and specifically governmental duty to respond. This produces the second bind: if racism does remain a problem, how can conservatives object to remedying it? More particularly, while they have an argument that affirmative action is itself racist, how can they attack traditional liberal solutions to inequality, such as welfare, job training, housing, education, and the like? What makes these efforts futile, or even unfair to whites? Finally and most importantly to dog whistle politics, how can conservatives talk about race—about why minorities pose a looming threat and how whites

are imperiled—if race is just a matter of skin color? If race is solely a matter of pigment, there's no reason for whites to fear minorities. After all, aren't we all the same? Race-as-blood helps bolster some conservative arguments, but it also strongly undercuts others.

Colorblindness answers by opportunistically switching to another understanding of race, frequently dropping race-as-blood to talk about racial groups as *ethnicities marked by distinct cultures*. To be clear, conservatives do not expressly equate ethnicity and race; indeed, when pushed, they revert to the notion that race is only a matter of superficial biology, and so, deny that racial groups can be defined by distinct cultures. Yet that is only when challenged; otherwise, conservatives routinely employ ethnic terms as a coded way to talk about racial groups and their supposedly incompatible behaviors and beliefs.

Partly because conservatives deny that race is anything more than blood yet constantly use an ethnic vocabulary to discuss group cultures, the popular imagination often confuses race and ethnicity. More focused attention to their relationship shows how, today, the notion of ethnic difference is central to modern racism. Ethnicity provides a basis for blaming minorities for their inferior positions, since it faults their supposedly defective cultures; simultaneously, it exonerates whites, since racism is no longer to blame for inequality. This in turn answers the question of government help: such assistance is futile because only nonwhites can reform their inferior cultures and self-defeating behaviors. Finally, the ethnic turn promotes a new culture talk that surreptitiously resurrects old stereotypes, allowing conservatives to reinvigorate a pernicious aspect of racism: contentions about fundamental differences in behavior and culture between innocent whites and threatening nonwhites.

ETHNICITY

The concept of ethnicity originated in the early twentieth century, when it arose as a means of erasing racial differences among whites.⁴⁰ From its inception, even as "white" developed in contradistinction to black and red, persons of European descent in North America commonly divided themselves along racial lines, with strong beliefs about racial characteristics and racial failings. Slurs like Hun, Mick, Polack, Wop, and Kike recall this phenomenon. During the 1920s, University of Chicago sociologist Robert Park began to challenge this narrative. He used the concept of cultural pluralism, rather than natural difference, to promote a conception of race that stressed the gradual assimilation of diverse groups.⁴¹ Under his view, all immigrant groups followed a similar trajectory from exclusion, clamminess, and poverty to eventual full inclusion, assimilation, and

material success. Park's theories soon spread beyond the academy and helped shape popular conceptions of group integration into American society, butressing the idea of America as a great melting pot. In turn, when World War II demonstrated the horrors of anti-Semitism, this encouraged the adoption in the United States of an ethnic vocabulary that sharply distinguished between race as biology and ethnicity as culture.⁴² Most persons of European descent increasingly came to see themselves as a racially undifferentiated people—that is, as simply white—though also as members of groups defined by local folkways. The verities surrounding fundamental racial differences gave way to new truths that instead saw only trivial ethnic differences, with all of the various European sub-groups supposedly sharing a single racial identity as white, as well as similar histories of struggle and eventual success on America's shores.⁴³

What had been "races" supposedly divided by deep natural differences now became "ethnicities" distinguished only by cultural diversity. This was an advance toward racial egalitarianism, for it erased racial hierarchy among persons of European descent. But it did not transcend race, for undergirding the notion of ethnic equality was the powerful assumption of a shared white racial identity. Ethnicity in the 1940s and 1950s did not cross the color line, but instead operated as a way to foster solidarity among whites.

Nevertheless, as the civil rights movement gathered force in the 1960s, an ethnic vocabulary and more generally a notion of groups defined by distinctive cultures was available as a way to reconceptualize racial dynamics. An extension of ethnicity across the color line might have been a felicitous development, for instance if society had come to see nonwhites in terms of cultural variety and a shared humanity. Instead, though, when ethnicity eventually was applied to nonwhites, it changed form and became another way of explaining unbridgeable difference. Where supremacist conceptions of race attributed minority failings to nature, ethnic conceptions would link virtually the same faults to their culture. Ethnicity ultimately replaced nature with culture, but otherwise left the stereotypes explaining minority inferiority largely untouched.

