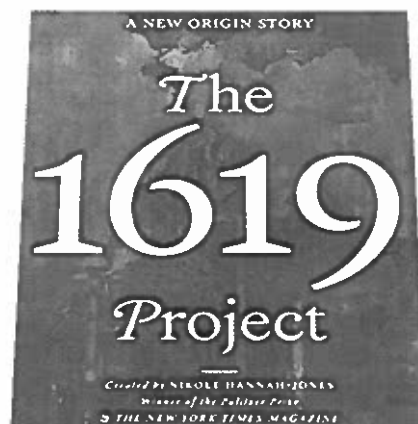




# Unpacking Our History Article Packet



## A New Origin Story Part 8: Politics, Progress, and Race

**NOVEMBER 8 2022**

**6:30 – 8:00 PM**

Zoom ID: 823 648 5349 | Password: 691353

**November 10, 2022**

**7 – 8:30 PM**

## Upcoming Unpacking Our History Programs

Two chances to attend

Tuesday Nov. 8, 2022 on Zoom 6:30 – 8 pm

Thursday Nov. 10, 2022 at Lee Road 7 – 8:30 pm

Topics Subject to Change

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Slavery and Religion

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## Authors in this packet

**Jamelle Bouie** is an American columnist for The New York Times. He was formerly chief political correspondent for Slate. David Uberti, writing in the Columbia Journalism Review in 2019, called Bouie "one of the defining commentators on politics and race in the Trump era."

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Early on the morning of November 4, 2020, with millions of votes still outstanding in the states that would determine the election, President Donald Trump declared victory. “I want to thank the American people for their tremendous support,” he began. “Millions and millions of people voted for us tonight. And a very sad group of people is trying to disenfranchise that group of people and we won’t stand for it. We will not stand for it.”<sup>1</sup> Over the following weeks and months, Trump’s legal team mounted dozens of lawsuits aimed at throwing out votes that had been cast for his opponent, Joe Biden, and overturning the election in Trump’s favor. “If you count the legal votes, I easily win,” he said in a White House speech. “If you count the illegal votes, they can try to steal the election from us.”<sup>2</sup>

Even before the election, the president and his allies had tried to suppress so-called illegal votes. In September, his attorney general, William Barr, falsely alleged that mail-in voting—which for many Americans was a necessity in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic—was “fraught with the risk of fraud and coercion,” incorrectly citing a 2005 commission report on voting from James Baker and former president Jimmy Carter. Robocalls from unidentified groups in Michigan warned residents that mail-in voting could leave their personal information in the hands of the police. In Georgia, voting officials slashed the number of polling places in majority-Black precincts even as the number of voters surged.<sup>3</sup> After Trump lost, with the majority of mail-in ballots going to his opponent, his campaign argued that illegal voting had been particularly rampant in a few cities within the states that had determined the election: Atlanta, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Milwaukee.

No one has ever accused Donald Trump of being subtle, but even for him,

this was blatant. Atlanta is 51 percent Black; Detroit, 78 percent. Philadelphia is 42 percent Black, and Milwaukee has a Black population of just under 39 percent. So-called illegal votes were, in actuality, just Black votes. This wasn’t about election integrity; it was about casting Black voters as politically illegitimate. As the NAACP Legal Defense Fund said in its lawsuit representing a group of Michigan voters against the Trump campaign, “Defendants’ tactics repeat the worst abuses in our nation’s history.”<sup>4</sup>

The president’s effort to overturn the election culminated in an attack on the United States Capitol as Congress began to certify the Electoral College results. Trump’s allies called the mob to Washington for a rally to “stop the steal,” and then Trump sent the mob after the legislature with the most inflammatory speech of his career. “We want to go back and we want to get this right because we’re going to have somebody in there that should not be in there and our country will be destroyed and we’re not going to stand for that,” he said.<sup>5</sup> A multiracial coalition of Black, brown, and white Americans had defeated Trump and put Biden and Kamala Harris, the first woman and first woman of color to become vice president, in the White House, and the president’s supporters, with his direct encouragement, stormed the national legislature to try to nullify the result.

The iconography of the mob was striking. The men and women who invaded the Capitol carried Gadsden flags (“DON’T TREAD ON ME”), “TRUMP 2020” flags, and “BLUE LIVES MATTER” flags. In one frequently reproduced photograph, a rioter was seen holding a Confederate flag while walking through the Capitol Rotunda adjacent to a portrait of South Carolina senator John C. Calhoun, chief statesman of the planter class, committed advocate for slavery, and intellectual forefather of the Confederacy.

That image, more than any other taken that day, captured the meaning of not just the mob but the Trump movement itself. It was never about “populism” or “nationalism” or the interests of working Americans. It was never about restoring the country to any kind of “greatness.” It was always about the contours of our national community: who belongs and who doesn’t; who counts and who shouldn’t; who can wield power and who must be subject to it.

And Trumpism, as the iconography of his movement demonstrates, has race at its core. Trump began his march to the White House as the chief proponent of the “birther” conspiracy, arguing relentlessly that the country’s first Black president was foreign-born and therefore illegitimate. His appeal as a presidential candidate was to white Americans who believed that their racial identity and the country’s national identity were one and the same. Many of

those supporters saw a political victory such as Biden's, propelled by Black votes, as suspect. What began with the "birther" crusade ended with the charge that Barack Obama's America itself was illegitimate and could not hold power.

None of this was an innovation of the Trump era. Obama's election reignited a centuries-old fight over democratic legitimacy—about who can claim the country as their own and who has the right to act as a citizen. Ever since our founding, an exclusive, hierarchical, and racist view of political legitimacy has been a persistent strain in our politics. Adherents of this view—who seek to narrow the scope of participation and wield power through minority rule—are the direct heirs to a tradition of American reactionary belief with its own peculiar history, not just in the ideological battles of the founding but in the institution that shaped and defined the early republic as much as any other.

**The plantations that** dotted the landscape of the antebellum South produced the commodities that fueled the nation's early growth.<sup>6</sup> But plantations didn't just produce goods; they produced ideas, too. Enslaved laborers developed an understanding of the society in which they lived. The people who enslaved them, likewise, constructed elaborate sets of beliefs, customs, and ideologies meant to justify their positions in this economic and social hierarchy. Those ideas permeated the entire South, taking deepest root in places where slavery was most entrenched.

In many respects, South Carolina was a paradigmatic slave state. Although the largest enslavers resided in the Lowcountry region, with its large rice and cotton plantations, nearly the entire state participated in plantation agriculture and the economy built on slavery. By 1820 most South Carolinians were enslaved Africans. By midcentury, the historian Manisha Sinha notes in *The Counterrevolution of Slavery*, it was the first Southern state where a majority of the white population held enslaved people.<sup>7</sup>

Not surprisingly, enslavers dominated the state's political class. "Carolinian rice aristocrats and the cotton planters from the hinterland," Sinha writes, "formed an intersectional ruling class, bound together by kinship, economic, political and cultural ties."<sup>8</sup> The government they built was the most undemocratic in the Union. The coastal districts, with their large numbers of enslaved people, enjoyed nearly as much representation in the legislature as more populous regions in the interior of the state. Statewide office was restricted to wealthy property owners. To even qualify for the governorship, you needed a

large, debt-free estate. Rich enslavers were essentially the only people who could participate in the highest levels of government. To the extent that there were popular elections, they were for the lowest levels of government, because the state legislature tended to appoint most high-level offices.

But immense power at home could not compensate for declining power in national politics. Despite the Three-Fifths Clause in Article I of the Constitution, which gave enslavers an almost uninterrupted hold on the presidency from 1789 to 1850, there were clear signs in the first decades of the nineteenth century that the South's influence was coming to an end. Immigration to the North and the growth of the North's white population in general, as well as the growth of the free Northwest, threatened Southern dominance in Congress. Major rebellions of enslaved people in Louisiana and Virginia, as well as the rise of Haiti as an independent Black nation, left the owners of enslaved people paranoid to the point of hysteria. A steady stream of escaped enslaved men and women threatened the defense of chattel slavery, as the formerly enslaved unsettled the ideological foundations of the South with their own lives and testimony. And the movement to end slavery, once a small fringe, had gained strength and numbers, as well as new arguments and new advocates. By the 1840s, political abolition had come into its own as a movement with real weight on the stage of American politics.

Out of this atmosphere of fear and insecurity came a number of thinkers and politicians who set their minds to defending the slavery-dependent South from a North they perceived as hostile. Arguably the most prominent and accomplished of these planter-politicians was Calhoun, who in addition to his career in the Senate was vice president under John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson and secretary of state under John Tyler and James Polk. The son of Scots-Irish Presbyterian transplants to Great Britain's North America colonies, John Caldwell Calhoun had been born in 1782 in the backcountry of South Carolina to Patrick Calhoun, a successful enslaver with thousands of acres and dozens of enslaved people to his name. Educated in New England, Calhoun was elected to the House of Representatives in 1810; he arrived there the following year as a pro-war nationalist, a modernizer who wanted to extend America's influence across the entire continent.

In Calhoun's view, there was no moral difference between slavery and other forms of labor in the modern world. "Let those who are interested remember that labor is the only source of wealth, and how small a portion of it, in all old and civilized countries, even the best governed, is left to those by whose labor wealth is created," he would later write in a congressional committee report. He continued:

Let them also reflect how little volition or agency the operatives in any country have in the question of its distribution—as little, with a few exceptions, as the African of the slaveholding States. . . . Nor is it the less oppressive, that, in one case, it is effected by the stern and powerful will of the Government, and in the other by the more feeble and flexible will of a master. If one be an evil, so is the other.<sup>9</sup>

It was because of this commitment to slavery that Calhoun feared outsized federal power over commerce, taxation, and trade. At a time when Northern manufacturers sought to protect their industries from foreign competition with tariffs and other restrictions on free trade, Calhoun worried that a growing and assertive federal government would extend that authority to slavery and the trade in enslaved people. This, in turn, led him to “nullification”: the theory that any state subject to federal law was entitled to invalidate it. He first advanced the idea in an anonymous letter, written when he was Jackson’s vice president, protesting the Tariff of 1828, which sought to protect Northern industry and agriculture from outside competitors. Passed under the “general welfare” clause of the Constitution, the tariff, for its opponents, raised the specter of an overly powerful federal government. If Congress had the authority to pass tariffs for the “general welfare,” what was there to stop it from limiting or even abolishing slavery? “Let us say distinctly to Congress, ‘HANDS OFF;’” wrote one South Carolina polemicist.<sup>10</sup>

Calhoun agreed. The tariff went beyond the power of the federal government, and its passage was a sign that the South was under threat by an overbearing North. “To the reflecting mind,” he wrote to Virginia senator Littleton Waller Tazewell a year before the tariff was passed, “[the tariff issue] clearly indicates the weak part of our system. . . . The freedom of debate, the freedom of the press, the division of power into three branches . . . afford, in the main, efficient security to the *constituents against rulers*, but in an extensive country with diversified and opposing interests, another and not less important remedy is required, *the protection of one portion of the people against another*.”<sup>11</sup>

There was one specific portion with whose protection Calhoun was chiefly concerned. “Our geographical position, our industry, pursuits and institutions are all peculiar,” he later wrote, referring to the slavery-dependent South.<sup>12</sup> Against a domineering North, he argued, “representation affords not the slightest protection.”<sup>13</sup>

Calhoun was driven by a sense of approaching doom. “It is, indeed, high time for the people of the South to be roused to a sense of impending calamities—on an early and full knowledge of which their safety depends,” he

wrote in an 1831 report to the South Carolina legislature. “It is time that they should see and feel that . . . they are in a permanent and hopeless minority on the great and vital connected questions.”<sup>14</sup>

On this defense of the prerogatives of the Southern section of the nation, Calhoun built an entire theory of government. Seeing the threat democracy posed to slavery, he set out to limit democracy. To do so he employed a novel conception of the Constitution. For Calhoun there was no “Union” per se. Instead, the United States was simply a compact among sovereigns with distinct, and often competing, sectional interests. This compact could survive only if all sides had equal say about the meaning of the Constitution and the shape and structure of the law. Individual states, Calhoun thought, should be able to veto federal laws if they believed the federal government had favored one state or section over another. The Union could act only with the assent of the entire whole—what Calhoun called “the concurrent majority.” This was in opposition to the Madisonian idea of rule by numerical majority, albeit mediated by compromise and consensus.

