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## ***By Any Other Name: American “Frustrationism”***

“C’mon, of course the President’s not racist, but he’s frustrated like so many Americans are.”

— Rep. Jim Jordan (R-Ohio)

Well, I certainly do not think the President’s a racist. I believe the President shares a lot of American’s frustration with Congress, particularly those four women congressmen....”

–Rep. James Comer (R-Kentucky).

“There’s nothing that is more upsetting to a conservative than to have their racism recognized as racism. You can call it anything else.”

— Sam Seder, The Majority Report

Is Trump a racist? Unequivocally. Does it matter? Of course. But does it really?

Racists in America face few consequences. They are not put on race-offender lists. People are not warned of racists in their community, on the police force, or, well, in the White House. They can – and obviously do – vote in federal elections, and they dial 911 on the flimsiest of pretexts without fear of penalty. If they carry a badge, and often even when they don’t, they can kill people of color with impunity. Sure, they may lose a job, have to relocate, or be banned from Twitter (unless, of course, they happen to be the president of the United States), but for the most part, they remain at large. After all, despite the human suffering it creates, racism itself is not a crime but an antisocial behavior that is tolerated unless it is deemed a hate crime.

Trump's latest tweet against four Democratic congresswomen of color seems to have finally crossed the media's red line. An obtusely oblivious corporate media that had hesitated to call him racist sans scare quotes has belatedly discovered what has boldly been staring them in the face all along. Still, some in politicians continue to call only the tweet racist without applying the label to its prolific author, as if it somehow magically wrote itself.

Indeed, Trump and his enablers remain convinced that racism does not exist in his heart or any of his bones, preferring to attribute his outbursts to more benign causes. Sen. Lindsey Graham, for example, assures us that Trump is not a racist but a narcissist. This is the same Graham who in 2015 dismissed Trump as "race-baiting, xenophobic, religious bigot," but who today shamelessly ups the ante on Trump's original tweet by denouncing "The Squad" as an "anti-Semitic," "anti-American" "bunch of communists" who "hate Israel" and "hate our own country," slanders which Trump quotes and adds to his own expanding arsenal of inflammatory defamations.

Then there are Reps. Jim Jordan and James Comer, both of whom see Trump not as a racist but a, well, frustrationist, a view also shared by Vice President Mike Pence, who has said that Trump is simply "expressing the frustration of the American people." Apparently, frustration makes you single out black and brown women, question their citizenship, patriotism, and call for them to "go back to their countries" or forcibly sent there. In this respect, the symptoms of frustration seem a lot like the side effects of Ambien, the drug of choice for those suffering from Roseanne Barr Syndrome: namely, the irresistible urge to hurl racist insults.

That some of Trump's defenders have chosen to attribute his behavior to frustration may be because, at the risk of indulging in Trumpian hyperbole, he is the most frustrated president in U.S. history, at least as tallied by the media which, until his latest, unequivocally racist diatribe was reluctant to label him racist and was more than comfortable pushing the narrative that he is only immensely frustrated. Just Google the words "Trump" and "frustration." The list of Trump's frustrations is unending: "Frustrated Trump 'Chewed Out' Staff for Failed Venezuela Coup" (Newsweek, June 20, 2019), "President Was Frustrated: Barr Defends Trump's Hurt Feelings in Pre-Mueller Presser" (Vanity Fair, April 18, 2019). "Frustrated Trump Demands to Speak to Twitter's Manager" (Yahoo News, April 24, 2019). Other reports have noted Trump's frustration with trade talks with China (Reuters, June 28, 2017, lack of progress with his Wall (The

Associated Press, April 3, 2018), the stalemate in Afghanistan (Washington Post, August 21, 2018), the Fed's independent policies (Associated Press, June 11, 2019), the Russia probe (PBS, February 18, 2018), the government shutdown (Washington Post, January 14, 2019), and "my generals" (Roll Call, January 14, 2019). He was even frustrated with former Department of Homeland Security chief Kirstjen Nielson (New Yorker, May 17, 2018) but not enough to question her loyalty to the U.S., label her a "commie," or demand that she go back to her "homeland" (perhaps because in his mind albescent Norway is not a "shithole country"). There is even an entire website devoted to "Frustrated Trump GIFs." In none of these instances did the tantrum-prone man-child of Mar-a-Lago spew racist invectives at the source of his frustration.