BLAMING MINORITIES

Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan—the former destined to spend decades at a post at Harvard writing on race and public policy, the latter to become a Democratic Senator from New York famed for his expertise on welfare—helped instigate this ethnic retooling as applied to nonwhites. In 1963, Glazer and Moynihan published a history of New York City, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City*.⁴⁴ This volume effectively laid the groundwork for contemporary

reactionary conceptions of race in the United States, including arguments that nothing should be done to alleviate racial inequality. As evident in the subtitle, Glazer and Moynihan pushed ethnicity across the color line: ethnicity would explain not only the New York histories and contemporary positions of Jews, Italians, and the Irish, but also blacks and Puerto Ricans.⁴⁵ Rather than extend to racial minorities the presumption that they possessed valuable cultures, however, Glazer and Moynihan used ethnicity to locate in their cultures the ultimate source of those groups' social failure.

Consider their explanation for why minority children (unlike earlier white immigrant students) failed to learn in New York's schools:

There is little question where the major part of the answer must be found: in the home and family and community. . . . It is there that the heritage of two hundred years of slavery and a hundred years of discrimination is concentrated, and it is there that we find the serious obstacles to the ability to make use of a free educational system to advance into higher occupations and to eliminate the massive social problems that afflict colored Americans in the city.⁴⁶

Glazer and Moynihan acknowledged the destructive legacy of past racism in distorting the cultures of nonwhite groups. This was an important concession, but one that only half followed the liberal insight from mid-century that tied the situation of nonwhites to past *and present* social practices. Politically, acknowledging the harmful effects of past discrimination was costless, for the most pressing questions centered on present causes of poverty and marginalization, and what that implied for social policy.

In their focus on the present, Glazer and Moynihan largely dropped structural impediments from their analysis. Rather, in "major part" they directed attention to "the home and family and community" for the immediate causes of the inferior educational, social, and material position of racial minorities. Glazer and Moynihan especially emphasized the destructive consequences that flowed from "broken homes" as when:

the mother is forced to work (as the Negro mother so often is), when the father is incapable of contributing support (as the Negro father so often is), when fathers and mothers refuse to accept responsibility for and resent their children, as Negro parents, overwhelmed by difficulties, so often do, and when the family situation, instead of being clear-cut and with defined roles and responsibility, is left vague and ambiguous (as it so often is in Negro families).⁴⁷

This quote from Glazer and Moynihan on the pathologies of the black family may trigger a sense of familiarity. These remarks anticipated by just a couple of years Moynihan's more widely known conclusions regarding blacks and welfare policy; conclusions that ultimately led him, as an official in the Nixon administration, to recommend a policy toward nonwhites of "benign neglect."

Two years after publishing *Beyond the Melting Pot*, Moynihan drew on ethnicity when he published a major paper that would become known as the *Moynihan Report*. Moynihan framed the report around the civil rights movement's increasing demands for equality. These demands, he warned, could not be met because of failings in the black community itself. Moynihan's deeper concern was the black family. It was the "Negro family," Moynihan asserted, that "is the fundamental source of the weakness of the Negro community at the present time." Dysfunction in the black family originated in racism and structural subordination, Moynihan acknowledged, but he argued that group dynamics within the black community perpetuated black misery without any external help from white racism. "At this point," Moynihan concluded, "the present tangle of pathology is capable of perpetuating itself without assistance from the white world."⁴⁸

Moynihan's report showed attention away from the structural components of racism into a bitter, poisonous fight over the health of black family life. The next year, Moynihan waded back into the melee with an article that made eyes-legal clear his normative position: "a community that allows a large number of young men to grow up in broken families, dominated by women, never acquiring any stable relationship to male authority, never acquiring any set of rational expectations about the future—that community asks for and gets chaos. Crime, violence, unrest, disorder . . . that is not only to be expected, but they are very near to inevitable. And it is richly deserved."⁴⁹ Chaos in the black community, Moynihan opined, stemmed from its cultural failings. As to crime, violence, unrest, and disorder, the community got what it richly deserved. Race, and more particularly race as it intersected with gender roles, was once again the prime culprit explaining the failure of minorities.

It is important to emphasize how reactionary this position was. At least since Teddy Roosevelt, prominent progressives had been arguing that forces beyond individual control all too often trapped the poor and the marginalized, and that society had an obligation to remedy to the extent possible these limiting structures to ensure that everyone had a fair shot. This liberal ideal became the dominant political consensus after the brutal experience of the Depression, spinning the salvaging programs of the New Deal. Given racism's history, this sense of

misfortune beyond personal control, in turn implying the need for government assistance, should have applied with particular force to nonwhite communities. But in Moynihan's analysis, it did not. For Moynihan to argue that blacks were the authors of their own failure would seem, in today's world, uncharitable and mean-spirited, something closer to what Newt Gingrich might say. In the mid-1960s, it was earthshaking, for it repudiated the liberal consensus upon which the modern state was predicated.

