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Dewey Clayton
University of Louisville

Sean Welch
University of Louisville

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“Post-racial America and the Presidency of Barack Obama”

Dr. Dewey Clayton

University of Louisville

Sean Welch

University of Louisville

Abstract

President Obama’s presidential victory in 2008 was seen as a historic moment, and many people claimed Obama’s election made America a post-racial society. However, since his election, Obama’s growing opposition asserted that their antipathy was based on his party and policies, but this resistance may instead be rooted in a subtle racism. Though Obama has sought to transcend race, this opposition suggests that America is not at all a post-racial society.

Introduction

Ushering in a new style of running for president, Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign was innovative in its strategies and mobilization tactics. Appealing to liberals, independents, and disaffected Republicans in a way that crossed class, racial, ethnic, and party lines, Obama’s bid for president was race-neutral. Obama ran a deracialized campaign and sought to transcend his race, a significant departure from prior African American presidential campaigns. Some even considered Obama to be emblematic of a “post-racial brand.”¹ After NBC News’ Brian Williams called the election for Obama, he asked NBC News analyst Tom Brokaw for his reaction.

Brokaw² said:

This is a very emotional moment for everyone in this country and for the world for that matter. This is not just a moment in American history; this is a profoundly important passage out of the deep shadows of our racist past that began with that first slave off-

¹ J. Heilemann and M. Halperin. *Game Change: Obama and the Clintons, McCain and Palin, and the Race of a Lifetime*. New York: Harper, 2010.

² NBC News, “NBC News Calls Election for Obama,” NBC News, Transcript, November 4, 2008, <http://icue.nbcunifiles.com/icue/files/icue/site/pdf/38832>.

loaded on a ship. Race has been a curse for America for a long time.

With its sordid history of racism, the ascendancy of Obama to the White House was interpreted by many as redemption; “a new day” in which America had finally stepped out of the shadows of its racist past.³ Others claimed that, “the myth of racist white voters was destroyed by the [2008] presidential election.”⁴

Obama’s election in 2008 was seen not only as the beginning of a post-racial America, but also a post-partisan America.⁵ If not post-partisan, Obama’s victory in 2008 was at least post-Republican, as it was considered transformative to such an extent that Obama was compared to the likes of Franklin D. Roosevelt. The November 24, 2008, cover of *Time* magazine even featured Obama in a convertible car with a cigarette in a silver holder à la FDR. Similarly, many considered the Republicans to have been irrevocably weakened by the 2008 elections. As Theda Skocpol⁶ said, “Reduced to a hard core centered in the once-Confederate South and the inner West, Republicans were virtually written off by many commentators in late 2008.”

However, opposition was hardly eviscerated as the Republicans made significant gains in the 2010 elections. While such electoral swings are not uncommon in American politics, the conservative backlash was a unique coalescence of both mainstream and fringe, including the Republican Party, the Tea Party, Fox News, and paramilitary groups. In what strikes one as unprecedented vitriol, some of those in the negative coalition against President Obama have questioned whether he is a natural-born American citizen, whether he is a Christian, whether he

³ G. Ifill. *The Breakthrough*. New York: Doubleday, 2009. A. Gillespie. *Whose Black Politics?: Cases in Post-Racial Black Leadership*. New York: Routledge, 2010. T. Davis. *Black Politics Today*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

⁴ A. Thernstrom, & S. Thernstrom. “Racial Gerrymandering is Unnecessary.” *The Wall Street Journal*, November 11, 2008. Retrieved April 23, 2015, from <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB122637373937516543>.

⁵ V. Sinclair-Chapman & M. Price. “Black Politics, the 2008 Election, and the (Im)possibility of Race Transcendence,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 41, no. 4 (2008): 739.

⁶ T. Skocpol. *Obama and America’s Political Future*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012: 4.

is truly patriotic, and, essentially, whether he legitimately occupies the White House as the President of the United States. Ironically, with all of the discussion after President Obama's historic victory about this nation having become post-racial, it now appears that the election of Barack Obama has brought into focus the myth that America is a post-racial society.

After reviewing the literature on racism in America, this article analyzes some of the demographic features of Obama's winning coalition in 2008 and 2012 and why this coalition may have caused a backlash among some whites. Covering the opposition to Obama from numerous segments of the American population, particular attention is given to the Tea Party, a populist political movement staunchly opposed to Obama. As such, the results from the 2010 Multi-State Survey of Race and Politics, which inspects the attitudes of the Tea Party supporters on issues of race and character traits concerning blacks and President Obama, are critically examined here. Importantly, other elements of the oppositional coalition beyond the Tea Party will be examined, fleshing out the multifaceted, yet relatively homogeneous, opposition to Obama. Finally, several major public events involving President Obama, including the town hall meetings surrounding the passage of the Affordable Care Act, Obama's healthcare program and the centerpiece of his legislative agenda during his first years in office, will be discussed as the backdrop against which the opposition manifested itself. Lastly, we hope to show that the continuing attacks on President Obama have not only had an impact on his effectiveness but also on the office of the presidency itself.

Literature Review

Race regulates, conditions, and controls. Formally and informally, half a century after the formal rejection of legal segregation and racial inequality, race continues to serve as the cornerstone of the contemporary social hierarchy. Simply, race still matters and racism is a constant. Race can even be thought of as similar to Foucauldian notions of power; like Foucault's notion of power, race is encompassing and inescapable in our social world. Yet, race and racism are not static and immutable, but are dynamic as they are continually modified and shifting.⁷ That race and racism are dynamic has led some to distinguish between new racism and old racism. Regarding the latter, this form of racism was open and straightforward bigotry based on the idea of white supremacy.⁸ The "racial institutional orders"⁹ of old racism were chattel slavery and the Jim Crow South. Many consider the era of explicit racist positions to have faded.¹⁰ But, in its place is a new racism, which is "more indirect, more subtle, more procedural, more ostensibly nonracial."¹¹ Whereas the blatant prejudice of old racism was "hot, close, and direct," the new subtle prejudice is "cool, distant, and indirect."¹²

This new racism has found a home in the American ethos, opposing changes to the status quo because policies aimed at decreasing inequality are believed to violate the traditional American values of individualism, the Protestant work ethic, and discipline.¹³ In other words, the

⁷ M. Foucault. *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1990, 99.