Calhoun initially lost the tariff fight, which pitted him against an obstinate Andrew Jackson, but he did not give up on nullification. He expanded on the theory at the end of his life, proposing an alternative system of government that gave political minorities a final say over majority action. In this “concurrent government,” each “interest or portion of the community” would have an equal say in approving the actions of the state. Full agreement would be necessary to “put the government in motion.” This was the only way, Calhoun argued, that the “different interests, orders, classes, or portions, into which the community may be divided, can be protected.”<sup>15</sup>

To Calhoun, this wasn’t just compatible with the Constitution, it was the realization of the founding vision for the American republic. In his view, and against the arguments of James Madison and other key framers, the Constitution did not establish the principle of majority rule. Instead, as the historian Robert Elder noted in the biography *Calhoun: American Heretic*, Calhoun believed that it established a system in which power was vested in “the whole—the entire people—to make it in truth and reality the Government of the people, instead of a Government of a dominant over a subject part.” Each elected branch—the House, the Senate, the executive—had its part to play in creating this consensus. “Each [department of government] may be imperfect of itself, but if the construction be good, and all the keys skillfully touched, there will be given out in one blended and harmonious whole, the true and perfect voice of the people.”<sup>16</sup>

The problem, in Calhoun’s eyes, was that the will of the majority, as ex-



pressed in the House of Representatives and the election of the president, had too much power. It had to be curbed, lest it overrun this "true and perfect voice of the people." And those "people" whose voices must be heard, of course, were those like him. Those with power. Those with property. Those who enslaved others.

Calhoun would grow more confident and forthright as a defender of slavery. In early 1837, in response to abolitionist calls to end slavery in the District of Columbia, Calhoun gave his signature (and infamous) defense of the institution.

But let me not be understood as admitting, even by implication, that the existing relations between the two races in the slaveholding States is an evil:—far otherwise; I hold it to be a good, as it has thus far proved itself to be to both, and will continue to prove so if not disturbed by the fell spirit of abolition. I appeal to facts. Never before has the black race of Central Africa, from the dawn of history to the present day, attained a condition so civilized and so improved, not only physically, but morally and intellectually.

In the meantime, the white or European race, has not degenerated. It has kept pace with its brethren in other sections of the Union where slavery does not exist. It is odious to make comparison; but I appeal to all sides whether the South is not equal in virtue, intelligence, patriotism, courage, disinterestedness, and all the high qualities which adorn our nature.

But I take higher ground. I hold that in the present state of civilization, where two races of different origin, and distinguished by color, and other physical differences, as well as intellectual, are brought together, the relation now existing in the slaveholding States between the two, is, instead of an evil, a good—a positive good.<sup>17</sup>

The government Calhoun envisioned would protect this system by defending "liberty": not of the citizen but of the master, the liberty of those who claimed a right to property and a position at the top of a racial and economic hierarchy. This liberty, Calhoun stated, was "a reward to be earned, not a blessing to be gratuitously lavished on all alike—a reward reserved for the intelligent, the patriotic, the virtuous and deserving—and not a boon to be bestowed on a people too ignorant, degraded and vicious, to be capable either of appreciating or of enjoying it."<sup>18</sup>

Calhoun died in 1850. Ten years later, Abraham Lincoln won the White House without a single Southern state and, following the idea of nullification and the concurrent majority to its conclusion, the South seceded from the Union. War came a few months later, and four years of fighting destroyed the system of slavery Calhoun had fought to protect. But parts of his legacy survived. His deep suspicion of majoritarian democracy—his view that government must protect interests, defined by their unique geographic and economic characteristics, more than people—would inform the sectional politics of the South in the twentieth century, as solid blocs of Southern lawmakers would work collectively to stifle any attempt to regulate the region.

Despite insurgencies at home—the Populist Party, for example, swept through Georgia and North Carolina in the 1890s, demanding aid for farmers and a reduction in debts—Southern lawmakers were able to maintain an iron grip on federal offices until the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In their legislative fights the spirit of nullification lived on. Anti-lynching laws and some pro-labor legislation died at the hands of lawmakers from the "Solid South" who took advantage of Senate rules like the filibuster—under which lawmakers could speak indefinitely, tying up the chamber's business—to effectively enact Calhoun's idea of a concurrent majority against legislation that threatened the Southern racial status quo.

Calhoun's idea that states could veto federal laws would return again following the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, as segregationists announced "massive resistance" to federal desegregation mandates and sympathizers defended white Southern actions with ideas and arguments that cribbed from Calhoun and recapitulated enslaver ideology for modern American politics.

"The central question that emerges," the *National Review's* founding editor, William F. Buckley, Jr., wrote in 1957, amid congressional debate over the first Civil Rights Act, "is whether the white community in the South is entitled to take such measures as are necessary to prevail, politically and culturally, in areas which it does not predominate numerically? The sobering answer is *yes*—the white community is so entitled because, for the time being, it is the advanced race." He continued: "It is more important for any community, anywhere in the world, to affirm and live by civilized standards, than to bow to the demands of the numerical majority."<sup>19</sup>

It was a strikingly blunt defense of Jim Crow and affirmation of white supremacy from the father of the conservative movement. Later, when key civil

rights questions had been settled by law, Buckley would essentially renounce these views, praising the movement and criticizing race-baiting demagogues like George C. Wallace. Still, his initial impulse—to give white political minorities a veto not just over policy but over democracy itself—reflected a tendency that would express itself again and again in the conservative politics he ushered into the mainstream, emerging when political, cultural, and demographic change threatened a narrow, exclusionary vision of American democracy.

In 1964, Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, an opponent of the Civil Rights Act, won the Republican Party's nomination for president. Goldwater allowed that there were "some rights that are clearly protected by valid laws and are therefore 'civil rights.'" But he lamented that "states' rights" were "disappearing under the piling sands of absolutism" and called *Brown v. Board of Education* an "unconstitutional trespass into the legislative sphere of government." "I therefore support all efforts by the States, excluding violence, of course," Goldwater wrote in *The Conscience of a Conservative*, "to preserve their rightful powers over education."<sup>20</sup> Though he lost the general election in a landslide, Goldwater won the Deep South (except for Florida), where white people flocked to the candidate who stood against the constitutional demands of the Black freedom movement.

Writing in the 1980s and '90s, Samuel Francis—a polemicist who would eventually migrate to the very far right of American conservatism—identified this same rejection of democratic processes in the context of David Duke's campaign for governor of Louisiana: "Reagan conservatism, in its innermost meaning, had little to do with supply-side economics and spreading democracy. It had to do with the awakening of a people who face political, cultural and economic dispossession, who are slowly beginning to glimpse the fact of dispossession and what dispossession will mean for them and their descendants, and who also are starting to think about reversing the processes and powers responsible for their dispossession."<sup>21</sup>

There is a homegrown ideology of reaction in the United States, inextricably tied to our system of slavery. And while that ideology no longer carries the explicit racism of the past, the basic framework remains: fear of rival political majorities; of demographic "replacement"; of a government that threatens privilege and hierarchy.

The last decade of Republican extremism is emblematic. In 2008, Barack Obama was elected president. Within months of taking office, he faced a wave of backlash from grassroots conservative activists calling themselves the Tea Party. On paper, and channeling the group's American Revolution-era name-

sake, this backlash was a revolt against the spending priorities of the new administration and the prospect of higher taxes. Tea Party politicians, like Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky and Representative Michele Bachmann of Minnesota, would come to Washington in 2011 with demands for spending cuts and balanced budgets. But a close examination of the beliefs of Tea Party activists shows a movement consumed with resentment toward an ascendant majority of Black people, Latinos, Asian Americans, and liberal white people. In *Change They Can't Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America*, their survey-based study of the movement, for example, the political scientists Christopher S. Parker and Matt A. Barreto show that Tea Party Republicans were motivated "by the fear and anxiety associated with the perception that 'real' Americans are losing their country."<sup>22</sup>

The scholars Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson came to a similar conclusion in their contemporaneous book about the movement, based on an ethnographic study of Tea Party activists across the country. "Tea Party resistance to giving more to categories of people deemed undeserving is more than just an argument about taxes and spending," they note in *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*; "it is a heartfelt cry about where they fear 'their country' may be headed." And Tea Party adherents' "worries about racial and ethnic minorities and overly entitled young people," Skocpol and Williamson write, "signal a larger fear about generational social change in America."<sup>23</sup>

Convinced of their imminent minority status in American politics, right-wing conservatives embarked on a project to nullify opponents and restrict the scope of democracy. In 2011, Tea Party lawmakers in Congress pushed the entire Republican Party to repeal the Affordable Care Act and make other sharp cuts to the social safety net. Since Democrats controlled the Senate and the White House at the time, and polling showed that the public, overall, was opposed to cutting benefits, there was, however, a limit to what Republicans could accomplish. So they held the government hostage to their demands, using the "debt limit"—a legislative mechanism that sets out the amount of debt the country can take on—to extract concessions. Rather than work within the constraints of ordinary politics, Republicans threatened to throw a wrench into the gears.

"I'm asking you to look at a potential increase in the debt limit as a leverage moment when the White House and President Obama will have to deal with us," said the incoming majority leader, Eric Cantor, at a closed-door retreat days after the 2011 session began, according to *The Washington Post*. Either the White House would agree to harsh austerity measures or Republicans would

force the United States to default on its debt obligations, precipitating an economic crisis just as the country, and the world, was climbing out of the Great Recession.<sup>24</sup>

This stand was emblematic of how the Republican Party would approach the rest of Obama's time in office. Either Republicans would succeed in stopping Obama's agenda or they would wreck the system itself. To this end, the Senate Republican leader, Mitch McConnell, embraced and expanded use of the filibuster to nullify the president's ability to nominate federal judges and fill vacancies in the executive branch. And after Republicans took the Senate majority in 2014, he led an extraordinary blockade of the Supreme Court, thereby robbing Obama of a Supreme Court nomination.

But while McConnell's hyper-obstructionist rule in the Senate is arguably the most high-profile example of the nullification strategy, it's far from the most egregious. In state legislatures across the country, Republicans have embraced a view that holds voting majorities—as well as entire constituencies—illegitimate if they don't support Republican candidates for office. In 2012, North Carolina Republicans won legislative and executive power for the first time in more than a century. They used it to gerrymander the electoral map and impose new restrictions on voting, specifically aimed at African Americans. One such restriction, a strict voter-identification law, was designed to target Black North Carolinians with “almost surgical precision,” according to the federal judges who struck the law down. When, in 2016, Democrats overcame these obstacles to take back the governor's mansion, the Republican-controlled legislature successfully stripped some power from the office, to prevent Democrats from reversing their efforts to rig the game.<sup>25</sup>

The same happened in Wisconsin. Under Scott Walker, the governor at the time, Wisconsin Republicans gave themselves a structural advantage in the state legislature through aggressive gerrymandering. They redrew the state's maps with such precision that they could continue to win a near supermajority of seats in the legislature even with a minority of the overall vote. After the Democratic candidate toppled Walker in the 2018 governor's race, the Republican majority in the legislature rapidly moved to limit the new governor's power and weaken other statewide offices won by Democrats. They restricted the governor's ability to run public-benefit programs and set rules on the implementation of state laws. And they robbed the governor and the attorney general of the power to either continue or end legal action against the Affordable Care Act.

