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America's White Problem Revisited



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

“What is commonly designated as the Negro problem is really a white problem. Will we whites continue to pass by on the other side and deny or evade the problem?”

–Albert Bigelow, “The White Problem” (1963)

“People pay for what they do, and, still more for what they allowed themselves to become. . . . And they pay for it very simply by the lives they lead. The crucial thing, here,

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is that the sum of these individual abdications menaces life all over the world. For, in the generality, as social and moral and political and sexual entities, white Americans are probably the sickest and certainly the most dangerous people, of any color, to be found in the world today.”

–James Baldwin, No Name in the Street (1972)

Almost two decades ago when Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. penned The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society (1991), the threat of American white extremism was, if not quite unimagined, profoundly underestimated. Instead, Schlesinger lays the blame for what he calls the “decomposition of America” on the rise of “tribalism,” with Afrocentrism, “multiculturalists” and “ethnocentric separatist,” who in Schlesinger’s view see “the western tradition [as] inherently racist, sexist, ‘classist,’ hegemonic; irredeemably repressive, irredeemably oppressive,” presenting a clear and present danger. In some ways, the book presages Samuel P. Huntington’s The Clash of Civilizations (1996), another in a long tradition of apocalyptic treatises on the rising tide of color, although this time penned by cold war liberals who offer a more palatable version lacking the overtly racist demagoguery of previous scribes. Like Huntington, Schlesinger envisions that the threat to western, specifically American values and institutions comes from an imagined Brown Peril of teeming dark-skinned others not from those who have historically rejected them – i.e., white racial narcissists. As Sam Tanenhaus wrote in his 2017 review of the book in The Atlantic, “though its critique of the ‘politics of identity’ and the ‘tribal antagonisms’ it bred should have included a harder look at his own privileged tribe, its delusions as well as its prejudices and presumptions.” Unlike Schlesinger’s nightmarish vision, the primary agents of America’s disintegration are white not black. In an increasingly fragmented nation, a white racist – not an Afrocentrist – occupies the seat of American power, enabled by a corps of sycophantic Republicans and a Democratic Party whose leadership twiddles its thumbs as Trump fiddles amidst a national conflagration he himself gleefully fans. For all their shortcomings, Schlesinger’s rabble-rousing Afrocentric bogeymen are nowhere to be seen; for all his rhetorical bluster, they did not – and do not – hold Tiki-torch hate rallies or plot and carry out mass shootings, although law enforcement has cast Black Lives Matter and other organizations demanding social justice in the role and built a speciously false equivalence between them and real white domestic terrorists. In fact, like Schlesinger, the government ignores this uncomfortable reality to focus instead on the

imagined scourge of “black identity extremists” (BIE), the fanciful enemy it has fabricated and pursued in one form or another since the Orwellian days (Big Master has always been watching) of the FBI’s RACON (1942-1943) and COINTELPRO (1956-1971) domestic surveillance programs.

As leaked FBI reports obtained by The Young Turks’ investigative reporter Ken Klippenstein reveal, IRON FIST (seriously, is the FBI now casting itself as the spandexed Defender of the American way?), the ominous codename of its latest program to surveil and infiltrate alleged “black extremist” groups, was set up following the Ferguson protests in response to the killing of Michael Brown, a clear indication that it regards Black Lives Matter and other groups of organized grievance protesting police brutality and social injustice as national threats, a not particularly surprising position given the fact that the powers that be have always considered black grievance a threat to the state and the white supremacism that sustains it.

More revealing, and more disturbing, the documents show that the FBI places the threat of such groups higher than white extremists with proven trail of violence and dead bodies to attest to their lethal intent. Reports from 2019 to 2020 rank black identity extremism as the top counterterrorist priority, even above al-Qaeda. Yet according to a 2018 threat guidance document, “The FBI judges BIE perceptions of police brutality against African Americans have likely [my emphasis] motivated acts of pre-meditated, retaliatory lethal violence against law enforcement,” hardly compelling evidence. On the contrary, as far speculative possibilities are concerned, it extremely unlikely that such groups will engage in violence for the simple reason that, as Foreign Policy reported in 2017, there is no documented evidence they actually exist outside of the FBI’s hyperactive imagination, a point former government officials and legal experts themselves acknowledge.

But then this nation’s proclivity for imagining potential weapons of its destruction rather than confronting and disarming real ones is nothing new. After all, what should one expect from a government that goes to war with Iraq over 9/11 and nonexistent WMDs but spares Saudi Arabia, despite the fact that fifteen of the nineteen hijackers hailed from there and the existence of Saudi royal family financial links to terrorist organizations. Jamal Khashoggi died for our sins, as have – and no doubt will – countless thousands of others.

Typically, rather than confront the FBI’s cynical legerdemain, corporate media prefers to present every Trumpian inanity as a strategic ploy masterfully designed by the tweeter-in-chief to distract his critics, although the real distraction comes from the media’s

promotion of this myth. This, too, is a symptom of America's white problem. For while the media focuses its attention on past and present Russian interference in U.S. elections and the political theater of Mueller's congressional testimony on the matter, it fails to pursue with the same persistent, inquisitive gusto domestically generated threats such as gerrymandering, voter suppression, and spurious election fraud allegations arising from a far more insidious internal enemy that carry far more consequences for our democracy than any cloak-and-dagger Kremlin machination, if only because we have inflicted them upon ourselves.