Television dramedies aside, orange may not be the new black (if it were, Trump could not resist the urge to slur himself), but "frustrationism" is the new racism, in the same way "I feared for my life" has become the go-to rationalization for police shootings.

It is telling that in a country built by slaves and founded by slaveowners, congressional decorum forbids calling our "frustrationist" president racist. Hence the kerfuffle that occurred when Nancy Pelosi, whose own earlier dismissive comments against her progressive colleagues (her own Sister Souljah moment) opened the door to Trump's attack, introduced a House resolution that denounced the president's racist comments as just that, though, significantly, not the president himself, the House speaker apparently unaware that bullies like Trump are drawn to vulnerability like sharks to blood.

So intense was the squabbling that Speaker pro tempore Rep. Emanuel Cleaver dropped his gavel and abandoned the chair because he was "embarrassed" by the dysfunctionality of a Congress, he said, whose "goal was to make things worse." Asked on CNN what he planned to do the next time the president tweets, Cleaver responded, that we should "forget the man's tweets," asserting, "All the chaos that's taking place here in Washington derives from one human being and a tweet. And I think we're having government by tweet, legislation by tweet, debate by tweet. And I think at some point, we the legislators, as well, frankly, as the media, let the president just tweet away, tweet away his presidency. But we can't continue to react to this. He's going to insult some others, he's going to speak some untruths and so forth. We need to just let him, uh, hang out at the White House and do that (my emphasis). To the degree that we still do some legislation and get some things done, we ought to do it."

In other words, the House would punish Richie Rich by sending him to his room (which in this case happens to be the Oval Office) to tweet out more racist insults – but don't dare call them that in the hallowed halls of the House – to his heart's content, and then forget about them so that Congress can do its job, including, one would hope, the actual exercise of congressional oversight that grants it the authority to pursue actions against the president's habitual misconduct far harsher than merely censuring his language and grounding him. The fact that the Democrat-controlled House has decided not to do so suggests that it embraces two worrisome, self-defeating and ultimately election-losing assumptions: 1) that Trump's racist tweets will eventually turn Americans against him rather than attract them and expand his base, and 2) that his racism is a distraction from more urgent national concerns when, in fact, as it impacts the very nature of our democracy, it is the main event and should be confronted accordingly.

Some pundits on both the left and the right, such as [Van Jones](#) and [Anthony Scaramucchi](#), wonder why Trump would play the race card when it would be more politically advantageous for him to play up his economic achievements. The answer, they suggest, is that it is all part of some elaborate master plan designed to energize his base and the Republican Party as a whole, a kind of twenty-first century reboot of the Southern Strategy on Red Bull (read Republican BS).

However, this view is myopic. For even granting that the current and, as [Elizabeth Warren](#) warns, potentially short-lived “economic boom” is the result of Trumpian policies and not a carryover from the Obama years – and there are good reasons to believe the latter – it should not blind us to the president's racist demagoguery or deter us from doing something about it, before it is too late. Significantly, polls show that while Trump gets props for the economy, his overall approval ratings remain low in comparison, which suggests both that Trump does not actually care about his overall approval (or perhaps, more ominously given his rising approval rating among Republicans in the wake of his racist tweets, he thinks they will inflate it) and that his demagoguery is motivated by a political calculation that there is a sizeable segment of the electorate that is eager to make a Faustian bargain that trades economic growth for social justice, the rule of law, and basic human decency.

Fifty-one years ago, in the [Prevalence of Nonsense](#), Ashley Montague and Edward Darling wrote of a similar trade off, citing a popular myth surrounding another preening, chin-jutting strongman: “Mussolini may have done many brutal and tyrannical things; he

may have destroyed human freedom in Italy; he may have murdered and tortured citizens whose only crime was to oppose Mussolini; but 'one had to admit' one thing about the Dictator: he 'made the trains run on time.'"

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