Michigan Republicans took an almost identical course of action after Democrats in that state managed to win executive office, using their gerryman-

dered legislative majority to weaken the new Democratic governor and attorney general. One bill shifted oversight of campaign-finance law from the secretary of state to a six-person commission with members nominated by the state Republican and Democratic parties, a move designed to produce deadlock and keep elected Democrats from reversing previous decisions.<sup>26</sup>

The Republican rationale for tilting the field in their permanent favor, or, failing that, nullifying the results and limiting Democrats' power as much as possible, has a familiar ring to it. “Citizens from every corner of Wisconsin deserve a strong legislative branch that stands on equal footing with an incoming administration that is based almost solely in Madison,” one Wisconsin Republican said following the party's lame-duck power grab. The speaker of the state assembly, Robin Vos, made his point more explicitly: “If you took Madison and Milwaukee out of the state election formula, we would have a clear majority—we would have all five constitutional officers, and we would probably have many more seats in the Legislature.” The argument is straightforward: Their mostly white voters should count. Other voters—Black people and other people of color who live in cities—shouldn't.<sup>27</sup>

Senate Republicans played with similar ideas just before the 2016 election, openly announcing their plans to block Hillary Clinton from nominating anyone to the Supreme Court, should she become president. “I promise you that we will be united against any Supreme Court nominee that Hillary Clinton, if she were president, would put up,” declared Senator John McCain of Arizona just weeks before the voting began.<sup>28</sup> And President Trump, of course, has repeatedly and falsely denounced Clinton's popular-vote victory as illegitimate, the product of fraud and illegal voting. “In addition to winning the Electoral College in a landslide,” he declared on Twitter weeks after the election, “I won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally.”

The larger implication is clear enough: a majority made up of liberals and nonwhites isn't a real majority. And the solution is clear, too: to write those people out of the polity, to use every available tool to weaken their influence on American politics—whether that means raising barriers to voting and registration or slashing access to the ballot box itself or anything in between. The Trump administration's failed attempt to place a citizenship question on the census was an important part of this effort. By requiring this information, the administration hoped to suppress the number of immigrant respondents, worsening their representation in the House and the Electoral College, reweighting power to the white rural areas that backed Trump and the Republican Party.



**Donald Trump's false** claims of electoral fraud in the wake of the 2020 presidential election were an expression of the idea that only certain majorities are real majorities, that only some Americans deserve to hold power. And while Trump lost and left office, the idea persists. Rather than mobilize new voters or persuade existing ones, Republicans throughout the country have set about restricting access to the forms of voting that helped Democrats win in traditionally Republican states like Georgia and Arizona. In Michigan, likewise, Republican lawmakers want to change the way the state distributes its Electoral College votes to nullify the influence of Detroit on the final result.

You could make the case that none of this has anything to do with slavery and enslavers' ideology. You could argue that it has nothing to do with race at all, that it's simply an aggressive effort to secure conservative victories. But the tenor of an argument, the shape and nature of an opposition movement—these things matter. Republicans stepped onto this path after America elected its first Black president, and they thereafter embraced a racist demagogue and his attacks on the legitimacy of the nation's multiracial character; these actions speak to how the threads of history tie past and present together.

While neutral on their face, these methods—the assaults on the legitimacy of nonwhite political actors, the casting of rival political majorities as unrepresentative, the drive to nullify democratically elected governing coalitions—are downstream of ideas and ideologies that came to fruition in the defense of human bondage and racial segregation. And as long as there are enough Americans who do not trust democracy to protect their privileges—as long as there are those who see in political equality a threat to their power and standing—these ideas and ideologies will have a path to power.

In which case, the price of equality, or at least of the promise of an equal society, is vigilance against those who would make government the tool of hierarchy. And, in turn, we must recognize that this struggle—to secure democracy against privilege on the one hand, and to secure privilege against democracy on the other—is the unresolvable conflict of American life. It is the push and pull that will last for as long as the republic stands.

**"That's what we mean** when we say America is exceptional. Not that our nation has been flawless from the start, but that we have shown the capacity to change and make life better for those who follow." So said President Barack Obama in his farewell address in January 2017, just days before Donald Trump took office. And yet, many Americans did not see a "more perfect Union" coming.<sup>1</sup> After all, Trump had been endorsed by a leading Ku Klux Klan newspaper and one of the organization's former leaders, David Duke.<sup>2</sup> He was advised by white nationalists like Steve Bannon. He made a political name for himself questioning Obama's citizenship.<sup>3</sup> Trump campaigned on making America "great again" after the first Black president. He framed Latino immigrants as rapists.<sup>4</sup> For many Americans, Trump was not forging a path forward to "make life better." Instead he represented a racist past they believed the nation had left behind, and his victory a reversal of the gradual racial progress they had been told was the American story.

Obama, himself an avatar of that progress, knew he had to explain this in his address. "Yes, our progress has been uneven," he said. "For every two steps forward, it often feels we take one step back. But the long sweep of America has been defined by forward motion, a constant widening of our founding creed to embrace all and not just some."<sup>5</sup>

Obama was embracing a national mythology in which America was marching forward and righting past wrongs, an epic, righteous journey that had led to his own election eight years earlier. This mantra of steady incremental change has long been a part of the American creed. Politicians of all races and parties convey it constantly. I once believed it. Sure, the country may have begun in slavery, but it fought a war to end it. It passed three new amend-

ments to the Constitution to end slavery and give citizenship to those formerly enslaved, and to grant the men among them the right to vote. And though, in the decades that followed, those rights were violently denied, eventually the nation's institutions acted to ensure them. In 1954, the Supreme Court declared segregated public schools unconstitutional. A decade later, Congress passed and President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. President Johnson appointed the former NAACP attorney Thurgood Marshall to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1967. Into the 1970s and '80s, the Black middle class started emerging and became more visible in culture, media, and politics. There were figures like Ed Bradley, who became the first Black White House television correspondent in 1976, and Harold Washington, who became the first Black mayor of Chicago in 1983 and inspired Obama's generation. In the 1990s, President Bill Clinton appointed what was at the time the most diverse cabinet in history. At the end of the twentieth century and the turn of the twenty-first, Black women and especially men were visible in politics, sports, entertainment, and mass media—people like Michael Jordan, Carol Moseley Braun, Jesse Jackson, Whitney Houston, Tiger Woods, Denzel Washington, Jay-Z, Spike Lee, Robin Roberts, Halle Berry, and Bryant Gumbel. By 2003, media moguls Oprah Winfrey and Robert L. Johnson had become billionaires. All the success stories of these *individuals* ostensibly demonstrated the forward march of the Black *community*.

With Barack Obama arriving on the stage of American history, community representation transmuted into national embodiment. "I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story, that I owe a debt to all of those who came before me, and that in no other country on earth is my story even possible," Obama said during his breakout keynote speech at the Democratic National Convention in 2004.<sup>6</sup> Four years later, when Obama was elected president, he had come to embody racial progress and the arc of American history itself. Obama did not *make* American history when he won the U.S. presidency on November 4, 2008. He *became* American history—an American history popularly written as the story of incremental and steady racial progress.

"HISTORIC WIN," blared the headline of *The Philadelphia Inquirer* the day after his election in 2008. "Change has come to America."<sup>7</sup> Nearly 70 percent of Americans agreed that his election would improve race relations in the country.<sup>8</sup> To some, it was a watershed moment. "'In answer to the question, Is America past racism against black people,' I say the answer is yes." Columbia University linguist John McWhorter wrote in *Forbes* weeks after Obama's

election. “Our proper concern is not whether racism still exists, but whether it remains a serious problem. The election of Obama proved, as nothing else could have, that it no longer does.”<sup>9</sup>

But when seen as the defining narrative of American history, this vision of our past as a march of racial progress is ahistorical, mythical, and incomplete. Even as those civil rights victories of the 1950s and '60s were transpiring in the courts and streets, the unemployment rates of Black Americans were rising. These persistently poor socioeconomic conditions—not to mention police violence—led to urban rebellions in 1964, 1965, 1966, and 1967—a year when Martin Luther King, Jr., said, “That dream that I had that day [in 1963] has, at many points, turned into a nightmare.”<sup>10</sup>

In 1968, in response to these rebellions, President Johnson and, repeatedly, presidential candidate Richard Nixon called for “law and order.” During a post-civil rights period of supposed progress, American society also became obsessed with a destructive fear of Black criminality. The call for law and order gave way to the War on Drugs beginning in the 1970s, and to mass incarceration in the 1980s and '90s. Meanwhile, police violence persisted and new forms of voter suppression became so sophisticated that they contributed to Republican presidential victories in Florida in 2000 and Ohio in 2004.<sup>11</sup> In 2009, the first Black president came into office during the Great Recession, which produced the widest racial wealth gap between Black and white Americans since the government began recording such data.<sup>12</sup>

When the long sweep of American history is cast as a constant widening of equity and justice, it overlooks this parallel constant widening of inequity and injustice. The two forces have existed in tandem, dueling throughout our history. The Northern states gradually emancipated enslaved Black people in the early United States—a step forward for justice—but at the same time these states gradually or immediately stripped freed Black people of their civil or voting rights—a step forward for injustice. In 1807, importation of Africans was prohibited by Congress—a step forward for nonviolence—but this led to a consequent boom in the violent and disruptive domestic trade of enslaved people and the “breeding” and spreading of the enslaved population—a step forward for brutal violence. In 1865, Congress abolished chattel slavery—stepping toward justice—but this immediately led to a series of racist “Black Codes” in Southern states that bound and regulated the movements of freed peoples and shifted the nation toward injustice. In the late 1860s, Radical Republican congressmen abolished these Black Codes, reconstructed Southern states, and extended civil and voting rights to Black men—another step forward for equity—but in another step toward inequity, lynchings and Jim Crow

reconstructed white supremacy and rescinded some civil and voting rights by the 1890s.

The singular racial history of the United States is therefore a *dual* racial history of two opposing forces: historical steps toward equity and justice and historical steps toward inequity and injustice. But foregrounded in the telling are the steps toward equity and justice as part of a grand American narrative march of liberty and equality for all.

This popular construct of racial progress does more than conceal and obfuscate; it actually undermines the effort to achieve and maintain equality. You can see this in the majority opinion written by Chief Justice John Roberts in *Shelby County v. Holder* in 2013. In that case, the Supreme Court struck down the federal preclearance section of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which required certain states and counties with a history of electoral racism to receive federal approval before changing local voting laws or practices. In his majority opinion, Roberts acknowledged that there had been a need for “strong medicine” against racism in 1965 but argued that since then, progress had rendered such policies unnecessary. “There is no denying, however, that the conditions that originally justified these measures no longer characterize voting in the covered jurisdictions,” he wrote. “Things have changed dramatically.”<sup>13</sup>

In the aftermath of this decision, multiple Republican-dominated states, freed of federal oversight, passed laws that disenfranchised Black people by limiting early voting and same-day registration and instituting voter ID laws that “targeted African American voters with surgical precision,” to quote the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit.<sup>14</sup> Fourteen states had new voter restrictions in time for the 2016 election, including Ohio and Wisconsin. These new voter-suppression policies were crucial to Trump’s victory.<sup>15</sup> And following Trump’s defeat in 2020, Republican state legislators have introduced more than 350 laws in forty-seven states that would make it harder for Americans, particularly Black Americans, to vote.

Inequality lives, in part, because Americans of every generation have been misled into believing that racial progress is inevitable and ongoing. That racial progress is America’s manifest destiny. That racial progress defines the arc of American history since 1619. That “things have changed dramatically.” In fact, this has more often been rhetoric than reality, more often myth than history. Saying that the nation can progress racially is a necessary statement of hope. Saying that the nation *has* progressed racially is usually a statement of ideology, one that has been used all too often to obscure the opposite reality of *racist* progress.

And it’s been this way since the beginning.

The propaganda of racial progress took its initial form in the era of slavery. Proponents of the idea held that slavery was justified by the fact that enslavers had improved the lot of the Africans they were enslaving. In the 1660s, prominent English minister Richard Baxter urged American planters in *A Christian Directory* to “make it your chief end in buying and using slaves, to win them to Christ, and save their Souls.”<sup>16</sup> The leading theologian in early colonial America, Cotton Mather, admired Baxter and built on his ideas. “You are better fed & better clothed, & better managed by far, than you would be, if you were your own men,” Mather informed enslaved Africans in Boston in the 1696 pamphlet *A Good Master Well Served*. It was one of the first articulations of racial progress in colonial America: American slavery was better than “miserable” African freedom, Mather argued. If they obey their masters, he informed enslaved people, their “souls will be washed ‘White in the blood of the lamb.’”<sup>17</sup>

By the time of the American Revolution, the first full-blown abolitionist movement had emerged, influencing a newly emergent anti-slavery rhetoric, even among enslavers like Thomas Jefferson. In 1774, he drafted a powerful freedom manifesto, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, in which he accused the British king of holding back the march of racial progress that the colonists wanted. “The abolition of domestic slavery is the great object of desire in those colonies, where it was unhappily introduced in their infant state,” Jefferson wrote.<sup>18</sup> Several of the admirers of *A Summary View* printed and circulated it widely, launching Jefferson into national recognition.