Trump, the bloated, pampered embodiment of white privilege, is a beneficiary of the unearned perks of paleness. Thus, it should come as no surprise that white American would rather debate whether Trump is a racist than actually do anything about it by confronting the basis of his power and dismantling the appeal of his divisive racist rhetoric. Again, this, too, is a manifestation of the white problem. For had Obama done a fraction of the things Trump has done, he would have been ousted from office. Had he behaved like a petulant brat on the world stage, hobnobbed with tyrants, and bullied and belittled any and all that questioned his behavior and his policies, not only would his qualifications as president – and as a human being – been questioned (as they still were, along with his American citizenship, even in the absence of such character flaws), but so, too, those who share his color. Tea Party caucus member Rep. Joe Wilson of South Carolina, who infamously shouted “You Lie!” at Obama during an address before a joint-session of Congress in 2009 but who had nothing but praise for Trump's lie-infested 2018 UN General Assembly speech, has yet to call out Trump on any of his estimated 12,000 - plus lies since assuming office, a silence shared by his Republican colleagues, some of whom have only recently found their huevos (they have had less success with extracting their collective heads, which remain stuck in a sunless place) and mustered enough strength to sputter weak objections in panicked response to a possible recession and, consequently, fears for their political future.

In 2017, the Orange Skull, as Art Spiegelman has dubbed the white supremacist man-child that intermittently occupies the Oval Office between costly golf trips to Mar-a-Lago, invited to the White House racist, misogynist, Jeffrey Epstein wannabe, and crotch-grabber (albeit his own) Ted Nugent, whose fecal spurs¹ kept him from serving in Vietnam. More recently, as Media Matters reported in July, the White House invited several right-wing extremists to a social media summit, including YouTube influencer

Tim Pool, Turning Point USA's Charlie Kirk, and Brent Bozell, whose Media Research Center once promoted an [article](#) from self-avowed "racial realist" Jared Taylor's American Renaissance website that asserted: "Experience has also taught me that blacks are different by almost any measure to all other people. They cannot reason as well. They cannot communicate as well. They cannot control their impulses as well. They are a threat to all who cross their paths, black and non-black alike." The link has since been removed with a disclaimer stating, "NewsBusters does not associate with known white nationalists" – but apparently it doesn't mind associating with relatively unknown ones until, it seems, they are exposed.

As Taylor demonstrates, America's white problem is not confined to American shores. In August 2017, Taylor appeared on a Japanese news program following the tragedy in Charlottesville.² Introduced as "godfather of the alt-right," Taylor espoused his anti-black views in fluent Japanese, expressing his support for Trump's anti-immigration policies because they will prevent whites from becoming a minority, dismissing uniformed Nazi marchers as "ineffective and counter-productive" (*mukōka, gyakukōka*) to the advancement of the "white interests" (*hakujin no rigai*) and insisting on the inevitability of racial separation to maintain social order and ensure the survival of the white race. (That the Japanese media has devoted endless hours to discussion of the rise of white supremacy in America under Trump, but assiduously refrains from discussing Japanese racism against their own domestic minorities, particularly Koreans, is a subject for another article.)

One wonders if Taylor's name appears on the FBI's list of racial extremists, given that according to its 2020 threat guidelines, one of the criteria for being labeled RMVE (Racially Motivated Violent Extremist), at least in the case of BIE, is the "use of force or violence in violation of criminal law in response to perceived racism and injustice in American society, or in an effort to establish a separate black homeland or autonomous black social institutions, communities, or governing organizations within the United States." Interestingly, although the FBI softened the guideline's racial element in response to criticism by the media and legal experts over their use of the term BIE, substituting it with the racially neutral RMVE, it now appears that only attacking racism and using violence to establish a black homeland constitute "violent extremism"; being racist, advocating for a "white homeland" (not specifically mentioned in the report), relying on state-sanctioned violence in the form of draconian immigration policies that rip children from their parents, cage immigrants and asylum seekers, and refuse to provide

them with the same level of humane care guaranteed prisoners of war under the Geneva Convention apparently do not.

America's white problem is ubiquitous and pandemic, plaguing not only, as we have seen, law enforcement but boardrooms, colleges and universities, corporate media and even AIs that, among other things, are unable to distinguish photographs of blacks from gorillas, an inability they share with some television news hosts. It is both institutional and personal and cannot be solved by simple if apparently heartfelt apologies.

The tragic irony of America's white problem, one which has not substantially changed in the decades since the observations of Bigelow and Baldwin that open this essay, is the persistence of denial and evasion which has prevented whites from acknowledging the role whites themselves play in their own discontent and which prompts them to seek solutions that project their fears and insecurities upon the world around them instead of confronting the true source of their angst, in the end exacerbating both their misery as well as of that of those whose humanity they reject.

Notes.

1 According to former MSNBC host Martin Bashir, Nugent may have an "obsession with fecal matter," which may explain his attraction to Trumpism.

2 Shūkan Hōdō Life [Weekly Report Life]. BS-TBS, August 27, 2017.

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