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White Skin Crisis

Why Things Will Likely Only Get Worse

by DAVID ROSEN

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Over the last few weeks the U.S. has faced a racial crisis not seen since the '60s. But while civil-rights protests and urban riots marked racial conflict a half-century ago, today's crisis is defined by a wave of white racist violence. It is a rage epitomized by numerous "urban lynchings" (i.e., police killings of unarmed people of color, most often men); Dylann Roof's (apparent) killing of nine African-American parishioners at the Emanuel AME Church in downtown Charleston, SC, on June 17th; and the subsequent burnings of eight African-American churches in Tennessee, Georgia, North and South Carolina, and Florida between the 21st and the 30th.

These developments bring to a boil the long, painful history of slavery, Jim Crow Reconstruction, the tumultuous civil-right era and the reconstitution of the U.S. now underway. It's led to much soul searching, especially among African-Americans and well-meaning Southern whites. Ever sensitive to bad press, white Republican politicians are moving to banish the Confederate flag as a token appeasement so as to avoid addressing more systemic issues. They want race and inequality off the political agenda as the 2016 election cycle gets underway.

Much of the current national debate about the killings has, rightly, focused on America's legacy of racism, gun control and the forgiveness expressed by some of the family members of the

deceased. Its also led many to link white-nationalist violence to police killings of people of color, often committed by white law-enforcement officers. Together, they reveal the roots of racism in America. Unfortunately, little attention has been paid to the deeper crisis besetting America's white population which likely fuels the racist rage, a recognition that white skin privilege is being eroded.

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, "Since 2000, the number of [white] hate groups has increased by 30 percent." It estimates that since Pres. Obama's 2008 election the number of such group rose 1,360 in 2012 from 813 in 2008; in 2014, there were 874 such groups. One group, Stormfront, claims 300,000 members. These groups incubate a particularly American form of race-based domestic terrorism.

The American Dream is over. Politicians – especially Republican presidential wannabes — are the last to speak the truth. They will do anything to misdirect public attention from the deepening social crisis gripping the U.S. They will continue to play the race card to avoid acknowledging the toll globalization and inequality as taking on their constituencies, especially poor, working- and middle-class whites. Sadly, as the U.S. social crisis deepens, one can expect more such incidents like that which took place in Charleston and the church burnings.

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The Charleston killings fueled a national debate over the cause of such wonton violence. Was it a hate crime or an act of domestic terrorism?; was it an act of racism or yet another mass-murder by a psychopath? Much has been made of Roof's website, "Last Rhodesian"; his jacket sporting flags of white-ruled Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and South Africa; his car license plate featuring the Confederate flag; and his racist manifesto.

"I chose Charleston because it is most historic city in my state, and at one time had the highest ratio of blacks to Whites in the country," he apparently wrote. "We have no skinheads, no real KKK, no one doing anything but talking on the internet. Well someone has to have the bravery to take it to the real world, and I guess that has to be me."

Interviews with Roof's family and friends paint a postmodern portrait of the classic "lone-wolf" killer. He seems to be a shy if unhappy, introverted loner who was politicized by racist ideology – and is digital-media savvy. News reports note that he lived in Gaston, SC, a town 97 percent white. His parents were separated but lived nearby. He reportedly dropped out of high school after repeating the 9th grade; he apparently used illegal drugs and was busted twice (once for possessing an illegal drug, Suboxone, a narcotic analgesic); and he drank a lot and hung out with friends in strip bars. He got a pistol for his 21st birthday and used it on the 17th.

Friends report he was smart, used the Internet to study race-related issues, and wrote and published a rabidly-racist personal manifesto. According to a high school friend, Antonio Metze, who is black, "He had black friends." According to another friend, "He wanted to do something big, like the Trayvon Martin case." And he did. (In these ways, he seems not unlike the Swedish mass murderer, Anders Breivik, who killed 77 people and was also driven by racist beliefs.)

Gaston, SC, is a small satellite town of Columbia, the state capital. In 2010, it claimed only 1,645 residents and was 97 percent white. In 2012, according the Census Bureau, there were 313 million Americans and “non-Hispanic whites” made up 63 percent of the U.S. population. The non-white population made up 37 percent (116 million people) and consists of Hispanics (17%), African-Americans (12%), Asians (5%) and multiracial Americans (2.4%). Perhaps more telling, people of color will likely eclipse the current white majority in 2043.

Gaston’s median income is just about half the national average for “white, not Hispanic” households. Wikipedia reports that household median income in Gaston is \$31,411. In 2013, South Carolina medium income was \$44,163. It notes, “About 17.1% of [Gaston] families and 18.2% of the population were below the poverty, including 26.1% of those under age 18 and 9.0% of those age 65 or over.” The 2013 medium income for all U.S. “white” households was \$55,257 and, for “white, not Hispanic” households it was \$58,270.