In this sense, the connection between Moynihan and Gingrich isn't merely faint echoing. Rather, Moynihan's use of culture to blame blacks and to argue that government is powerless to remedy poverty was subsequently carefully cultivated by conservative thinkers, including Charles Murray, Dinesh D'Souza, and Myron Magnet.⁵⁰ They molded the story, downplaying the destructive effects of past racism, and adding the accusation that liberal programs themselves create cultural pathologies in nonwhite communities. The core point, though, endured: minority culture, not racism, explains nonwhite poverty and makes government assistance futile. This has now germinated into a broad political consensus, especially though not exclusively among Republicans.

Whites believed in structural remedies when they saw the poor as people like themselves, folks sometimes trapped by larger forces or bad breaks. They shifted to a belief in personal failings when they began to see the poor as nonwhites fundamentally unlike themselves. Today, conservatives like Gingrich seek to both stroke and exploit the conviction that the poor choose their fate. Pursuing the Republican nomination in 2012, Gingrich argued that laws limiting work by young children, a cornerstone of Teddy Roosevelt's 1910 Square Deal, should be repealed. He explained: "Really poor children in really poor neighborhoods have no habits of working and have nobody around them who works. So they literally have no habit of showing up on Monday. They have no habit of staying all day. They have no habit of 'I do this and you give me cash,' unless it's illegal."⁵¹

The imagery here is Moynihan's, of black children raised in pathologically dysfunctional households that guarantee generation after generation of black poverty. As legal scholar Dorothy Roberts observes, "the powerful Western image of childhood innocence does not seem to benefit Black children. Black children are born guilty. They are potential menaces—criminals, crackheads, and welfare mothers waiting to happen."⁵² Gingrich trades on this imagery, even as he purports to describe poor children in general. And his point is that government cannot help, not even when it seeks to protect young children from the hardship of work. Let them sell their labor in the market for whatever they can get, he advises, for individual effort, even by children, is the only way out of

poverty. The discredited *laissez-faire* ideology of the early twentieth century has come storming back.

To be perfectly clear, the problem is *not* that Moynihan, Gingrich, and others dare to talk about culture. Daily conditions of life inevitably shape ways of living lessons often imparted to the next generation. Thus, it was not that Moynihan completely erred in the basic claim that larger social practices damaged black family life (Gingrich's fact-challenged claims are another matter). Scholars focused on the black community such as E. Franklin Frazier and Kenneth Clark had already said as much decades before.⁵³ Prominent civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., also lamented the harm done to black families. Indeed today critiques of personal failings intertwined with outrage over structural disadvantage continue to form staples of black political thought.⁵⁴ Again, the problem lay not in mentioning culture and behavior. Rather, the grievous error lay in installing cultural pathology as *the root cause* of continued nonwhite failure, often to the complete exclusion of structural factors.

Compare Moynihan's conclusion that social legislation could not succeed with the analysis urged by Martin Luther King, Jr. He, too, offered a despairing portrait of the "shattering blows on the Negro family [that] have made it fragile, deprived and often psychopathic," a description nearly as negative as Moynihan's. Yet King offered this prescription:

The most optimistic element revealed in this review of the Negro family's experience is that the causes for its present crisis are culturally and socially induced. What man has torn down, he can rebuild. At the root of the difficulty in Negro life is pervasive and persistent want. To grow from within the Negro needs only fair opportunity for jobs, education, housing and access to culture. To be strengthened from the outside requires protection from the grim exploitation that has haunted [the community] for 300 years.⁵⁵

King's solution, offered in the winter of 1965, was access to jobs, education, and housing, coupled with freedom from further exploitation. King's hope lay in addressing the structural components of white racism, not in placing a national spotlight on the damaged black family. Ethnicity has been shaped into a reactionary ideology not merely through a focus on group cultures, but because it uses arguments about defective cultures to utterly displace any attention to ongoing dynamics of racial subordination. Ultimately, in conservative hands, race presented as ethnicity faults minorities for their own situation, thereby undercutting arguments for liberal repair.