Two years later, Jefferson found himself in Philadelphia as a delegate at the Second Continental Congress, drafting the Declaration of Independence. “The history of his present majesty is a history of unremitting injuries and usurpations,” Jefferson declared. He then listed every wrong, saving perhaps the worst of the king’s abuses for last: the king of Great Britain “has waged” what Jefferson, an enslaver, called a “cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation hither.” The king had suppressed “every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce.”<sup>19</sup>

The delegates ended up cutting this anti-slavery passage in its entirety before finalizing the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. But they could not erase its powerful framing: that the founding fathers were not responsible for slavery but, rather, were ushering in a new age of freedom; that Great

Britain was to blame for the trade in enslaved persons; and that racial progress was on the way through American independence.

In reality, some of the Americans who decried British tyranny were themselves opposed to abolition. In his notes on the proceedings of the Second Continental Congress concerning this early draft of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson wrote, “[T]he clause . . . reprobating the enslaving the inhabitants of Africa, was struck out in complaisance to South Carolina & Georgia who had never attempted to restrain the importation of slaves, and who on the contrary still wished to continue it. [O]ur Northern brethren also I believe felt a little tender under those censures; for tho’ their people have very few slaves themselves yet they had been pretty considerable carriers of them to others.”<sup>20</sup> Jefferson tried to justify American inaction on the trade in enslaved persons and on slavery by placing the blame on King George’s head, but the burden of culpability rested also on American shoulders in both the North and the South.

Soon, the justification for inaction took a different form. Not long after helping to establish the Methodist Church in America in 1784, Thomas Coke started circulating petitions to abolish slavery. In 1785, he led a delegation of abolitionists to Mount Vernon to convince the future first president of the United States to join their movement. But George Washington declined to sign the petition or publicly support the Methodists’ anti-slavery efforts, on the premise that “it would be dangerous to make a frontal attack on a prejudice which is beginning to decrease.”<sup>21</sup> Washington—perhaps knowingly and strategically—exonerated himself from taking a political stand against slavery on the grounds that progress was being made. Slavery persisted, and grew, protected by the argument that it was going away.

Still, slavery was a political, moral, and intellectual quandary for the founding fathers, who saw themselves as part of the Age of Enlightenment. They were not so blinded by the myth of racial progress that they failed to understand the contradiction of a republic founded on the principles of freedom and equality in which one-fifth of the population was held in bondage. They were embarrassed enough that they left the words “slavery” and “slave” out of the U.S. Constitution entirely.

The awkwardness of the topic did not hinder the economic institution’s growth. In the aftermath of the American Revolution, many Northern states that were less reliant on enslaved labor did pass gradual abolition laws, and some enslavers in the Upper South did free their captives, but most in the South did not. Jefferson himself freed only two enslaved people in his lifetime.<sup>22</sup> Americans in both the North and the South came to see slavery as a



necessary evil, the only way to pay off their debts and build the new nation. Cotton gins were invented to speedily remove seeds from cotton fibers, making cotton produced by enslaved labor immensely profitable and leading to an insatiable demand for more land and more labor. Enslavers were marching into the Louisiana Territory, which Jefferson secured from France in 1803. The number of enslaved Africans swelled by 70 percent, from 697,681 in the first federal census of 1790 to 1,191,362 in 1810, and more than tripled over the next fifty years.<sup>23</sup>

As slavery grew, so too did the cries to abolish it. Still, many white people, even those who were anti-slavery, couldn't stomach the idea of Black equality. A solution was found in the idea of colonization: freeing and "civilizing" Black people, then sending them out of the country. The idea had been proposed by Jefferson in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, published in 1785. This new form of racial progress envisioned the United States as a white ethnostate that avoided what Jefferson argued would be a never-ending race war. Black people should "be brought up" until "the females should be eighteen, and the males twenty-one years of age, when they should be colonized to such place as the circumstances of the times should render most proper." To replace them, the nation should "send vessels . . . to other parts of the world for an equal number of white inhabitants," Jefferson wrote.<sup>24</sup>

Into the antebellum era, a big tent of enslavers and centrist anti-slavery reformers—both inspired by Jefferson—came to see colonization as a way to resist those enslaved persons and free abolitionists pressing for the immediate end of slavery. Enslavers came to favor the idea of colonizing all *free* Black people out of the country—to better control the restive population of enslaved people. The minutes from the founding meeting of the American Colonization Society in 1816 record that Virginia congressman John Randolph argued that colonization would "materially tend to secure" slavery, casting off those free Black people whose presence incited "mischief" and "discontent" among the enslaved.<sup>25</sup> The eighth Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Henry Clay, agreed in his speech at the meeting. The society would ignore the "delicate question" of abolition and only promote the deportation of the free Black population, Clay stated. "Can there be a nobler cause than that which," he argued, "while it proposes to rid our own country of a useless and pernicious, if not a dangerous portion of its population, contemplates the spreading of the arts of civilized life, and the possible redemption from ignorance and barbarism of a benighted quarter of the globe!"<sup>26</sup>

Centrist anti-slavery reformers had similar plans for free Black people and different plans for the enslaved. Free Black people must be trained "for self-

government" and then return to their land of "origin," New Jersey clergyman Robert Finley wrote in the colonization movement's pioneering manifesto, *Thoughts on the Colonization of Free Blacks*. For the enslaved, he advocated that they be gradually freed over time—as many were in Northern states when they reached a certain age—and colonized out of the United States. "By this means the evil of slavery will be diminished, and in a way so gradual as to prepare the whites for the happy and progressive change."<sup>27</sup> The manifesto was published in 1816, the year he helped enslavers found the American Colonization Society.

The American Colonization Society grew into the preeminent racial "reform" organization in the United States by the late 1820s. By 1832, every Northern state legislature had passed resolutions endorsing colonization. While many Southern white colonizationists sought to remove free Black people, Northern white colonizationists were typically energized by the scenario of removing all Black people, enslaved and free.

Both viewed colonization as incremental progress. Enslaved or free Africans would be civilized and gradually emancipated and sent back to Africa to civilize "miserable" Africans, thus establishing slavery itself as an instrument of racial progress. As the retired Jefferson put it in a letter to anti-slavery sympathizer John Lynch in 1811, "Having long ago made up my mind on this subject, I have no hesitation in saying [that colonization is] most advantageous for themselves as well as for us." He went on to suggest that the plan would also be advantageous for Africa, a continent lacking the "useful arts." Schooled free Black people, Jefferson argued, would "carry back to" Africa "the seeds of civilization, which might render their sojournment here a blessing in the end to that country."<sup>28</sup>

By the 1790s, the abolitionist movement that had begun during the era of the American Revolution had ebbed. White abolitionists, in reviving the movement in the 1830s and '40s, mostly opposed gradual abolition and colonization. Instead, they pushed for immediate emancipation, while fashioning a new form of racial progress, one focused on individual behavior and acceptance. Some white abolitionists agreed with William Lloyd Garrison, who wholeheartedly believed that Black people had "acquired" and would continue to acquire "the esteem, confidence and patronage of the whites, in proportion to [their] increase in knowledge and moral improvement."<sup>29</sup> Garrison called on Black people to follow this lead and behave in an upstanding manner to make white Americans more comfortable setting their brethren free. In



an address before Black Philadelphians in 1831, Garrison said, "If you are temperate, industrious, peaceable and pious; if you return good for evil, and blessing for cursing; you will show to the world, that the slaves can be emancipated without danger: but if you are turbulent, idle and vicious, you will put arguments into the mouths of tyrants, and cover your friends with confusion and shame."

This strategy of *uplift suasion* that focused on policing Black behavior actually reinforced racism and slavery. Garrison implied that it was "turbulent" Black behavior that drove racist reactions among white people who would otherwise hold Black people in "esteem," an inversion of the true cause and effect of racism. Likewise, his encouragement of behavioral uplift sidelined the role of anti-racist activism and resistance at a time when they were needed the most. Indeed, racism and Southern slavery were spreading and becoming more powerful in the 1830s and '40s. But many white and Black abolitionists failed to acknowledge this racist progress. As Garrison said in the Philadelphia speech, "The signs of the times do indeed show forth great and glorious and sudden changes in the condition of the oppressed."<sup>30</sup>

In the summer of 1847, Garrison wrote in *The Liberator* that the "slave power" had declined in the past ten years, leading to a "gradual abatement of the prejudice which we have been deploring."<sup>31</sup> These remarks came in the middle of the Mexican-American War, a battle that began after the United States annexed Texas, and perhaps reflected his anxiety about slavery's western expansion more than his belief in its imminent demise. The war with Mexico helped nationalize the slavery debate, since many white Northerners who might not have personally supported abolition nevertheless worried that the new territories would be controlled by the enslavers' interests, shutting out free white labor and increasing the political power of the Southern slaveholding states over the Northern states. Congressional representatives from the North and the South had been in a contentious battle since 1846 over the Wilmot Proviso, which proposed a ban on slavery in any territories acquired during the war.<sup>32</sup>

As sectional political tensions over slavery's expansion heated up in the halls of Congress, some abolitionists established a new rhetorical ground: slavery and anti-Black racism were one and the same, and if slavery ended, racism would vanish as well. "Complexional caste is tolerated no where, excepting in the immediate vicinage of slavery," Garrison declared in 1847, adding that racism's "utter eradication is not to be expected until that hideous system be overthrown."<sup>33</sup> French scholar Alexis de Tocqueville, who traveled across the United States in the early 1830s, had a different observation. "The

prejudice of the race appears stronger in the States which have abolished slavery, than in those where it still exists; and nowhere is it so intolerant as in those States where servitude has never been known," Tocqueville wrote in his classic 1835 treatise, *Democracy in America*.<sup>34</sup>

Garrison accompanied Frederick Douglass on a speaking tour in the Old Northwest (what is now the easternmost portion of the Midwest). En route through Pennsylvania, he came face-to-face with racism outside of the immediate vicinage of slavery. When they arrived in Ohio in August 1847, every single free state in the region had restricted Black people from voting and serving in the militia in the prior half century. During this period, Ohio and Illinois explicitly named whiteness as a prerequisite for jurors; Black jury service in Indiana, Michigan, and the territory that would become the state of Wisconsin was unheard of. By 1851, many Midwestern states had restricted Black people from owning land or contracting for labor by forcing them to provide certificates of freedom and posting bonds to ensure that they would not become dependent. Several states prevented Black people who had recently arrived from residing there altogether.<sup>35</sup>

Abraham Lincoln came of age politically in one of these states. As a young Illinois politician, he held both racist and anti-slavery views. He expressed the former and dulled the latter when it suited him politically.<sup>36</sup> During his senatorial bid against Stephen Douglas in 1858, Lincoln appeased the racist ideas of Illinois voters by announcing, "I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the black and white races—that I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people." In the same speech, Lincoln expressed a belief in "a physical difference between the white and black races" that would "forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality."<sup>37</sup>

During his presidency, Lincoln opposed the expansion of slavery while also supporting colonization schemes as late as 1862.<sup>38</sup> Lincoln's positions on slavery, colonization, and emancipation shifted with the winds of political and military expediency stirred by the Civil War. But when it became a military necessity to save the Union, Lincoln issued and signed the Emancipation Proclamation. While the proclamation opened the door to enrolling around 180,000 Black soldiers in the Union army, it ended up freeing fewer than 200,000 Black people on the day it was signed. Nearly 500,000 Black people in border states; approximately 300,000 Black people in Union-occupied Confederate areas, including the entire state of Tennessee and portions of Virginia and Louisiana; and more than 3,000,000 people in Confederate territories

remained enslaved.<sup>39</sup> It was incumbent upon those enslaved Black people to emancipate themselves. And that is precisely what they did, running away from enslavers to Union lines; many of them joined the Union army, turning the tide of the war.