The slow U.S. economic recovery from the Great Recession of 2007-09 is gradually reducing the national poverty rate. However, the Census Bureau reported that as of 2013, nearly 30 million “white” Americans lived in poverty and that the number of “white, not Hispanics” in poverty was 18.8 million people. The highest concentration of poverty is in the South where an estimated 18.9 million people (16.1%) live in poverty. The Kaiser Family Foundation estimates, using Census data, that 23 states had a poverty rate of 10 percent or greater. The highest rates of white poverty were in Kentucky (18%) and West Virginia (17%); South Carolina’s poverty rate was 15 percent. Gaston is a snapshot of small-town white America, a segment of the nation now in deepening crisis.

The situation for poorer whites, especially in the South, gets bleaker when demographic and income factors are linked to education attainment and drug use. Together, these elements suggest the soil of despair out of which a reactionary nativist movement — epitomized by Roof — festers.

Between 1990 and 2013, the percentage of white people 25- to 29-year who had received at least a high school diploma or its equivalent increased to 94 from 90 percent. More revealing, during that period the gap between white, black and Hispanic high-school grads narrowed considerable. For African-Americans, it declined to 4 from 8 percent and for Hispanics it fell to 18 from 32 percent.

However, drilling down into the formal, 4-year graduation rates at the state level reveals a more disturbing picture of the long-term crisis facing white Americans. A revealing study, “State High School Graduation Rates By Race, Ethnicity,” drawing upon U.S. Department of Education data from the 2011-12 period, found the formal white graduation rate was 86 percent. Most disturbing, the white students in 20 states fell below 80 percent graduation rate — South Carolina’s graduation rate was 78 percent and Roof was not one of them.

According to news reports, Roof used a variety of drugs, everything from alcohol to marijuana to Xanax. Among whites, drug use or abuse is rampant. In 2013, the “legal” drug of choice was

alcohol, where nearly three-fifths (58%) were drinkers and nearly a quarter (24%) binge drinkers. The use of tobacco products (e.g., cigarettes, cigars) among whites is still over one-quarter (28%). With regard to “illegal” drugs, in ’13, marijuana was Americans favorite means of getting high, accounting for four-fifths (81%) of illicit drug users and involving about 20 millions users per month.

The new drugs of choice among white Americans are psychotherapeutic drugs and heroine. A 2010 report from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that, during 2009, 2.4 million individuals used psycho drugs, including anti-anxiety drugs (like Xanax that Roof apparently used), pain relievers (like Suboxone), tranquilizers, stimulants and sedatives, for nonmedical purposes. Most alarming, it found for 2007 – the last year data was available — deaths from unintentional overdoses from such drug use increased to approximately 27,000. Now, almost a decade later, one can only wonder how many have died from such drug overdoses?

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Racism is America’s great shame. It’s embedded in the nation’s very founding, with the first Africans arriving as slaves and the *Constitution* establishing the value of a slave at 3/5th a white male citizen. A century-and-a-half after the Civil War, it still finds resonance among a significant segment of the white American electorate. It’s one of the defining, if unspoken, principles of the Republican Party.

Conservative politicians love playing the anti-race “race card.” It’s the practice of accusing someone, most often Pres. Barack Obama or another African-American figure, of using race as a factor in an analysis of a critical current event. They claim that such statements invoke prejudice, violating the spirit of civil political discourse. With rare exception, its not been invoked about the Charleston killings or the subsequent church burnings.

Since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Republican politicians have followed what Pres. Richard Nixon’s advisor, Patrick Buchanan, called the “Southern strategy.” It was a devils bargain, struck between opportunist conservative politicians and many white Americans to use the ballet to protect traditional power relations, white skin privilege.

The strategy has, for nearly a half-century, successfully divided the American people along race lines. It’s a mean-spirited form of distraction, a sentiment that took root in the country four centuries ago when the first black slaves were auctioned off as private property. In the U.S., race is the great divide and playing the race card has worked for decades — and will likely be a key (if moderated) part in the Republican’s 2016 campaign playbook.

Playing the race card permits Republican politicians – and white voters! – to avoid confronting the deeper social, economic and demographic changes remaking the nation. White Americans, especially poor, working- and middle-class, are facing an historical crisis. They are being, simultaneously, eclipsed and squeezed; their relative proportion of the country’s population is shrinking while their economic situation is growing evermore insecure.

White privilege is eroding, driven less by people of color (who are poorer and suffer greater hardships) than by the policies of the – mostly white — 1 percent oligarchs. (And, as only U.S. politics could accomplish, America’s first mixed-race president who identifies as African-American has led the campaign for the Pacific trade pact to ensure the 1 percent’s global hegemony.) Often overlooked, the racism of white skin privilege plays a key – if unspoken – role in the repression of white people; it keeps them blind, in denial, to what causes their deepening immiseration.

Amidst these profound social changes, the Southern strategy is also eroding. It needs to be rebuked once and for all. Roof’s (apparent) killings of nine innocent black parishioners has led many Southern politicians to utter public *mea culpas*, distancing themselves from the Confederate flag and calling for racial brotherhood. Whether this new spirit will separate more “moderate” whites from hardcore racists and spawn a new political realignment remains to be seen. Sadly, as the U.S. social crisis deepens, one can expect more such incidents like the Charleston killings and the church burnings.