⁸ R.A. Strickland & M. L. Whicker. "Comparing the Wilder and Gantt Campaigns: A Model for Black Candidate Success in Statewide Elections," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 25, no. 2 (1992): 205.

⁹ D.S. King and R.M. Smith "Racial Orders in American Political Development," *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 1 (2005): 75.

¹⁰ D. Kinder, D. R. & Sears, D.O. "Prejudice and Politics: Symbolic Racism Versus Racial Threats to the Good Life." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 40, no. 3 (1981): 414-431; R.W. Meertens & T. F. Pettigrew. "Is Subtle Prejudice Really Prejudice?" *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (1997): 54-71; Y. M. Kim. "Whites' Explanations of Blacks' Socioeconomic Underachievement: Individualism, Structuralism, and Status Inconsistency." *Current Research in Social Psychology* 5, no. 8 (2000): 126-150.

¹¹ T. F. Pettigrew "Racial Change and Social Policy," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 441, no. 1 (1979): 118).

¹² Meertens & Pettigrew, "Is Subtle Prejudice Really Prejudice?," 54.

¹³ Strickland & Whicker. "Comparing the Wilder and Gantt Campaigns: A Model for Black Candidate Success in Statewide Elections," 205.

new racism holds that nonwhites are “violating cherished values.”¹⁴ The new racism is part and parcel of a “color-blind racial order,” which insists that all Americans be judged by their character and not their color, thus preserving patterns of racial inequality and sustaining white advantages.¹⁵ New racism and the concomitant color-blind racial order perceive white achievements as having nothing to do with race but are attributed to hard work and merit. Accordingly, race-conscious policies are considered unnecessary and even a disadvantage to whites through reverse racism.¹⁶

Many whites see race as a zero-sum game, so that less inequality for nonwhites means more inequality for whites.¹⁷ With that said, some have argued that there may be an unconscious component to racism, and political scientist Marjorie Hershey¹⁸ said, “Although a small percentage of the American people is willing to express overt racism, social psychologists argue that a substantially larger proportion holds racially biased attitudes of which they may barely be conscious: what some sociologists term ‘racism without racists.’” Nonetheless, the claims of new racism are post-racial claims that are more ideological than empirical as they deny persistent structures and patterns of inequality in race relations.¹⁹

In many respects, new racism was a response to the civil rights movement and the “urban crisis,” which became the crucible for an alliance between neo-liberals and right-wing traditional conservatives. Specifically, out of the 1960s and 1970s was a concerted assault on social welfare and big government, as well as attacks on crime by emphasizing the need for “law and order”

¹⁴ J. McConahay & J. C. Hough. “Symbolic Racism.” *Journal of Social Issues* 32, no. 2 (1976): 23-45.

¹⁵ D. S. King and R.M. Smith. “Strange Bedfellows? Polarized Politics?: The Quest for Racial Equity in Contemporary America,” *Political Research Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (2008): 688.

¹⁶ E. Anderson et al. “The Legacy of Racial Caste: An Exploratory Ethnography,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 642, no. 1 (2012): 37.

¹⁷ M. I. Norton & S.R. Sommers. “Whites See Racism as a Zero-Sum Game That They Are Now Losing,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 6, no. 3 (2011): 215-218.

¹⁸ M. Hershey. “The Media: Coloring the News.” In *The Elections of 2008* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2010), 131.

¹⁹ Anderson et al., “The Legacy of Racial Caste: An Exploratory Ethnography,” 40.

that could be achieved through “broken windows” policing.²⁰ The discourse of new racism is a coded language. For example, Richard Nixon sought to attract disaffected Southern white voters by “appealing to the fears of whites in response to the growing political power and demands of African Americans.”²¹ Such appeals were made by Nixon through coded language, that is, with phrases like “law and order” and “B-U-S-I-N-G.”²² Such racial codes have been referred to as “dog whistle” racism and almost always allow a level of plausible deniability, permitting the perpetrator to feign ignorance.²³

Regarding new racism’s opposition to big government and welfare, some have posited that strong opposition to big government is a proxy for racism.²⁴ Indeed, the rise of new racism and the shift in the discourse to emphasize limited government and self-reliance is very much indicative of the color-blind racial order. It is worth noting that the biological elements of old racism, that blacks were naturally and essentially deficient,²⁵ can be seen in new racism. For example, attacks on big government and welfare are rooted in the belief that these had created a culture of poverty, a pathologically deficient underclass.²⁶ Yet, culture of poverty and underclass

²⁰A. O’Connor. “The Privatized City: The Manhattan Institute, the Urban Crisis, and the Conservative Counterrevolution in New York.” *Journal of Urban History* 34, no. 2 (2008): 333-353.

²¹A. Greenblatt & Marshall, P. “Changing U.S. Electorate.” In *Issues in Race and Ethnicity*, Congressional Quarterly Researcher, 5th ed., 55-80. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2011, 37-38.

²²D.M. Clayton. *The Presidential Campaign of Barack Obama: A Critical Analysis of a Racially Transcendent Strategy*. New York: Routledge, 2010, 52.

²³I. Haney-López, I. *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class*. New York. Oxford University Press, 2014.