Nevertheless, in the next two years, Lincoln sat for journalists, artists, and photographers seeking to sculpt him into history as the Great Emancipator. Painter Francis Bicknell Carpenter spent six months at the White House in 1864 to visually re-create the moment when Lincoln ended slavery; *First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation of President Lincoln* was intended to “commemorate this new epoch in the history of Liberty,” Bicknell wrote.<sup>40</sup> Some people who witnessed the construction of Lincoln as the Great Emancipator realized that racial-progress mythology was being used to cleanse white people of their guilt and responsibility. “The negro has saved himself,” Ralph Waldo Emerson observed around this time, “and the white man very patronizingly says, I have saved you.”<sup>41</sup> White people—embodied in the enslaver—enslaved Black people. And then white people—embodied in Lincoln—freed Black people. In the end, it was white people who righted the wrong of slavery.

This formulation stemmed not from an accurate reading of events but from the myth of racial progress. Upon this myth, each successive generation of white Americans is let off the hook for the legacy of slavery. Politicians and the public alike can claim that this sin remains a part of the past, that the country has rid itself of the stain, and that there is no need for antiracist remedies like reparations.

Radical Reconstruction did bring about actual racial progress. The Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments—ending chattel slavery, granting Black people citizenship, and providing Black men the ability to vote—were passed. Southern constitutional conventions from 1867 to 1869 included Black delegates—about half of whom had been born in slavery—and white and Black elected officials introduced many Southern states’ first publicly funded education systems, penitentiaries, orphanages, and asylums for the mentally ill; expanded women’s rights and guaranteed rights to Black people; and reorganized local governments.<sup>42</sup>

And yet, as Eric Foner showed in his classic study of the period, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution*, these advances furnished a ready excuse for why more could not be done to achieve true equity and justice for all. The white leaders who advocated for Black men’s right to vote absolved themselves of a continued commitment to overturning lingering racist policies and practices by reasoning that Black men could now save themselves and

their families through the ballot box. For their own benefit, newly emancipated Black people “should not continue to be kept wards of the nation,” said reformer Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who had commanded Black soldiers in the Civil War. Or as congressional representative and future president James A. Garfield put it, “The Fifteenth Amendment confers upon the African race the care of its own destiny. It places their fortunes in their own hands.” These sentiments were widespread despite the fact that the formerly enslaved escaped their bondage with absolutely nothing. An Illinois newspaper proclaimed, “The negro is now a voter and a citizen. Let him hereafter take his chances in the battle of life.”<sup>43</sup> From this point forward, white Americans were ready to blame Black behavior, and not racism and the deprivations of 250 years of enslavement, for persisting racial inequities.

Meanwhile, under the cover of this narrative of racial progress, racism was advancing. Fierce resistance to Black economic freedom, civil rights, and political power held countless Black Americans in a second slavery, with few rights and powers. Violence from white terrorist groups like the new Ku Klux Klan and the Red Shirts allowed white supremacists to regain power in the early 1870s, while the Panic of 1873 drove many Black Southerners into debt servitude.<sup>44</sup>

In 1875, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act, which prohibited racist discrimination in public places and public facilities, including those that provided transportation or food. But the following year, when nine million people, or one-fifth of the U.S. population, attended the centennial of Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia, celebrated as a monument to that “palladium of our nation’s liberties,” another series of Black Codes was already restricting the rights of Black people to work and live in Southern states.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, with the Compromise of 1877, Reconstruction was brought to a close, the last federal troops were withdrawn from the South, and Jim Crow was born. As the nation celebrated a postwar unity, Southerners started hailing the *New South*. America was ostensibly marching forward, and if Black people were not keeping up, it was their own fault. In 1883, the Supreme Court used the language of progress to strike down the Civil Rights Act of 1875, opening the legal door to a raft of new Jim Crow laws. “When a man has emerged from slavery and by the aid of beneficent legislation has shaken off the inseparable concomitants of that state,” Justice Joseph P. Bradley concluded, writing for the majority, “there must be some stage in the progress of his elevation when he takes the rank of a mere citizen, and ceases to be the special favorite of the laws.” The Court twisted the litigants’ requests to be

treated equitably into a request to be “the special favorite” of the laws. *The New York Times* applauded the Court’s “undoing” of Congress’s work.”<sup>46</sup>

Nearly seventy years later, after the Second World War, the United States emerged as a global superpower, having founded the United Nations and formulated economic plans to protect European nations from staggering war debts. However, the United States and the Soviet Union soon took up arms in a war for influence in decolonizing countries in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Jim Crow segregation in the United States had been a topic of political discourse in the USSR since the late 1920s, and Black Americans’ experiences of racist policies and violence had been featured in the Soviet press to argue for the superiority of communism over capitalism and to charge the United States with hypocrisy for claiming to be the exemplar of global freedom. Racism experienced by Black Americans took on new significance during the Cold War.<sup>47</sup> The U.S. government tried to reconcile the nation’s new image as a global beacon of morality and democracy with worldwide press coverage of its pervasive racism.<sup>48</sup> In 1947, the Truman administration issued *To Secure These Rights: The Report of the President’s Committee on Civil Rights*, one of the most powerful indictments of racism ever to come from the U.S. government—a sign of progress in the midst of racism. But that same year, the NAACP offered the ninety-four-page *An Appeal to the World: A Statement on the Denial of Human Rights to Minorities in the Case of Citizens of Negro Descent in the United States of America and an Appeal to the United Nations for Redress*. And in 1951, the Civil Rights Congress delivered a petition, *We Charge Genocide*, to a meeting of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Paris. The petition documented 152 killings (or lynchings) and 344 other genocidal crimes against African Americans from 1945 to 1951.

American officials grew increasingly concerned that a public projection of racism against its own citizens would cause the United States to lose the support of people of color abroad—especially in those decolonizing African and Asian countries—while increasing their support for joining forces with the USSR. Scrambling into damage control, what is now the United States Information Agency (USIA) produced and circulated around the world a document titled *The Negro in American Life*.<sup>49</sup> “There began in the United States a theory of racial inferiority which became a key tenet in support of slavery and, later, of economic and social discrimination,” the pamphlet stated in 1950 or 1951. “It is against this background that the progress which the Negro has made and the steps still needed for the full solutions of his problems must be mea-

sured.”<sup>50</sup> *The Negro in American Life* ended up advancing the same narrative that Americans do today: a celebration of racial progress. In the context of the Cold War, the government used racial progress rhetoric to prop up the United States as the world’s leading democracy.

While *The Negro in American Life* did not want decolonizing nations to see the racist present, Black Americans lived it. Around this time, the majority of white Americans seemed to favor laws and policies that promoted segregated housing.<sup>51</sup> In 1946, only 28 percent of Southerners and 54 percent of Northerners with a high school diploma believed that Black Americans should be entitled to equal job opportunities. Degrees of support correlated to education level, with just 20 percent of Southerners and 46 percent of Northerners with a grade school education in support.<sup>52</sup> In a 1950 Roper Center survey on public school integration, only 41 percent of respondents said that “children of all races and color[s] should be allowed to go to the same schools together everywhere in the country.”<sup>53</sup> But still, the USIA pamphlet stated that at the turn of the century, “the majority of whites, northern as well as southern, were unabashed in their estimate of the Negro as an inferior. . . . Today, there is scarcely a community where that concept has not been drastically modified.”<sup>54</sup>

Like their predecessors, the writers of this pamphlet situated the past, not the present—or in some cases, the status of individual Black elites, not the masses—as defining the standards of measurements for progress. Over the past fifty years, progress for “the Negro” had occurred in all areas “at a tremendous pace,” according to *The Negro in American Life*. The pamphlet disclosed the existence of “large landowners,” of “wealthy businessmen,” of professionals, of tremendous advances in literacy rates and college enrollments. “Much remains to be done,” because the average income of white Americans was still “substantially better than that of Negroes,” the pamphlet stated. But the “gap is closing.”<sup>55</sup>

The racial-progress story becomes quite familiar from there. In 1954, with *Brown v. Board of Education*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that segregated public schools were unconstitutional. *Racial progress*. The Montgomery bus boycott began a movement for desegregation across the South in 1955. *Racial progress*. President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent federal troops to escort the Little Rock Nine in 1957. *Racial progress*. The lunch-counter sit-ins by Black college students in 1960 led to the desegregation of Southern businesses. *Racial progress*. Freedom Riders helped desegregate bus terminals in 1961. *Racial progress*. The March on Washington and the dream of Martin Luther King, Jr., made nationwide news in 1963. *Racial progress*. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed. *Racial progress*.

But what is left out of this story is that this Second Reconstruction was needed because the First Reconstruction, after the Civil War ended in 1865, failed to bring into being and sustain an equitable nation—an effort undermined by the propaganda of racial progress. What is left out of the story of our time is that a Third Reconstruction is needed because the Second Reconstruction failed to actualize King's dream, again undermined by the racial-progress propaganda.

On June 4, 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson gave the commencement address at Howard University. "It is a tribute to America that, once aroused, the courts and the Congress, the President and most of the people, have been the allies of progress," he said.<sup>56</sup> But he also showed why decades of racial progress rhetoric had been shortsighted. Progress has primarily come for "a growing middle class minority," while for poor Black people "the walls are rising and the gulf is widening," Johnson pointed out. "Thirty-five years ago the rate of unemployment for Negroes and whites was about the same," he noted. "Tonight the Negro rate is twice as high." In recent decades, Johnson added, income disparities, disparities in poverty rates, disparities in infant mortality, and urban segregation were all increasing.<sup>57</sup>

Still, Johnson's racial-progress message lived on in history, and his warnings died in the fires of the late 1960s. After he signed the Voting Rights Act into law on August 6, 1965, the USIA again made sure that the Cold-Warring world digested it as a sign of progress. In 1965, agents composed and circulated *For the Dignity of Man: America's Civil Rights Program*. Progress had arrived, the pamphlet stated. And now racism had been mostly confined to "individuals and some states and local governments." It conveyed to the world a middle-class, interracial, harmonious United States, a country most Black Americans would have hardly recognized.<sup>58</sup>

One year earlier, Malcolm X had stood before a meeting of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) at a Methodist church in Cleveland. "How can you thank a man for giving you what's already yours?" he asked, speaking of the Civil Rights Act, which was making its way through Congress at the time. "You haven't even made progress, if what's being given to you, you should have had already. That's not progress."<sup>59</sup> Malcolm X and others remained skeptical of all the progress rhetoric.

To skeptical African Americans it was not surprising when, five days after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, police brutality set off the six-day Watts Rebellion against racism, one of the most destructive urban rebellions in U.S. history. President Johnson was stunned. "After all we've accomplished. How can it be?" he asked a top aide.<sup>60</sup> And then came more than one hundred urban

rebellions in the summer of 1967, and Black people demanding more than civil and voting rights. Ruled by white minorities in majority Black counties, neighborhoods, and cities, Black people demanded democracy. They demanded political power—Black Power! But Johnson spoke for many white Americans when he responded to the uprisings in his State of the Union address on January 17, 1968, by stating, to bipartisan applause, that "the American people have had enough of rising crime and lawlessness."<sup>61</sup>

Just six weeks later, the commission Johnson had established the previous summer to study the causes of the urban rebellions issued its report. According to the eleven-member Kerner Commission, the main issue was not crime and lawlessness but white racism. "Our nation is moving towards two societies," the report proclaimed, in its most famous passage, "one black, one white—separate and unequal."<sup>62</sup> To arrest this alarming development, the commission recommended the creation of higher-paying, higher-status jobs for Black people; a federal open-occupancy law that would prohibit racist discrimination against prospective Black renters or home buyers; and an increase in political representation in local governments for poor Black communities.

But in the afterglow of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, as the United States proclaimed racial progress to the world and to itself, Johnson ignored most of the commission's recommendations. The Second Reconstruction's last victory was the Civil Rights Act of 1968, which targeted racism in housing.<sup>63</sup> "We have come some of the way, not near all of it," Johnson remarked on its passage in the aftermath of King's assassination. "There is much yet to do."<sup>64</sup> This iteration of the racial-progress refrain, which can be traced back to the Cold War pamphlet *The Negro in American Life*, focuses our attention on how the United States has come a long way (the past) and how America has a long way to go (the future). This past/future logic has compelled generation after generation to overlook the present—indeed, the presence of racism.