EMERGING AND CELEBRATING WHITES

Furthering the sense that minorities could only blame themselves, ethnicity also erased "whites" as a dominant group. Ostensibly, there existed instead only a welter of ethnic minorities—Irish, Italians, Jews, Poles, and so on—many of which themselves had earlier suffered discrimination. Justice Powell used this argument to attack affirmative action, questioning whether there even existed a white race: "the white 'majority' itself is composed of various minority groups, most of which can lay claim to a history of prior discrimination at the hands of the State and private individuals. Not all of these groups can receive preferential treatment and corresponding judicial tolerance of distinctions drawn in terms of race and nationality, for then the only 'majority' left would be a new minority of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants."⁵⁶ Far from being dominant, Powell presented the white group as comprised of various vulnerable minorities, each of which labored under "a history of prior discrimination at the hands of the State and private individuals." Ethnicity even converted the most elite whites into racial victims, with WASPs becoming America's most vulnerable potential victim, as the only group ineligible to claim affirmative action. America's elite now turned out to be just another marginalized group. If whites did not exist, how could they be responsible for racial inequality?

Beyond disaggregating whites into vulnerable minorities, ethnicity also provided a means by which whites could celebrate their white identities and segregated neighborhoods. Where this had recently represented reviled manifestations of white supremacy, now it reflected laudable expressions of ethnic pride.⁵⁷ Like the blacks, Latinos, and Asians clamoring to be seen in a positive light, theoretically the Italians, Irish, and Poles were merely expressing group pride in their distinctive ethnic origins. Yet treacherous notions of white superiority were inextricably mixed in. Especially after their virtual disappearance in the 1950s, the revival of European ethnic identities in the 1970s connected intimately to white reactions to the civil rights era.⁵⁸ Nor were racially astute politicians slow to adopt the new vocabulary. Recall Jimmy Carter's racial pandering, when he spoke out forcefully against government efforts to promote neighborhood integration: "I have nothing against a community that's made up of people who are Polish or Czechoslovakian or French-Canadian, or who are blacks trying to maintain the ethnic purity of their neighborhoods," Carter said. "This is a natural inclination on the part of the people."⁵⁹ Disfavored expressions of white supremacy reemerged as worthy ethnic pride—not only as the moral equivalent of black efforts to rescue a stigmatized identity, but also as a legitimate basis for resisting integration.

The turn to ethnicity in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a substitute language for race helped fuel dog whistle politics. Ethnicity told a story of groups either defeated or elevated by their own cultures. Dog whistle politicians embraced the ethnic fiction, amplifying themes of deviant nonwhite behavior and white innocence. The narratives promoted alike by the ethnic turn and racial demagogues—a lack of work ethic, a preference for welfare, a propensity toward crime, or their opposites—reinvigorated racial stereotypes, giving them renewed life in explaining why minorities lagged behind whites. These stereotypes might have faded as society addressed racism. Instead, they became the staples of political discourse, repeated ad nauseam by politicians, think tanks, and media.

Precisely because ethnicity encouraged talk of group differences in culture and behavior, it kept alive a potent aspect of racial ideology: narratives of fundamental differences in capacity that supposedly explained group hierarchy. Ethnicity avoided what seemed central about race, its claims about differences rooted in nature. But in practice, direct references to nature mattered surprisingly little. Even absent this, racial narratives had tremendous social and political potency simply by emphasizing the racist commonsense that groups were divided by differences in habits, temperament, and ability rooted in the groups themselves. Ethnicity helped keep racism vibrant by preserving its core—the stories whites told about their essential superiority, and the tales they repeated about fundamentally inferior nonwhites. Racial demagogues could drop direct references to biology and racial groups, and still stir racial passions. Ethnicity helped establish a commonsense framework in which discussions of dysfunctional culture and menacing behavior were readily understood as describing the essential identity of nonwhites.

Yet racial demagogues did more than resurrect old stereotypes; they altered them in ways that combined assaults on nonwhites with attacks on liberalism. Shaped by the coded language of *conservative* dog whistle politics, racial stereotypes increasingly connected ideas of minority inferiority with rightwing political narratives. This dynamic was so powerful that it ultimately contributed to a marked evolution in the forms taken by racial prejudice. Today, the most powerful racial stereotypes—the ones most generally credited and in widest circulation—do verily precisely with dog whistle narratives jointly attacking minorities and liberalism.

Already in 1971, social psychologists studying racism began describing an evolution from “old-style” endorsements of white supremacy to new forms of prejudice that linked the failings of blacks to deficient cultures, especially to their refusal to adopt conservative precepts of rugged individualism.⁶⁰ Support

for bans on interracial marriage and restrictions mandating whites-only neighborhoods slipped, but endorsements of more abstract statements like “Negroes who receive welfare could get along without it if they tried” and “the streets aren’t safe these days without a policeman around” surged.⁶¹ By the mid-1990s, a strong consensus existed among social science researchers that racial prejudice had changed. Scholars remarked that “a new form of prejudice has come to prominence, one that is preoccupied with matters of moral character, informed by the virtues associated with the traditions of individualism. At its center are the contentions that blacks do not try hard enough to overcome the difficulties they face and that they take what they have not earned.”⁶² Harvard sociologist Lawrence Bobo’s term for this new prejudice, “laissez-faire racism,” highlights the close connection between present forms of racial resentment and the resurgence of an anti-government ideology.⁶³