²⁴S. P. Huntington. “American Ideals versus American Institutions.” *Political Science Quarterly* 97, no. 1 (1982): 1-37; Kinder & Sears, “Prejudice and Politics: Symbolic Racism Versus Racial Threats to the Good Life,”; J. Gainous. “The New ‘New Racism’ Thesis: Limited Government Values and Race-Conscious Policy Attitudes.” *Journal of Black Studies*, 43 (2012): 251-273.

²⁵N.A. Valentino, & T. Brader. “The Sword’s Other Edge: Perceptions of Discrimination and Racial Policy Opinion after Obama.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 75, no:2 (2011): 204.

²⁶O’Connor, “The Privatized City: The Manhattan Institute, the Urban Crisis, and the Conservative Counterrevolution in New York,” 333-353; A. Reed. “The ‘Underclass’ as Myth and Symbol: The Poverty of Discourse about Poverty.” In *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 179-196.

theories could also be read as positing a natural and innate inferiority of certain beings, notably blacks.²⁷

New racism's dog whistle of law and order also can be seen as suggesting an essential inferiority of blacks. Time in prison and contact with the prison system has become a normal life stage for many young black men, who are incarcerated at rates about eight times higher than those for whites.²⁸ Some see the prison as genealogically linked to the ghetto, Jim Crow South, and chattel slavery as institutions defining, confining, and controlling African Americans.²⁹ Importantly, as John Wideman³⁰ said:

It is not racist to be against crime, even though the archetypal criminal in the media and the public imagination [is the African American male]. Gradually, 'urban' and 'ghetto' have become code words for terrible places where only blacks reside. Prison is rapidly being relexified in the same segregated fashion.

Indeed, being a black male has come to be seen as probable cause, as it is synonymous with being a criminal.³¹ In effect, with the actor divorced from the act, the young black male is seen as a criminal even without committing a crime.

Given this persistence of racism, it has been difficult for black politicians to achieve success. Many of the blacks who would become mayors, state legislators, and congressional representatives have organized outside of traditional party networks and formed independent organizations that allowed for relatively autonomous black leadership.³² That said, black candidates have to be cautious so that they are not perceived solely as "black candidates," that is,

²⁷ Reed, "The 'Underclass' as Myth and Symbol: The Poverty of Discourse about Poverty," 179-196.

²⁸ B. Pettit & B. Western. "Mass Imprisonment and the Life Course: Race and Class Inequality in U.S. Incarceration." *American Sociological Review* 69, no. 2 (2004): 151-169.

²⁹ L. Wacquant. "From Slavery to Mass Incarceration: Rethinking the Race Question in the U.S." *New Left Review* 13 (2002): 41.

³⁰ J. E. Wideman. "Doing Time, Marking Race." *The Nation* 261, no. 14 (1995): 504.

³¹ Wacquant, "From Slavery to Mass Incarceration: Rethinking the Race Question in the U.S.," 56.

³² Sinclair-Chapman & Price, "Black Politics, the 2008 Election, and the (Im)possibility of Race Transcendence," 739.

they have to run color-blind campaigns. Even black candidates who run moderate campaigns can fall victim to racist attacks and racist sentiments amongst the electorate. For example, overt resentment about big government and its support for black demands contributed to Tom Bradley's defeat in California's 1982 gubernatorial race, though Bradley had presented himself as a color-blind, moderate candidate.³³ Likewise, in the 1990 U.S. Senate race in North Carolina, Jesse Helms heralded himself as having "North Carolina values," while Harvey Gantt was framed as an extremist with views and values outside the mainstream of American culture.³⁴

L. Douglas Wilder, who, having been elected governor of Virginia in 1989, became the first black to be elected governor in the nation's history, and Edward Brooke, who in 1966 became the first black to serve in the Senate since Reconstruction, have advocated that black candidates be race-neutral and run race-neutral campaigns. Neither of these two politicians presented themselves as black candidates. Rather, Brooke and Wilder presented themselves as candidates who happened to be black. As Brooke said, "I wanted to be perceived as a qualified candidate, not a black candidate." Likewise, Wilder said, "I have never been a civil rights activist of any kind."³⁵ This kind of deracialized campaign would also be run by Barack Obama in his 2008 presidential run. Indeed, like himself, Wilder has said that Obama does not see politics through the strict prism of race. Discussing his own conversations with Obama, Wilder said, "[O]ne thing we discussed is that there are no such things as 'black issues.' Health and education

³³ J. Citrin, D.P. Green, & D.O. Sears. "White Reactions to Black Candidates: When Does Race Matter?" *Public Opinion Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (1990): 74-96.

³⁴ Strickland & Whicker, "Comparing the Wilder and Gantt Campaigns: A Model for Black Candidate Success in Statewide Elections," 204-212.

³⁵ J.L. Jeffries. "U.S. Senator Edward W. Brooke and Governor L. Douglas Wilder Tell Political Scientists How Blacks Can Win High-Profile Statewide Office," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 32, no. 3 (1999): 586.

are not black issues. Improvement of job opportunities is not a black issue. Many whites resent people campaigning as if all whites have it made or as if all whites are in a position of luxury.”³⁶

Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign was emblematic of deracialization and an attempt to transcend race.³⁷ Rather than speaking on African-American trauma, going back to his 2004 speech at the Democratic National Convention, Obama has offered a “rhetoric of consilience.”³⁸ In contrast to figures like Al Sharpton or Jesse Jackson, Obama neither came out of the African American community nor had highly visible connections in the field of civil rights.³⁹ There was even concern as to whether Obama was “black enough” insofar as he, among other things, was not the descendant of plantation slaves like the majority of black Americans.⁴⁰ Further, Obama has continually emphasized programs, principles, and purposes that are meant to advance the common values and goals of all Americans,⁴¹ while his own story is a testament and embodiment of the American ethos—of individual achievement, hard work, and ingenuity.⁴²

In addition to other than Obama, other contemporary, high-level black politicians like Harold Ford Jr., Deval Patrick, and Cory Booker have pursued deracial strategies.⁴³ In some respects, the reluctance to discuss race reaffirms the rules of the game in an “Anglo-conformity”⁴⁴ that is acceptable to white elites as it does not threaten the color-blind racial order.