In the 1970s, newly emergent "conservatives," as they self-identified, broke from the liberal past/future refrain that the nation still had a ways to go. They pointed to the legislative gains of the preceding decades to claim that the nation had arrived; Black people in the here and now were no longer facing racism. Conservatives framed supporters of affirmative action as "hard-core racists of reverse discrimination" against white people, as Yale Law professor Robert Bork claimed in 1978.<sup>65</sup> Such arguments echoed the Supreme Court



ruling in 1883 that found the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional, gutting the anti-racist protections of the Reconstruction amendments on the grounds that Black Americans should not be treated as “the special favorite.” Like enslavers and centrist anti-slavery Americans agreeing on the need to colonize free Black people (but disagreeing on colonizing the enslaved), leading white Republicans and Democrats agreed that substantial progress had been made (and disagreed only about whether racism was over).

During the presidential debate on October 28, 1980, between incumbent Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, an audience member highlighted the racist policies that “nonwhite” Americans faced in schools, jobs, and housing. Reagan replied that he was “eternally optimistic” about race relations and expressed his belief “that we’ve made great progress from the days when I was young and when this country didn’t even know it had a racial problem.” Carter acknowledged that the United States “still had a long way to go” but highlighted the “good [racial] progress” promoted through Democratic policies involving “unemployment compensation, the minimum wage, welfare, [and] national health insurance.”<sup>66</sup>

By the 1990s, the gulf between the rhetoric of racial progress and the reality for millions of Black Americans had grown wider, as the former became more and more triumphant. In 1995, four years after the LAPD brutally beat Rodney King, Dinesh D’Souza, a former Reagan aide, published a book titled *The End of Racism*. This was the year of the O. J. Simpson trial, with its racially polarizing verdict and revelations of racist LAPD behavior, and the beginning of the apex of Black incarceration rates during the War on Drugs, after Bill Clinton signed the devastatingly punitive 1994 crime bill. Two years later, in their 1997 blockbuster *America in Black and White*, Manhattan Institute fellow Abigail Thernstrom and her husband, Harvard historian Stephan Thernstrom, argued that “few whites are now racists” and that what dominates current race relations is “black anger” and “white surrender.”<sup>67</sup>

By the century’s end, the term “color-blind” was often being used by politicians and thinkers to describe the correct way to think about race, since so much progress had been achieved and apparently all Americans were already being treated equally. “Color-blind” white people were telling Black Americans to stop playing “the race card.”<sup>68</sup> Black cultures and behaviors were once again being blamed for racial disparities and inequity, while anti-Black racism was exonerated on the altar of racial progress.

On January 10, 2000, the Harvard University sociologist Orlando Patterson guaranteed that by 2050 the United States “will have problems aplenty. But no racial problem whatsoever.”<sup>69</sup> Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor

cut that time period in half in a 2003 case upholding some forms of affirmative action in university admissions. “We expect that 25 years from now,” she wrote, “the use of racial preferences will no longer be necessary to further the interest approved today.”<sup>70</sup>

The election of Obama in 2008 became the final proof to some that the United States had achieved the ultimate victory of racial progress, the end of racism. This message was offered as much to Black Americans as to non-Black Americans. In a post-election piece published in the *Los Angeles Times*, Hoover Institution fellow Shelby Steele asked, “Doesn’t a black in the Oval Office put the lie to both black inferiority and white racism? Doesn’t it imply a ‘post-racial’ America?”<sup>71</sup> In 2008, the General Social Survey asked whether Black Americans “have worse jobs, income, and housing than White people . . . mainly due to discrimination.” Only 35 percent of Americans answered “yes,” the fourth-lowest anti-racist response in three decades of polling.<sup>72</sup> During his second term, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington in 2013, President Obama stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. He declared, “The arc of the universe may bend toward justice, but it doesn’t bend on its own.”<sup>73</sup>

Obama was referring to a phrase from Martin Luther King, Jr.’s 1956 speech after the Montgomery bus boycott: “The arc of the moral universe, although long, is bending toward justice.”<sup>74</sup> King himself had paraphrased the words of Theodore Parker, a Unitarian minister and abolitionist, who before the Civil War had believed emancipation was coming. “I do not pretend,” Parker wrote, “to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.”<sup>75</sup>

President Obama often paraphrased the quote in speeches. He even had the phrase woven into the rug in the Oval Office.<sup>76</sup> In his farewell address in Chicago in 2017, President Obama told Americans that “we’re not where we need to be.” But he assured the nation, “The long sweep of America has been defined by forward motion, a constant widening of our founding creed to embrace all, and not just some.”<sup>77</sup>

The arc of the moral universe is indeed long, and as Obama observed, it doesn’t bend on its own. The people bend it toward justice or injustice, toward equity or inequity. The long sweep of America has been defined by two forward motions: one force widening the embrace of Black Americans and another force maintaining or widening their exclusion. The duel between these two forces represents the duel at the heart of America’s racial history. The



myth of singular racial progress veils this conflict—and it veils the snowballing racism behind Black people today still weathering the highest unemployment and incarceration rates and the lowest life expectancy and median wealth compared to other racial groups. Until Americans replace mythology with history, until Americans unveil and halt the progression of racism, an arc of the American universe will keep bending toward injustice.

## 17 The Alt-Right in Charlottesville

HOW AN ONLINE MOVEMENT BECAME  
A REAL-WORLD PRESENCE

*Nicole Hemmer*

There was a frisson of excitement rippling through the white vans carrying marchers to downtown Charlottesville on the morning of August 12, 2017. The night before, they had gathered in the dark and marched under flickering torchlight. But that morning they would assemble in the full light of day, faces clear and bright under the midday sun when the rally kicked off at noon.

It was the alt-right's coming-out rally.

For nearly a decade, the alt-right (a Far Right movement rooted in racist nationalism) had been a largely online phenomenon, a growing network of white supremacists, men's rights activists, antisemites, and others who sought to craft an alternative to American conservatism. Believing the American Right had become too milquetoast and moderate, they wanted to form a Far Right politics centered on white supremacy, patriarchy, and nativism. Though there were publications and public events that attended the rise of the alt-right, its group identity was primarily forged online, a characteristic evident in its meme-based language, trolling-based strategies, and key events like #GamerGate.

The Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville was supposed to be the moment the alt-right crossed over into the real world, demonstrating its

physical presence and political strength in the aftermath of President Donald Trump's election. It was meant to show widespread unity on the Right, connecting the most violent fringes of the alt-right with its more respectable avatars.

In that, the alt-right largely failed. But to dismiss the events in Charlottesville as a failure, to see it as a catastrophe that ended the political importance of the alt-right, is a mistake. The events at Charlottesville revealed the intertwined nature of the movement's quest for political acceptance and hunger for political violence, and marked the reorganization, not the dissipation, of the broader movement.

#### THE EARLY DAYS OF THE ALT-RIGHT

To the extent that it has a definable beginning, the "alternative Right" traces back to 2008, when it was devised by Paul Gottfried, a humanities professor and paleoconservative, and Richard Spencer, a white supremacist. The two worked together at *Taki's Magazine*, a publication that served as a gathering place for members of the Right who felt they no longer fit within the contemporary conservative movement.

Gottfried and Spencer had two different visions for the alternative Right, but they were appropriate coauthors of the term. For Spencer, the phrase was new window dressing for a white supremacist ideology with neo-Nazi roots and ethnic cleansing aims, ideas far, far outside the mainstream. In 2008 he also founded his National Policy Institute, a think tank whose banal name belied its extremist politics.

Gottfried had been tossing around for a word for the movement he had described as "post-paleo." He believed that the original paleoconservative movement, which had emerged in the 1980s and 1990s around noninterventionist nationalism and the traditionalist values of the culture wars, had largely run its course, drained by internecine fights and the graying of its advocates (Pat Buchanan most prominent among them). But he had noticed a new phenomenon emerging in places like the Ron Paul campaigns: a right-wing movement that shared paleoconservatism's noninterventionist and nationalist politics but seemed to have a new energy.<sup>1</sup>

There was one more thing Gottfried believed was wrong with the older paleoconservatives vis-à-vis the post-paleos: they no longer showed any interest in "human cognitive disparities." What could Gottfried have meant by this? He explained that paleoconservatism regrettably showed "little interest in the cognitive, hereditary preconditions for intellectual and cultural achievements" and that some paleos were even drifting into the "liberal immigrationist camp."<sup>2</sup>

In other words, the paleoconservative movement had lost its interest in racist IQ theories, like those found in the pseudoscientific tract *The Bell Curve*, and antiimmigration policy.

Fortunately, he continued, the generation of young professionals who made up the post-paleos had taken readily to those issues and were sharing their work in outlets like *Taki's Magazine* and *VDARE*, a virulently anti-immigration, white nationalist website.<sup>3</sup>

Gottfried distanced himself from Spencer around the time Spencer began giving Nazi salutes in public, but it is not difficult to see how their interests intersected in 2008.<sup>4</sup>

The alt-right's early ties to paleoconservatism, bell-curve racism, and anti-immigrant politics help explain both the origins of the alt-right and the belief by people like Spencer that the movement could eventually find a home in the mainstream Right: after all, all three of those ideas were en vogue on the Right in the 2000s and 2010s, especially as neoconservative policies were undergoing renewed challenge thanks to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. While in elite Republican circles neoconservatism rarely met sustained challenge, in the conservative base it was far more contested.

Digital outlets like *Taki's Magazine*, *VDARE*, *AltRight*, and *Radix Journal* all worked to frame the alt-right as an intellectual project, a challenge to the movement conservatism of magazines like *National Review* and the neoconservatism of magazines like *Weekly Standard*. Alt-right leaders understood the significance of these intellectual homes, and indeed shared lineage with the leading magazine of paleoconservative thought, *The American Conservative*, which was founded in 2002 by Pat Buchanan, Scott McConnell, and Taki Theodoracopulos, the last of whom would found *Taki's Magazine* in 2007.

Without drawing too sharp a line between the early alt-right and paleoconservatism—the networks and ideas overlap significantly—

paleoconservatives emphasized noninterventionist, even isolationist, foreign policy and Christian traditionalism, while the early alt-right focused much more on white supremacy, antifeminism, and anti-immigration ideas. As alt-right leaders integrated more into established networks of white power organizing, some early adherents like Gottfried would distance themselves from the alt-right label, but as an intellectual and organizational project, the post-paleo movement would continue (as seen in the many fractures and rebranding efforts post-Charlottesville).<sup>5</sup>

The intellectualization of the alt-right was only one part of the movement, which flourished online, particularly on discussion and image boards like Reddit, 4chan, and 8chan, as well as in online video game groups and on social-media and video-sharing platforms like Twitter and YouTube. In these digital spaces, the alt-right became a project of radicalization, bringing more and more people, primarily young, college-educated white men, into the movement. While the exact scope of the movement is difficult to determine, given that it operated in amorphous and often anonymous spaces, a fair estimate is that tens of thousands of young, white men of varying class and educational backgrounds from across the United States and Canada identified with the alt-right (though most of the public leaders have college degrees, and the groups recruit on college campuses). The most important shared demographic for the group is that they are almost exclusively white and male.<sup>6</sup>

These digital formats shaped the linguistics of the alt-right, dominated by memes (images that, through widespread sharing and creative modification, serve as symbolic insider referents) and lingo pulled from culture and packed with meaning. Through networks of men's rights activists, white nationalists, gamers, and the like, terms such as *red-pill* and *cuck* became ubiquitous on the alt-right. The first was borrowed from the film *The Matrix* to explain someone who had chosen to see the world as it truly is—that is, to see through the lies of “political correctness” and accept “natural” race and sex hierarchies. The second was borrowed from a porn genre that features Black men having sex with white women as the women's white male partners watch, capturing the emasculation and racial inferiority that the alt-right encourages white men to stand up against.

Other memes had no logical connection to the politics of the alt-right. Pepe the Frog, a cartoon character, had a long history as a popular meme

on 4chan and Tumblr before being co-opted by the alt-right. So thoroughly had the alt-right absorbed the Pepe image that it became internet shorthand for the movement, and the frog symbol became a marker in Twitter names and alt-right websites like Gab.ai.