In accord with the stories spun by dog whistle politicians, many whites have come to believe that they prosper because they possess the values, orientations, and work ethic needed by the self-making individual in a capitalist society. In contrast, they have come to suppose that nonwhites, lacking these attributes, slip to the bottom, handicapped by their inferior cultures and pushed down by the market’s invisible hand, where they remain, beyond the responsibility, or even ability, of government to help. Today’s most powerful stereotypes blame minority culture in a manner tied closely to conservative myths of rugged individualism.

We can see the strong connection between group stereotypes and dog whistle themes in a recent survey on racial prejudice undertaken by social psychologists. The survey found that during Obama’s first four years in office, the percentage of Democrats expressing prejudiced views about blacks remained steady at just over 30 percent—still a discouragingly high proportion.⁶⁴ It also found that the number of Republicans expressing anti-black prejudice increased significantly over those years, going from 71 percent to 79 percent, which is to say, to roughly four out of five. Beyond these high numbers, though, focus on the precise questions in the survey. To measure prejudice, the study asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with statements like:

- Over the past few years, Blacks have gotten more economically than they deserve.
- It’s really a matter of some people just not trying hard enough; if Blacks would only try harder, they could be just as well off as whites.
- Irish, Italians, Jewish, and other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without special favors.⁶⁵

While these statements reference race directly, they also track major themes in dog whistle politics: the notion that blacks receive more than they deserve; the stereotype of laziness; the use of an ethnic conception of race to blame blacks for their own failings.

Bucking the trend of seeing these sentiments as reflecting a modern form of prejudice a few scholars have objected that instead survey questions such as these—which have been in use since the 1970s—measure a confounded mixture of racial sentiment and policy attitudes. These critics insist that because prejudice and policy are interwoven, it's impossible to know to what extent prejudice alone continues.⁶⁶ But this misses the point: the confluence of racial prejudice and conservative politics is the new racism. It's a product of almost a half-century of ethnic discourse and coded race-baiting that has remade racism into a set of ideas jointly demonizing nonwhite culture and activist government. These ethnic-racial-political stereotypes have become staples of modern racial discourse, and now seem like self-evident truths to a staggering four out of five Republicans. It is now virtually commonsense, at least among the GOP faithful, that minorities fail, and they succeed, as rugged individuals.

■ WHITES AS VICTIMS

In a 2011 poll, more than half of whites thought that discrimination against their race was “as big a problem” as the mistreatment of nonwhites. Among Republicans and Tea Party members, nearly two out of three sympathized with this view of whites as racial victims. Among those who “most trust Fox news,” the number stepped even higher.⁶⁷ Colorblindness lies at the heart of the contemporary belief held by many whites that they are the true racial victims in US society today. Let's reprise what colorblindness tells them:

- *Race* is just a matter of blood, and has no connection to past or present social practices.
- *Racism* means being treated differently on the basis of race. Since affirmative action treats whites differently because of race, it constitutes racism. Thurgood Marshall and Martin Luther King, Jr., agree. On the other hand, there is little racism against minorities today: witness the absence of proven malice.
- *Ethnicity* shows that whites do not exist as a dominant group, but only as ethnic minorities with just as much right as other minorities to protect their own group interests.

- *Group cultures* differ, and it's not racist to acknowledge that white ethnics have succeeded, and nonwhite groups have failed, on the basis of differences in group capacity and behavior. Moreover, since groups are the masters of their own fate, it is futile (in addition to being racist) for government to give some groups special handouts.

When laid out this way, it's no surprise that Reagan and other political leaders since have embraced colorblindness. It sounds liberal yet works like a racial cudgel, denying that there's discrimination against minorities, elevating whites as racial victims, justifying white superiority, and facilitating dog whistle racial appeals that emphasize culture and comportment.

And one more thing: colorblindness also protects dog whistle race-baiting against charges of racism. Even though conservatives repeatedly use an ethnic vocabulary, they always hold in reserve the colorblind insistence that race is just a matter of blood. This provides a stock defense of dog whistling, for it allows politicians to demagogue culture and behavior, while insisting that they cannot possibly be engaged in racial pandering because they have not directly referenced biology. In the next race chapter, Chapter Six, we will examine at length how colorblindness facilitated the rise of new ways of communicating and defending racism. Before then, however, we turn to consider important evolutions in dog whistle politics since the 1990s.