³⁶ J. Curiel. “The Year of Keeping Up with Obama—Democrat Candidates Courting Black Voters,” March 11, 2007. Retrieved April 23, 2014, from <http://www.sfgate.com/opinion/article/The-year-of-keeping-up-with-Obama-Democrat-2578336.php>.

³⁷ Clayton, *The Presidential Campaign of Barack Obama: A Critical Analysis of Racially Transcendent Strategy*.

³⁸ D.A. Frank & M.L. McPhil. “Barack Obama’s Address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention: Trauma, Compromise, Consilience, and the (Im)possibility of Racial Reconciliation.” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 8, no.4 (2005): 571-594.

³⁹ R. Walters. “Barack Obama and the Politics of Blackness,” *Journal of Black Studies*, 38, no. 1 (2009): 15.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 9

⁴¹ D.S. King & R.M. Smith. “Barack Obama and the Future of American Racial Politics,” *Du Bois Review* 6, no. 1 (2009): 32.

⁴² Sinclair-Chapman & Price, “Black Politics, the 2008 Election, and the (Im)possibility of Race Transcendence,” 739.

⁴³ A. Gillespie, *Whose Black Politics?: Cases in Post-Racial Black Leadership*. New York: Routledge, 2010; Ifill, *The Breakthrough*.

⁴⁴ Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity*, 145.

It is interesting to consider, albeit briefly, the aforementioned in terms of critical race theory. More precisely, Derrick Bell, a legal scholar and critical race theorist, has argued that throughout American history, significant progress for blacks has been achieved only when their goals coincide with the perceived needs of whites.⁴⁵ However, although Obama has distanced himself from race, perhaps consciously to assert post-racial bona fides,⁴⁶ Obama is not a post-racial figure. After all, the significance of Obama's presidency and some of the opposition it has garnered have been rooted in race. And, given the pervasiveness of racial problems in this country, to speak of America as a post-racial society, as if race were in the rearview mirror, is not only absurd, it is also dangerous.

The New Coalition Forged by Obama

In his bid for the presidency, Obama forged a new coalition of voters nationwide that cut across racial and ethnic lines. As in 2008, in 2012, the black vote went almost unanimously for Barack Obama. This coalition included 93 percent of African Americans, down two percentage points from 2008; 71 percent of Hispanics in 2012, up from 66 percent of Hispanics in 2008, and 73 percent of Asians, up from 63 percent in 2008 – and a two percentage point higher rate than Hispanics. Among white voters with college or post-graduate education, Obama received 42 percent of the vote, down five percentage points from 2008. Overall, Obama received only 39 percent of the white vote in 2012, down from 43 percent in 2008. Romney received 59 percent of the white vote in 2012 – thus, becoming the first presidential candidate to receive so large a share of the white vote and lose the presidential election. The white portion of the presidential

⁴⁵ D.A. Bell. *Race, Racism, and American Law (6th Ed.)*. Aspen Publishers, 2008.

⁴⁶ M.C. Dawson. *Not in Our Lifetimes: The Future of Black Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011, 67.

electorate has been steadily declining for decades – from 87 percent in 1992 down to 72 percent in 2012.⁴⁷

What this means is that the Republican Party’s white base is dwindling and the election of the president is no longer determined by the white vote alone. Obama’s loss of the white vote is most evident in the South, where he fared poorly in 2008 and 2012. Obama garnered less than 50 percent of the white vote in each of the eleven states of the Old Confederacy in 2008 and 2012. In eight of those states: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas, in 2008 and 2012, he received less than 35 percent of the white vote (see Table 1). Though he employed an aggressive strategy to win Southern states, Obama won three Southern states in the 2008 election (Virginia, North Carolina, and Florida), but only two Southern states in 2012. Even in the Southern states he won, he lost a majority of the white vote in both 2008 and 2012. As shown in Table 3, compared to Table 2, Obama’s white support declined from 2008 to 2012 in the two Southern states he won.⁴⁸

The new and broad coalition built by Obama was made up of those who predominantly favor color-blind policies, but who do want to see real, material racial progress and can tolerate some race-conscious measures, along with those who think significant race-conscious measures are needed, but who are willing to put them on the back burner if progress can be achieved through other means.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, similar to 2008, the 2012 election highlighted the shifting demographics within the American electorate, and, as Dick Morris, in not-so-shrouded coded language said, “This isn’t your father’s America.”⁵⁰ The new coalition of voters has been fueled

⁴⁷ H. Wolff. “Race and the 2012 Election.” *The American Renaissance*, November 9, 2012. Retrieved April 13, 2015, from <http://www.amren.com/features/2012/11/race-and-the-2012-election/>.

⁴⁸ Wolff, “Race and the 2012 Election.”

⁴⁹ King & Smith, “Barack Obama and the Future of American Racial Politics,” 31.