The adoption of a nonsensical character—around which an equally nonsensical mythology sprang up, involving the Egyptian god Kek and the fictional nation of Kekistan, whose flag was modeled off the flag of Nazi Germany's navy—points to one of the most important stylistic innovations of the alt-right, especially in comparison with the white power and neo-Nazi groups that preceded it. Using the tools of irony and jokiness, people aligned with the alt-right were able to disguise their genuine political ideology and slowly introduce newcomers to their ideas, testing people's boundaries by laughing off anything that drew a negative reaction.

This early development of the alt-right occurred mostly out of public view. The first time the movement started to gain media attention was in 2014 because of something called GamerGate. The video game community had long been the province of gamers, who were overwhelmingly young, white, and male. In an effort to expand the sorts of games available and to challenge the overtly masculine and often misogynist nature of gaming, a feminist game designer named Zoe Quinn released a game called *Depression Quest* in 2013. It is difficult to overstate how innocuous this game was, or to understate the scale of backlash against Quinn and the women journalists who covered her work. Rape threats, death threats, doxing, swatting: the women were subject to the most violent aspects of the gaming community and the misogynist men's rights community.<sup>7</sup>

The attacks on Quinn, Brianna Wu, and Anita Sarkeesian were largely carried out over social media sites like Reddit and 4chan, though at times they crossed into the real world. The main line of grievance in GamerGate was this: video games were now subject to “political correctness” (the dismissive label for concerns about representation), and one more space that had once been the province primarily of white men was being intruded upon by feminists, antiracists, and “social justice warriors,” as GamerGaters called them.

GamerGate did not garner much media attention—the concerns of gamers were not considered front-page material—but it did catch the eye of Steve Bannon. Bannon had grown interested in online gaming communities

in 2005, when he raised \$60 million for Internet Gaming Entertainment, a company that used low-wage Chinese workers to make money playing *World of Warcraft*. He later said that he'd been intrigued by the game's community: "These guys, these rootless white males, had monster power." In 2014 he found that same "monster power" in GamerGate. Where most people saw harassment, Bannon saw potential activists. He believed he could take the energy and anger that fueled GamerGate and bring those gamers, primarily young white men, into a broader politics of populist white nationalism—in other words, into the politics of the alt-right.<sup>8</sup>

Bannon, who was running a right-wing website called Breitbart, had long seen potential in the alt-right. He believed that by focusing on the grievances of white men, it was possible to tap into a broader world of pro-West, antiliberal, anti-civil rights politics that could be harnessed for genuine political change. So he hired a young tech writer named Milo Yiannopoulos, who rose to prominence covering the controversy. Bannon put Milo in charge of the technology section of Breitbart.

Together, Bannon and Milo helped transform Breitbart into a place that could serve as, in Bannon's words to a *Mother Jones* reporter in August 2016, a "platform for the alt-right." Not exactly an alt-right publication, Breitbart was instead a conduit for helping to mainstream the alt-right and gain it legitimacy.

It's important to understand what Breitbart was before GamerGate and the turn to alt-right amplification. The site was founded in 2007 by Andrew Breitbart, a California-based activist who believed conservatives could use the internet in far more effective ways than they had in the early 2000s. So he launched Breitbart, which began as a news aggregator, then increasingly developed an identity as a right-wing populist site, opposed to bigness (its sections were called Big Government, Big Media, Big Hollywood, and the like) and eager to use investigative journalism and exposés to bring down Democrats and the American Left (it was Andrew Breitbart who revealed that Democratic representative Anthony Weiner had been sending sexually suggestive messages to a minor online).

Breitbart, while an online innovator, was not particularly distinguishable from other mainstream conservative media outlets. After Andrew Breitbart died suddenly in 2012, control of the publication fell to Steve Bannon, who had distinctly populist-nationalist politics. Though national-

ism wasn't especially en vogue in 2012, populism was. And Bannon, with an eye on the churn in European politics, saw the potential to mobilize a new coalition in the United States, one rooted in disaffected young white men. When he brought Yiannopoulos aboard, he began transforming Breitbart from a conservative site to a right-wing nationalist outlet with increasingly close ties to the European Right and to the online alt-right.

When Donald Trump entered the presidential race in 2015, these forces coalesced. Having worked with Bannon in the past, Trump had learned the language of nationalism. He openly mocked the decision to go to war in Iraq and Afghanistan—catnip to paleoconservatives—and made openly racist anti-immigration rhetoric central to his campaign. These ideas were well outside the consensus of the Republican elite in 2015.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, from the beginning Trump's campaign seemed like one big troll: the announcement speech in his own hotel lobby, the rambling attacks on immigrants and Muslims and other Republicans, the ridiculous nicknames, the self-evident falsehoods, the constant contradictions. Yet he instantly resonated with the GOP base, surging to the top of the polls within a few weeks of his announcement and never losing that top spot.

What read as authenticity and entertainment to many of Trump's supporters looked very different from the perspective of the alt-right. Here was a candidate who put white male grievance at the center of his campaign, who delivered his most outlandish lines with an am-I-serious? smirk, and who seemed to shred the niceties and norms that had once defined American presidential campaigns. When hit, he hit back twice as hard.

These features made the Trump campaign an opportunity for the alt-right. Online, acting primarily under the veil of anonymity, members of the alt-right honed a media strategy that first brought the movement to the attention of mainstream journalists. This was intentional: the alt-right targeted journalists, primarily on Twitter, sending them not just memes but gruesome images from World War II death camps, antisemitic symbols, and photos of lynchings. Suddenly inundated by these images from seemingly hundreds if not thousands of individual accounts, one could scarcely not notice that something was happening.

And still, though journalists had been barraged with swastikas, antisemitic memes, and unprecedented troll attacks that occasionally spilled over into real life in the form of phone calls and letters, the alt-right



received no sustained attention prior to Trump's decision in August 2016 to hire Bannon as his campaign chief and Hillary Clinton's decision, a few days later, to deliver a speech on the dangers of the alt-right.

The mainstreaming of the alt-right had begun.

In alt-right circles, the Clinton speech was a moment of celebration. Trump's decision to hire Bannon had made the movement impossible to ignore; Clinton's decision to speak out about the movement had generated national attention. The two events combined raised awareness in a way that many believed could be used as a recruiting tool to expand the movement. After all, they were now associated with the nominee of a major party. Whatever one thought of Donald Trump's chances in late August 2016—and few people believed he was in a position to win—that association nonetheless helped draw the alt-right that much closer to mainstream politics.

#### COMING OUT

It was in this moment that Richard Spencer became the face of the alt-right. Typical of the coverage he received in the closing days of the campaign (and in the months after) was a piece in the left-wing magazine *Mother Jones*, originally run under the headline "Meet the Dapper White Nationalist Who Wins Even If Trump Loses." The October 27, 2016, piece, which featured Spencer in a tweedy suit eating "slivers of togarashi-crusted ahi from a rectangular plate" at a restaurant in Whitefish, Montana, where he lived, helped shape the image of the alt-right as a movement of handsomely clad, well-educated white men who would happily wolf down fusion cuisine while plotting the future of the white race.<sup>10</sup>

That image benefited the alt-right in a variety of ways, not least by generating unexpectedly flattering, if not fawning, coverage in mainstream media by journalists who mistakenly believed that white nationalists were relics of a long-forgotten past, toothless country bumpkins in tattered Klan robes. That misunderstanding of racism would come with a hefty price tag: in treating Spencer as someone surprisingly respectable, journalists ignored the fact that white nationalist organizers had always adapted to the fashion of their times, only appearing as sepia-toned relics once decades had passed.

In giving Spencer the star treatment, replete with lengthy profiles that detailed his clothes, his diet, his haircut, and, sometimes as almost an afterthought, his virulently racist politics, journalists helped amplify Spencer and added to the air of celebrity that encircled him in late 2016 and into 2017. That amplification had consequences, because Spencer, having found his way into the spotlight, sought a way to stay there.

Donald Trump's surprise victory in November 2016 fed much of the media coverage of Spencer. Suddenly it seemed like the alt-right, like the populist-nationalism Trump and Bannon represented, had been legitimated—far more mainstream than most Americans had thought prior to election night. The DeploraBall, an inauguration event hosted and attended by many of the leading alt-right celebrities, including Spencer, Jack Posobiec, and Gavin McInnes, featured Nazi salutes and a triumphant movement that seemed poised to take over Washington along with the new administration.<sup>11</sup>

But as journalists turned their attention to the new administration and the resistance organizing against it, Spencer set his sights a little further south. At a rally in front of the White House to oppose the bombing of Syria—the alt-right retained its post-paleo commitment to nonintervention, especially when it involved an ally of Russia, to whom the group shared a particular allegiance because of its conservative dictatorial government—he met a young alt-right acolyte named Jason Kessler.

Kessler had been making a name for himself a hundred miles southwest of the capital in his hometown of Charlottesville, Virginia. There, Vice Mayor Wes Bellamy, a newly elected African American member of the city council, had begun advocating for the removal of two massive Confederate statues that stood in public parks in the city's downtown. Activists in town bolstered Bellamy's argument, noting that the Confederate soldiers depicted in the statues, Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, had never stepped foot in Charlottesville. They also argued that, because 52 percent of the county was enslaved during the Civil War, the Confederate soldiers had been an occupying army and the U.S. soldiers had been liberators, a reality not reflected in the town's statuary.

Because Bellamy was the leading advocate for the statues' removal, Kessler began targeting him, looking for a way to unseat the vice mayor. But he also wanted to use the debate over the statues as a focal point for



the alt-right movement. He believed that connecting with Spencer would buy him purchase within the alt-right leadership and that their mutual connection to Charlottesville—Spencer was a University of Virginia alum—could serve as a common bond.

Spencer too was eyeing Charlottesville and the monument battle. Confederate statues had long blurred the line between white nationalism and regional pride, offering plausible deniability for the white supremacists who wanted to use the statues as their new cause du jour. The turn to the statues controversy represented a pivot away from the Trump campaign and toward a battle that would connect them both with a deeper American history and a new audience ripe for radicalization.

On May 13, 2017, Spencer joined Mike Enoch, a neo-Nazi blogger and podcaster, and a hundred or so other self-identified members of the alt-right in Charlottesville. They plowed through the Festival of Cultures, a celebration of the town's diversity featuring booths from different countries. The celebration was being held in Lee Park in the shadow of the statue of Robert E. Lee, one of the statues whose removal was under debate. The white supremacists crowded around the Germany booth in a tribute to Adolf Hitler, then made their way to Jackson Park and the statue of Stonewall Jackson, where they made their speeches.<sup>12</sup>

These speeches, full-throated declarations of white supremacy, did not try to hide or temper their politics. The fight was not just about the statues, Spencer declared, it was about white heroes and white history and the effort to stamp out white culture. He put in bald terms what defenders of the Confederacy seldom stated or even acknowledged: the deeply racist history behind the statues and their subjects.<sup>13</sup>

If the daytime event was about white supremacy—a catalogue of the superiority of the white race and white history—the nighttime event was about white power—a demonstration of the physical intimidation and violence that the alt-right was willing to use to enforce that claim of supremacy. A hundred members of the alt-right returned to Lee Park with torches. They circled the statue of Lee and chanted “Blood and soil” and “You will not replace us.”

Two weeks later, Jason Kessler filed for a permit for a rally in Lee Park, scheduled for August 12, 2017.

## UNITE THE RIGHT

The Unite the Right rally was billed as a free speech event with two overarching goals: to forge a broad right-wing coalition that included the alt-right and to frame the group's organizing as a testament to the Left's intolerance for the First Amendment.

It would end up shattering the alt-right coalition and associating it irredeemably with terroristic violence.

The strain on the alt-right coalition was a function of efforts to broaden it. The lineup for the day included Spencer, Kessler, Enoch, Ku Klux Klan organizer David Duke, neo-Nazi Anthime Gionet (a.k.a. Baked Alaska), libertarian candidate and Far Right activist Austin Gillespie (a.k.a. Augustus Sol Invictus), white supremacist and men's rights activist Christopher Cantwell, neo-Nazi organizer Matt Heimbach of the Traditionalist Worker Party, white supremacist and conspiracist John Ramondetta (a.k.a. Johnny Monoxide), former chief technology officer of *Business Insider* and alt-right troll Pax Dickinson, and neo-Confederate Michael Hill.<sup>14</sup>

That lineup, plus the May statue rally and torch-burning, had put white supremacy at the center of the Charlottesville activism. While groups like the Proud Boys (of which Jason Kessler was a member) were present in Charlottesville throughout the summer of 2017 and during the events of August 11 and 12, their leaders had tried to put distance between the “alt-light” or “civil nationalists” and the alt-right as early as the DeploraBall in January of that year.

