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## Right-Wing Racism: Past, Present—and Future

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Does Barack Obama look like a “skinny ghetto crackhead” to you? Did Whitney Houston’s death inspire the thought that Representative Maxine Waters needs to “step away from the crack pipe?” If so, then Fox is the cable network for you. (The quotes belong to Media Research Center president Brent Bozell and Fox News host Eric Bolling, respectively.) But if you prefer your news by radio, then perhaps you’d best stick with Rush Limbaugh, who explains that President Obama “talks honky” around white folk, while his wife feels entitled to abuse public funds as payback for centuries of white oppression of black people. And finally, if you like your racism live and in person, then no doubt you would have been right at home at the recent CPAC convention, where Ann Coulter told the assembled crowd, “Voters with forty years of politically correct education are ecstatic to have the first black president. They just love the idea of it, even if we did get Flavor Flav instead of Thomas Sowell.”

Comparing the president of the United States and the most senior female black member of the House of Representatives to rap artists/reality-TV clowns and drug addicts is apparently unremarkable for conservative media personalities, but presidential candidates need to be more subtle. When Newt Gingrich, for instance, calls President Obama America’s “food stamp president” and promises to “talk about why the African-American community should demand paychecks and not be satisfied with food stamps,” he is engaging in similar signaling, though one with built-in deniability. For Gingrich this has the added benefit that when he pretends this is not the case in the face of media questioning, he gets to attack yet another enemy of the Tea Party types whose confused causes he professes to represent.

It has become a depressing ritual of American politics that when one is confronted with evidence of one’s racism, the proper response is to insist that while old-fashioned Bull Connor-style

racism has disappeared, liberals and journalists—and rarely is any distinction made here—remain obsessed with this now-imaginary phenomenon as a means of persecuting conservatives for telling it like it is. For instance, Coulter insists that “liberals and white supremacists are the only people left in America who are neurotically obsessed with race.” Bozell complains of the alleged (Clarence Thomas-style) “high-tech lynching” of Herman Cain by those who accurately reported what the former candidate actually said and did. And, um, ditto Limbaugh, who responded to the same reporting and commentary of Cain’s actions by knowingly explaining that it “tells us who the real racists are.”

The upside of this (barely) coded racist discourse for Fox, Limbaugh, Coulter, Gingrich, etc., is apparent on several levels simultaneously. First and most obvious is its appeal to the unreconstructed and unashamedly racist among us. It’s impossible to know how large this number is since even most racists know not to admit their true beliefs to a pollster, much less a reporter. But if, say, the first 5,000 or so comments on FoxNews.com on Whitney Houston’s death are any indication, their ranks remain considerable.

Moreover, recent research appears to confirm what would strike many of us as obvious: with an African-American in the White House, the stoking of racist sentiments is good politics for Republican candidates. Harvard doctoral student Seth Stephens-Davidowitz employed Google searches to measure racial prejudice in American media markets and found that such animus in the United States may have cost Obama three to five percentage points in the 2008 popular vote. His findings were reinforced by a second study of the topic, published in the journal *Political Psychology* by University of Massachusetts political scientist Brian Schaffner. One may or may not be surprised to learn from yet another recent study—this one published in *Psychological Science*—of an apparently direct correlation between low scores on childhood IQ tests and prejudiced beliefs and socially conservative views later in life. Such beliefs, as the theory goes, offer “structure and order” that wash away the complexity of the real world into simple and identifiable rules, according to Dr. Gordon Hodson, a psychology professor at Brock University in Ontario. “So, it may not be surprising that people with less cognitive capacity will be attracted to simplifying ideologies,” according to Brian Nosek, a University of Virginia psychologist quoted in the *Huffington Post*.

Whatever its causes and connections, unreconstructed racism remains a consistent if rarely acknowledged fact of modern American political life—and one that is all too easy to exploit for political (or financial) gain without any apparent price attached to it. Architect of George H.W. Bush’s 1988 presidential campaign, and later RNC chair, the late Lee Atwater explained in 1981: “You start out in 1954 by saying, ‘Nigger, nigger, nigger,’” but “by 1968, you can’t say ‘nigger’—that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like forced busing, states’ rights, and all that stuff.” People conveniently forget that the now nearly sainted Bush I would likely have lost that race had Atwater’s friends refrained from incessantly running television commercials focusing on the frightening face of black rapist/murderer “Willie” Horton. That infamous ad’s author, Larry McCarthy, told a reporter, according to a recent Jane Mayer profile in *The New Yorker*, that upon seeing Horton’s mug shot, McCarthy said to himself, “God, this guy’s ugly,” adding, “This is every suburban mother’s greatest fear.... The guy looked like an animal.” Surprise, surprise: McCarthy is now heading up the Mitt Romney Super PAC, Restore Our Future.

In 2005 then-RNC chair Ken Mehlman, speaking to the NAACP, admitted that during the civil rights movement “some Republicans...[were] trying to benefit politically from racial polarization,” and apologized. But if William Faulkner were alive today, he could tell Mehlman that, sadly, in this regard, the past isn't dead. It isn't even the past.