⁵⁰ D. Chinni. Election Exit Polls Provide Mountain of Data. *PBS.org*, 2012. Retrieved November 21, 2014, from <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/patchwork-nation-from-election-exit-polls-a-mountain-of-data/>

by an increase in non-white immigration and a decline in the percentage of white voters overall in this country. Hispanics, of whom there are 48 million, have replaced African Americans as the largest minority and account for 16.7 percent of the total population but only 10 percent of voters in 2012. African Americans comprise 13 percent of the population and 13 percent of the electorate. Though Asians now make up 5 percent of the population, they account for only 3 percent of the electorate.⁵¹ By 2050, many demographers predict that whites will no longer be in the majority, and that the United States will be a majority minority nation.⁵² Already, four in ten Millennials are nonwhite.⁵³

Race & Opposition to Obama

While Obama's 2008 victory was heralded as a "new day" and the Republicans were considered a dying breed, the honeymoon period was relatively short-lived. On February 19, 2009, CNBC commentator Rick Santelli, speaking from the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, went on a tirade against the nascent Obama administration, specifically assistance to underwater mortgage holders, many of whom were lower-income and minority Americans. By subsidizing "the losers' mortgages," Santelli exclaimed the "government is rewarding bad behavior." Santelli invited America's "capitalists" to a "Chicago Tea Party" to protest such government intervention, signifying a revolt of "real" Americans against an overreaching government and "freeloaders."⁵⁴ Around the same time as Santelli's explosion, on February 23, Fox News' Glenn Beck had a special show in which he and his guests spoke of the possibility of

⁵¹ Wolff, "Race and the 2012 Election."

⁵² Greenblatt & Marshall, "Changing U.S. Electorate," 56.

⁵³ P. Taylor. "The Next America," April 10, 2014. Retrieved April 6, 2015, from <http://www.pewresearch.org/next-america/#Two-Dramas-in-Slow-Motion>.

⁵⁴ T. Skocpol, & V. Williamson. *Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012: 50-51.

another Civil War in what was a discussion wrapped in fear of big government and thinly-veiled racism.⁵⁵

Despite attempts by the Obama campaign to run a race-neutral campaign, race was ever-present in 2008, and the vitriol was there even before Obama's election as president. Though the Obama campaign had been relatively race-neutral throughout 2007, race crept in during the South Carolina primary as the Clintons began to use race-baiting, alluding to Obama as a Jesse Jackson-like figure.⁵⁶ It has even been reported that Senator Ted Kennedy endorsed Obama after the South Carolina primary because he, "worried that the Clintons were trying to turn Obama into the black candidate—the Jesse Jackson of 2008."⁵⁷ After receiving the nomination, the Obama campaign became the target of racist attacks by the mainstream media and the fringe of the conservative movement.⁵⁸ In September of 2008, Congressman Lynn Westmoreland of Georgia referred to the Obamas as "uppity." Though benign in isolation, the adjective is loaded with connotations of repression in the context of the historically segregated South.⁵⁹

In July 2008, the cover of *The New Yorker* magazine, a liberal-leaning publication, portrayed Obama as a Muslim in sandals and a turban, while Michelle was dressed in camouflage fatigues, combat boots, with an AK-47 strapped over her shoulder, and wearing an afro.⁶⁰ Meant to be ironic, *The New Yorker* cover confirmed the fears of some that the 1970s-era armed black radical was in cahoots with the 21st century jihadist. Additionally, according to African American scholar Molefi Asante, Obama was the "first presidential candidate in history

⁵⁵ Dawson, *Not in Our Lifetimes: The Future of Black Politics*, 80-81.

⁵⁶ M. Tesler & D.O. Sears. *Obama's Race: The 2008 Election and the Dream of a Post-Racial America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010: 30-31

⁵⁷ D. Balz & H. Johnson. *The Battle for America 2008: The Story of an Extraordinary Election*. New York: Viking, 2009, 173.

⁵⁸ Dawson, *Not in Our Lifetimes: The Future of Black Politics*, 64.

⁵⁹ R.P. Formisano. *The Tea Party: A Brief History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, 43.

⁶⁰ Clayton, *The Presidential Campaign of Barack Obama: A Critical Analysis of Racially Transcendent Strategy*, 80.

to receive Secret Service protection so early in the campaign...on April 3, 2007, because of serious threats against his person by numerous detractors.”⁶¹ Finally, unable to directly and explicitly use race against Obama, the McCain campaign tried to raise concerns that Obama would pursue race-conscious policies that would expand opportunities for African Americans. These efforts were accompanied by attempts to cast Obama as fundamentally different and outside of the mainstream with ads asking “Who is the real Barack Obama?” and “Vote for a real American, John McCain.”⁶²

The racially-attuned opposition to Obama that emerged in 2008 and remained after his re-election has been persistent. Mark Potok, the Director of the Intelligence Project for the Southern Poverty Law Center, an organization that monitors hate groups, has noted:

The 1990s saw the rise and fall of the anti-government ‘Patriot’ movement, made up of paramilitary militias, tax defiers, and so-called ‘sovereign citizens.’ By early in the 21st century, they had largely disappeared. After disappearing for almost a decade, right-wing militias, tax defiers, and sovereign citizens are reappearing across the country.⁶³

What is different? As Potok said, “A key difference this time is that the federal government is now headed by a black man.” Potok believes that the election of Barack Obama, along with a loss in the percentage of whites in this country overall, on top of high levels of non-white immigration, have all helped to racialize the Patriot movement, which in the past was not primarily motivated by race hate.⁶⁴

In fact, the Patriot movement, comprised of right-wing armed militias, rose exponentially after Obama’s election. Consistently below 200 between the years of 2002 and 2008, the number

⁶¹ M. Asante. “Barack Obama and the Dilemma of Power: An Africological Observation,” *Journal of Black Studies*, 38, no. 1(September 2007): 105-115.

⁶² King & Smith. “Barack Obama and the Future of American Racial Politics,” 30.