The Proud Boys were organized in 2016 by *Vice* magazine founder Gavin McInnes as a men's-only neofascist organization dedicated to political violence. The group, which the Southern Poverty Law Center estimated had around six thousand members in 2017, was closely associated with the alt-right and the men's rights movement, but McInnes worked to separate the group, to an extent, from the more openly white supremacist organizations and leaders within the alt-right. This offshoot rebranded itself the “alt-light,” hinting at its leaders' efforts to moderate their image. McInnes and other members of the so-called alt-light, like Mike Cernovich, Jack Posobiec, and Milo Yiannopoulos, had worked alongside Richard

Spencer and associated with the alt-right into 2016; after Trump's election, when political power and influence seemed more attainable, they distanced themselves from Spencer and his allies.<sup>15</sup>

No moment better captured these shifts than competing rallies in Washington, DC, in late June 2017, seven weeks before the Unite the Right rally. The organizer of the "Rally for Free Speech," Colton Merwin, made a last-minute change to the speakers' list, adding Spencer. As soon as he did, activists Laura Loomer and Jack Posobiec pulled out of the event, and Posobiec organized a counterrally, the "Rally against Political Violence." The competing rallies, both operating under appealing but inaccurate names, were physical representations of how split the movement had become.<sup>16</sup>

The Unite the Right rally crystallized those tensions, as McInnes denounced the planned gathering and warned Proud Boys not to attend (though many did). The objections to the Unite the Right rally flowed from several sources: rejection of Spencer's leadership, part of the internecine fights within the alt-right; concern over the open neo-Nazi identity of some of the speakers; and even worry that the gathering would be infiltrated by law enforcement.

But whatever the motivation, it was clear by mid-2017 that a portion of the alt-right wanted to return to its "post-paleo" roots, to a time when the movement, while still defined by white male chauvinism, was not so publicly aligned with white power organizing.

Yet the divisions at the leadership level were not so cleanly reflected in the movement more broadly, and the ostensible aims of the Unite the Right rally—building a coalition, defending free speech, protecting Confederate statues—continued to shape the planned activities for the day, as well as the rules surrounding it. Participants were urged not to give Nazi salutes, and, having worked closely with law enforcement in preparation for the day, the organizers anticipated a scene of stark contrasts, with the speakers orating from the park while counterprotesters clashed with police.

That planned symbolism was important, because for months the alt-right had been honing a set of arguments meant to help mainstream the movement: wanting only their God-given right to speak freely, the alt-right had revealed the intolerance, violence, and un-Americanness of a Left that refused to let them speak. It was a smart tactic, because by fram-

ing the political stakes not as white supremacy versus antiracism but as free speech versus censorship, the alt-right could effectively flip the tolerance-intolerance framework around white supremacy (something that, in other circumstances, they have done quite effectively).<sup>17</sup>

Such a plan could have succeeded, perhaps, but it was dramatically undercut by the decision to hold an unannounced torchlight march on August 11, the evening before the Unite the Right rally. That march began as an act of political intimidation and ended as an act of political violence, as hundreds of white men (and a handful of white women) marched onto the University of Virginia's campus without prior notice or authorization, shouting slogans like "Jews will not replace us." When they arrived at their intended rallying point, the statue of Thomas Jefferson outside the university's famed Rotunda (an attempt to claim Jefferson as part of the lineage of white heroes), they found a small group of antiracist students and activists circling the statue. The marchers surrounded the protesters and then began to beat them as police looked on nearby.

The torchlight march unmade the argument, defended in court just hours earlier, that the Unite the Right rally was about political speech rather than political violence. At 8 p.m., U.S. District Court judge Glen Conrad had sided with the American Civil Liberties Union, on free speech and free assembly grounds, to allow the rally to be held in downtown Charlottesville rather than moved to a more isolated, and more defensible, spot a mile away. Less than two hours later, the torchlight march showed that the judge had erred, that the core issue was in fact public safety, because the alt-right activists were planning to engage in political violence.

But no new order was issued, and the rally was allowed to proceed as planned.

By the next morning, none of the stated premises of the Unite the Right rally were intact. Rather than uniting a broad right-wing coalition around the issue of Confederate nostalgia and white rights, the organizers had exposed the sharp limits of a political movement that openly displayed Nazi symbols and chanted antisemitic slurs. The violence at the Rotunda had exposed the inauthenticity of the free speech claims and made it impossible to pin the violence of the day on antiracist and antifascist counterprotesters. Even had the rest of the day gone as planned, had the white supremacists and neo-Confederates and neo-Nazis given their

speeches and marched in and out of the park under police protection, the rally was already a failure on its declared terms (though, as I'll discuss in the next section, the stated goals and the actual goals of the rally should not be assumed to be the same).

As it happened, the rally did not go as planned. As the speakers huddled in the rear of the park, alt-right supporters and white supremacist activists, many of them armed, gleefully clashed with counterprotesters, unimpeded by the massive police presence that encircled the downtown area. When the park was cleared well in advance of the planned start time, white supremacists rolled through the city's narrow streets. One group savagely beat counterprotester DeAndre Harris in a parking garage next to the police station in what was, at the time, the bloodiest violence of the day.

A little over ninety minutes later, at 1:41 p.m., twenty-year-old James Alex Fields Jr., who earlier in the day had been seen carrying a shield with the emblem of Vanguard America, a neo-Nazi organization, sped his gray Dodge Charger into a crowd of counterprotesters, killing an activist named Heather Heyer and injuring dozens of others in an act of terroristic violence.

In December 2018, a Virginia jury found Fields guilty of first-degree murder, malicious wounding, and leaving the scene of a fatal crash. His sentence: life plus 419 years and \$480,000 in fines. Six months later, Fields pleaded guilty to twenty-nine federal hate-crime charges, and received twenty-nine life sentences.<sup>18</sup>

#### THE AFTERMATH

The shocking images from Charlottesville roiled the nation for the next week, though the ultimate cost to the alt-right was not immediately clear. That's in part because, in the days following the violent march and terror attack, President Trump equivocated in his response. His infamous statement that there were "very fine people" on both sides was understood by alt-right activists as an endorsement of their cause.

Yet in the weeks and months that followed, fallout mounted. A few high-profile activists were arrested, including one of the scheduled speakers, Christopher Cantwell. The Traditionalist Worker Party, a neo-Nazi

organization founded by scheduled speaker Matthew Heimbach with about five hundred members, dissolved. Participants in the torchlit march were doxed (that is, had their personal information, including their identities, released online by antiracist and antifascist activists) and several lost their jobs as a result. Identity Evropa, the neo-Nazi group with about one thousand members that coined the chant "You will not replace us," saw its membership rapidly decline and was forced to rebrand as the American Identity Movement.

An independent review conducted by Tim Heaphy, a former U.S. attorney, found that the police had been ill-prepared and had failed to properly coordinate across local, state, and national units. The commonwealth's attorney told police, incorrectly, that they could not restrict weapons, when they could—and should—have prohibited nonfirearm weapons. Commanders told their units not to intervene except in the most severe cases of violence, and the style of intervention—closing down the park and pushing the alt-right ralliers into the counterprotesters—served to ramp up, rather than deescalate, the violence.<sup>19</sup>

In national politics, Charlottesville made some people and moments temporarily toxic. Steve Bannon left the White House five days after the violence in Charlottesville, and soon after took his nationalist project abroad, helping organize nationalist movements in Europe. And while Donald Trump continued to defend his post-Charlottesville comments—in 2019, he insisted he had "answered perfectly"—there was a coordinated campaign on the Right to deny that Trump even made the comments, calling it "the Charlottesville lie."<sup>20</sup>

New legal techniques developed by counterterrorism expert Mary McCord disarmed and depressed scheduled rallies in Tennessee, and the tiny turnout for a rally in Boston suggested that whatever the alt-right had hoped to achieve in Charlottesville, the events of August 11 and 12 had sealed the movement's fate, discrediting white supremacy, shattering the alt-right, and exposing the emptiness of the movement's First Amendment claims.<sup>21</sup>

That, anyway, is the conventional wisdom surrounding Charlottesville. But it paints far too rosy a picture.

First, the terrorism in Charlottesville must be understood as part of an unbroken, and indeed increasing, line of Far Right white supremacist terror attacks. Though future historians may be able to fill in the gaps of our

current knowledge, from our perspective, we can see a rise in terroristic white power violence as early as 2011, when white supremacists David Pederson and Holly Grigsby went on a multistate killing spree. A year later, Wade Michael Page, who had neo-Nazi and white supremacist ties, killed six people at a Sikh temple in Wisconsin. A white supremacist killed three people in two shootings at Jewish centers in Kansas City, and the next year Dylann Roof murdered nine Black worshippers in Charleston, South Carolina.<sup>22</sup>

Nor did the attacks end with Charlottesville: the 2018 shooting at a Pittsburgh synagogue was the deadliest antisemitic attack in U.S. history.

This timeline narrowly focuses on white power violence in the United States, but a broader lens brings in major terror attacks in Norway and New Zealand as well as “incel” massacres in the United States and Canada. Charlottesville did not disrupt this violence; it only added to it.

Second, the decline of particular figures within the alt-right should not be mistaken for a decline in the ideology of the alt-right. As the earlier fissures in the movement show, the “post-paleo” energy had already started to reorganize in ways more acceptable to mainstream politics. Repackaged as “Western civilization” and “civic nationalism,” many of the same ideas that fueled the alt-right have been retooled in ways that create plausible deniability about alt-right ties while still advancing the core political values.

Through this lens, Charlottesville must still be understood as a major recruitment event, even as the rally drew condemnation from most parts of mainstream culture and politics. The ideas, images, and rhetoric of the alt-right were made much more visible because of the coverage of those events, and whatever the short- and medium-term damage to the movement and the alt-right brand, as a tool for recruitment and radicalization it was likely a success.

How much of a success is difficult to trace in the present. The large-scale deplatforming of Far Right websites and personalities has made the networks more difficult to map, as more and more participants are moving onto secure channels like Discord and semiprivate platforms like Gab. The post-Charlottesville deplatforming was limited in time and scope—Richard Spencer is back on Twitter, the openly racist and antisemitic website *The Daily Stormer* is back on the regular web, and activists have found a number

of workarounds for fundraising to sidestep their ejection from major sites like PayPal and Patreon. Following the Capitol attack in January 2021, another large-scale deplatforming pushed many Far Right activists off Facebook and Twitter, temporarily shut down the alternative social media site Parler, and introduced a new wave of activists to encrypted apps like Telegram and Discord. As such, some of these networks remain difficult to trace and, at this point, impossible to view through a historical lens.

Finally, despite the push for new domestic terrorism laws and the FBI’s recognition of white power terrorism as a serious and growing problem, law enforcement and media still tend to treat white power terrorism with a lone-wolf framework. The United States lacks a domestic terrorism law, for important civil-liberties reasons, but federal law enforcement has also been reluctant to use conspiracy laws for these sorts of cases. At the same time, a combination of disinformation campaigns, partisan motivation to reject political framing, and reporting that focuses on mental illness and individual histories makes it difficult for the analysis of organized white supremacist violence to break through.

The assault on the Capitol in January 2021 adds an important coda to this story. Looked at from the perspective of the events in Charlottesville, it is a chilling sign of how much success the Far Right has had in integrating itself and its ideas into pro-Trump politics. If events at Charlottesville ultimately failed to “unite the Right,” the mix of Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and other Far Right groups at the Capitol, incorporated with a much larger right-wing crowd acting under the banner of Trump flags rather than Nazi flags, signifies that the white power and violent Right has indeed integrated itself into the broader pro-Trump Right.

That Right does not look like the alt-right of 2017. Charlottesville did indeed mark the end of the alt-right as it was once understood—a coming-out party that failed spectacularly. But the events of 2017 advanced the movement’s underlying objectives in ways we are still working to understand. The organizing around Charlottesville, rather than a static moment that marked a beginning or an end, should be understood as one moment in a contested process of political negotiation and radicalization.