⁶³ Telephone Interview, 16 Dec. 2011

⁶⁴ Ibid.

of Patriot groups was 500 in 2009. Growing consistently from then on, there were nearly 1,400 Patriot groups by 2012.⁶⁵ Perhaps the most visible act by such groups during Obama's time in office was the standoff at Cliven Bundy's ranch in Nevada in which the anti-government Patriot groups stood armed against federal agents until the federal agents backed down.⁶⁶ Indeed, there are some federal and local law enforcement groups who view the domestic terror threat from such groups as equal to or greater than the threat from foreign Islamic terror groups like ISIS.⁶⁷

Another highly vocal and visible manifestation of resistance to Obama was the Tea Party, which formed in early 2009. Composed primarily of white males over 45 and wealthier than most Americans,⁶⁸ the Tea Party espouses anti-government, anti-debt, and anti-deficit principles. At least on its face, the Tea Party falls in line with a long tradition of conservative opposition to the encroachment of big government.⁶⁹ But, the Tea Party "expresses a 'heartland' ethos of ethnocentrism among older white Americans experiencing rapid change in the kinds of people who make up the nation."⁷⁰ In fact, despite proposed libertarian principles, generally speaking, the Tea Party is more akin to reactionary conservatism in the tradition of the Know-Nothing Party, the Ku Klux Klan, and the John Birch Society.⁷¹

⁶⁵ VICE. "Watch Host Gianna Tognoni Debrief Our New HBO Episode About American Militant Groups," March 21, 2015. Retrieved April 6, 2015, from <http://www.vice.com/read/watch-host-gianna-tognoni-debrief-our-new-hbo-episode-about-american-militant-groups-014>.

⁶⁶ M. Strasser. "For Militiamen, the Fight for Cliven Bundy's Ranch is Far From Over." *Newsweek*, April 23, 2014. Retrieved April 6, 2015, from <http://www.newsweek.com/2014/05/02/militiamen-fight-over-cliven-bundys-ranch-far-over-248354.html>.

⁶⁷ E. Perez & W. Bruer. "DHS Intelligence Report Warns of Domestic Right-Wing Terror Threat." CNN.com, February 19, 2015. Retrieved April 6, 2015, from <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/02/19/politics/terror-threat-homeland-security/>.

⁶⁸ L. Pitts. "Obama, Race, and Tea Party Supporters." *Louisville Courier-Journal*, April 24, 2010. Retrieved April 26, 2010, from <http://www.courier-journal.com/article/20100425/OPINION04/4250318/Leonard-Pitts-Obama-race-tea-party-supporters>.

⁶⁹ M.A. Smith. *The Right Talk: How Conservatives Transformed the Great Society into the Economic Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

⁷⁰ Formisano, *The Tea Party: A Brief History*, 110.

⁷¹ M.A. Barreto & C.S. Parker. *Change They Can't Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013, 4.

In 2010, the University of Washington’s Institute for the Study of Ethnicity, Race, and Sexuality conducted a multi-state survey on race, finding that the Tea Party supporters were predisposed to racial intolerance.⁷² According to the survey results, approximately 45 percent of white respondents either strongly support or somewhat support the Tea Party movement. Commenting on the results, Christopher Parker, the principal investigator in the study, said, “If one believes that blacks don’t try hard enough, use slavery as an excuse, and...have received more than they deserve (racial resentment), they are 37 percent more likely than those who don’t believe this...to support the tea party.”⁷³ Moreover, Parker said, “Once you control for partisanship, party identification and ideology, there’s STILL a significant, robust effect for race.”⁷⁴ To facilitate comparisons across a range of support for the Tea Party, the study divided support for the Tea Party into four distinct categories: True Skeptics of the Tea Party, Middle of the Road, True Believers, and Never Heard Of.⁷⁵

For the survey, respondents were asked a series of questions about blacks in general: whether they thought each group was hard-working, intelligent, or trustworthy. Of those who strongly supported or somewhat supported the Tea Party, only 35 percent believed blacks are hard-working, only 45 percent believed blacks are intelligent, and only 41 percent believed blacks are trustworthy (see Table 4). It is worth noting, as Theda Skocpol and Vanessa

⁷² The survey is drawn from a probability sample of 1,006 cases, stratified by state. The Multi-State Survey of Race and Politics included seven states, six of which were battleground states in the 2008 presidential election. It includes Georgia, Michigan, Missouri, Nevada, North Carolina, Ohio, and California. Survey respondents include 494 whites, 380 blacks, 77 Latinos, and 64 members of other races and ethnicities. The study has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1% and was conducted by telephone from February 8 through March 15, 2010.

⁷³ Quoted in Pitts “Obama, Race, and Tea Party Supporters.”

⁷⁴ Ibid

⁷⁵ Respondents were required to answer a question that asked whether or not they “strongly approved” or “somewhat approved” of the Tea Party. True Believers were those who strongly approved of the movement and True Skeptics were those who strongly disapproved of the Tea Party. Middle of the roaders were those who either somewhat disapproved or somewhat approved. Also included was a column for the group who claimed to have never heard of the Tea Party, and so have no opinion of the movement.

Williamson⁷⁶ said, “Compared to other Americans, Tea Partiers rate *whites* relatively poor on these characteristics, too. Tea Partiers have negative views about all of their fellow citizens.” When analyzing the responses of all whites surveyed for the same three questions, the results are startling, as only 40 percent of all whites interviewed felt that blacks are hard-working, only 49 percent of all whites felt that blacks are intelligent, and only 47 percent of all whites felt that blacks are trustworthy. Less than 50 percent of both Tea Party True Believers and all whites surveyed felt that blacks are hard-working, intelligent, or trustworthy. Indeed, whether they are Tea Party supporters or not, the data show that the whites surveyed hold negative stereotypes towards blacks, perhaps even assigning an essential deficiency to blacks.

Additionally, respondents were asked to react to whether they felt a series of phrases described President Obama either extremely well or quite well. The phrases given to respondents were: knowledgeable, intelligent, moral, or a strong leader. Of the Tea Party True Believers, only 38 percent described the president as knowledgeable, only 37 percent described the president as intelligent, only 32 percent described the president as moral, and only 44 percent described the president as a strong leader (see Table 5). These numbers provide a stark contrast to the results of all whites, which showed that 60 percent felt the president was knowledgeable, 63 percent felt that he was intelligent, 61 percent felt he was moral, and 64 percent felt he was a strong leader (see Table 5). Since the majority of Tea Party members tend to be white and Republican, there is the possibility that the low percentage of Tea Party True Believers who had unfavorable perceptions of Obama on the four traits may be due to partisanship and not racism. Nonetheless, that so many respondents would believe Obama to be unintelligent and unknowledgeable seems to fly in the face of reality. After all, Obama has a bachelor’s degree from Columbia University and a law degree from the Harvard School of Law. While at Harvard, Obama was the first black

⁷⁶Skocpol & Williamson, *Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*, 69.

elected president of the prestigious Harvard Law Review. Moreover, Obama is an accomplished author and served as a law professor at the University of Chicago Law School. In his *Kill the Messenger* stand-up special, comedian Chris Rock poignantly observed this social reality that blacks must be truly exceptional to achieve a certain status that ordinary whites occupy.⁷⁷ That said, Obama's accomplishments are extraordinary by any standard, not just for a black man.

Although Tea Party members are vehement in arguing that race has nothing to do with their opposition to President Obama, it is clear from the data that we do not live in a post-racial society, and that the perceived racial superiority among whites still has a significant impact on their negative stereotyping of blacks in America. Echoing this, Logan said that the "most controversial aspect of the [Tea Party] movement in 2009/2010 was the way its supporters positioned themselves with regard to race."⁷⁸ For example, at Tea Party rallies one could see several signs depicting Obama as a terrorist, as an African witch doctor with a bone through his nose, or as Hitler. In the summer of 2010, the NAACP even passed a resolution condemning the racism of the Tea Party.⁷⁹ No doubt, the racial sentiments here are nuanced. Arceneaux and Nicholson⁸⁰ posit that racial resentment does color the judgments of the Tea Party members about government aid to the poor, but that racial animus is not the primary force behind their opposition. Furthermore, describing the Tea Party Convention held in February 2010, Jonathan Raban⁸¹ observed that there were those in attendance clearly motivated by a vehement racism, though he noted that others were repulsed by it. Nevertheless, the aforementioned examples indicate racial undertones and overtones are constitutive elements of the opposition to Obama.

⁷⁷ C. Rock. *Kill the Messenger*. New York: HBO Video, 2009.

⁷⁸ E. Logan. *'At this Defining Moment': Barack Obama's Presidential Candidacy and the New Politics of Race*. New York: New York University Press, 2011.

⁷⁹ Ibid

⁸⁰ K. Arceneaux & S.P. Nicholson. "Who Wants to Have a Tea Party? The Who, What, and Why of the Tea Party Movement." *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 45, no. 4 (October 2012): 700.

⁸¹ J. Raban. "At the Tea Party." *The New York Review of Books*, March, 2010. Retrieved November 20, 2014, from <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/mar/25/at-the-tea-party/>.

The Conservative Backlash against Obama

Upon taking office, strong anti-Obama rhetoric quickly became noticeable in the elite conservative political and media circles. In fact, their disagreement with Obama's policies continued to grow and become more sustained as conservative leaders made an about-face on several issues, flipping from advocacy to derision on similar positions they supported under Republican presidents. For example, as journalist Bakari Kitwana said, "The \$700 billion Wall Street bailout was a necessary evil. But, for them, the \$787 billion economic stimulus marked the end of capitalism."⁸² Similarly, Kitwana notes that under President Bush, support for the Iraq War was pro-American, but under Obama, the idea of not criticizing a war president has been abandoned.⁸³

Obama is not the first president to be accused of expanding government and advocating socialist policies. Similar to the constant of racism and conservatism that desperately seeks to arrest change, there is a constant found in an increasingly interventionist state, particularly from the beginning of the 20th century through the present. At the very beginning of the 20th century, referring to the need for the federal government to check corporations, Herbert Croly⁸⁴ argued that Hamiltonian means should be employed in order to achieve Jeffersonian ends, that is, big government ought to be a tool to preserve individual freedoms and liberties. During the New Deal era of President Franklin Roosevelt the role of government was greatly expanded to combat the Great Depression, and, in the process, laid the foundation for a welfare state. Regarding the

⁸² K. Bakari. "Is Conservative Obama Backlash the New Racism?" *Huffington Post*, September 8, 2009. Retrieved March 10, 2010, from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bakari-kitwana/is-conservative-obama-bas_b_279775.html.

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ H. Croly. *The Promise of American Life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965.

New Deal programs, Newman and Jacobs⁸⁵ said, “Public opinion was skeptical of the value and legitimacy of relief programs. An overwhelming majority believed the government was spending too much money on relief.”

Beyond fiscal concerns, it is not unfounded to be wary of an expanding government. After all, the most horrific suffering in human history has been the result of large-scale, often progressive, projects carried out by highly centralized and bureaucratic states.⁸⁶ With that said, opposition to big government is not only the result of fiscal concerns or fears of an ever-present government. Rather, there is also a racial motivation. As an opponent of the New Deal programs said:

We mean to do this without the aid of bought Negro relievers, WPA-ers, subsidized non-producers, pampered Alien and Labor Union hangers-on, or that misguided coterie surrounding you who have so amiably and so senselessly squandered our billions. We prefer to link up with the yearly increment of American-born new voters who will remember their heritage and keep it clean.⁸⁷

Indeed, it would not be difficult to imagine these words being spoken today, as such animus still exists within certain discourses, especially within the anti-Obama rhetoric.

The rise of hate speech and anti-Obama rhetoric in America is prevalent in the conservative media and blogosphere. There is, further, a rather blurry line between objective news and ideological orchestration. Such a blurry line is particularly noteworthy with Fox News, which, at times, appears to operate as a right-wing propaganda machine for the Republican Party. While Fox News’ anchors and reporters argue that news reporting and political commentary operate independently of each other, many people on the right, including right-wing extremists,

⁸⁵ K. Newman & E. Jacobs. “Brothers’ Keepers?” *Society* 4, no. 5 (July 2007): 6-11.

⁸⁶ J.C. Scott. *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

⁸⁷ K. Newman & E. Jacobs. *Who Cares? Public Ambivalence and Government Activism from the New Deal to the Second Gilded Age*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, 45.

take their cues from the media outlet and similar media sources. In fact, Fox News amplified the public attention that Tea Party groups received, and connected their viewers with online tools to start or link up with their local Tea Party. Whereas other media outlets covered big, national Tea Party events when they happened, Fox News was out in front, offering steady “coverage” for weeks leading into each major event. And Fox acted as a kind of movement orchestrator, offering models and contact information to local and regional viewers hoping to connect with one another. Accordingly, Fox News served as a cheerleader and megaphone for Tea Party events and helped otherwise scattered conservatives gain a sense of shared identity and pooled tactical knowledge.⁸⁸

In an article titled “Political Hate Talk and the Safety of President Obama,” journalist Herndon Davis quotes Joan Walsh, the editor-at-large of the online news magazine *Salon.com*, saying, “I think there is clearly a fringe of people who are economically vulnerable and who are susceptible to the alarmist rhetoric being spewed about the president. I do worry about violence.”⁸⁹ Moreover, Davis has asserted that some of the most virulent anti-Obama rhetoric has come from pundits, politicians, and even ministers like Steven Anderson of Arizona. Former Fox News talk show host Glenn Beck said, “President Obama has a deep-seated hatred of white people. This guy [Obama] I believe is a racist. Obama’s healthcare is driven by reparations.”⁹⁰ Similarly, Fox News’ Sean Hannity has repeatedly leveled harsh criticisms at the president and regularly questions his intelligence.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Skocpol, *Obama and America’s Political Future*, 50-51; Skocpol & Williamson, *Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*, 121-153.

⁸⁹ H. Davis. “Political Hate Talk and the Safety of President Obama,” September 18, 2009. Retrieved October 2, 2009, from http://www.bet.com/WebApplications/betRoot/Templates/Posting_A.

⁹⁰ Ibid

⁹¹ S. Hannity. “Critics Question Rick Perry’s Intelligence, But What About President Obama?” *Fox News Channel*, August 29, 2011. Retrieved August 30, 2011, from <http://www.foxnews.com/on-air/hannity/2011/08/30/critics-question-rick-perrys-intelligence-what-about-president-obama>.

The king of conservative talk radio, Rush Limbaugh said, “I hope Obama fails. Adolph Hitler, like Barack Obama, also ruled by dictate. The Obama healthcare logo is damn close to a Nazi swastika logo.”⁹² Members of the U.S. Congress have made equally outrageous comments. Former Senator Jim DeMint (R-SC) said, “If we’re able to stop Obama [on healthcare reform], it will be his Waterloo. It will break him.”⁹³ In a statement made to the *National Review*, Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY), the Senate Minority Leader at the time, blatantly professed, “The single most important thing we want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term president.” Rep. Michelle Bachmann (R-MN) said in response to some of President Obama’s policy proposals, “I want people in Minnesota armed and dangerous on the issue of the energy tax because we need to fight back.”⁹⁴ And former Governor and Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin referred to President Obama’s healthcare reform legislation as “downright evil” and inferred that his policies would force her youngest son, who has Down Syndrome, “to stand in front of Obama’s death panel.”⁹⁵

Through relentless obstruction on the part of Republicans, it seems that the Office of the Presidency has been diminished in terms of prestige and authority. In January 2015, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was invited by Speaker of the House John Boehner, without having consulted President Obama, to address a joint session of Congress.⁹⁶ Similarly, Republican Senators recently sent an open letter to Iran in an effort to derail the nuclear

⁹² Davis. “Political Hate Talk and the Safety of President Obama.”

⁹³ Ibid

⁹⁴ Ibid

⁹⁵ Ibid

⁹⁶ R. Kagan. “Five Reasons Netanyahu Should Not Address Congress,” January 29, 2015. Retrieved March 20, 2015, from http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/five-reasons-netanyahu-should-not-address-congress/2015/01/29/1c8c66a4-a7e1-11e4-a06b-9df2002b86a0_story.html.

negotiation between Iran and the U.S., acting as if Obama is not even the President.⁹⁷ Finally, Mitch McConnell has sought to undermine Obama's Climate Plan with other countries and has even urged states in the union to openly defy the Environmental Protection Agency's proposed rules to limit greenhouse gas emissions.⁹⁸ Undermining Obama domestically and internationally may have dangerous and inalterable consequences for the office of the Presidency. Indeed, former President George W. Bush has avoided criticizing Obama, saying, "I don't think it's good for the country to have a former president undermine a current president; I think it's bad for the presidency for that matter."⁹⁹

Conspiracy Theories

When Obama was first elected in 2008, many conservatives, most notably Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump, questioned whether he was born, not in Hawaii, but in Kenya, the birthplace of his father. Championed by Trump, this "birther movement" continued to grow until the White House ultimately released a certified copy of Obama's Certificate of Live Birth (the long-form birth certificate)¹⁰⁰ that showed he was born in Honolulu, Hawaii, on August 4, 1961. Despite this evidence, Trump, among others, still refuses to publicly acknowledge this fact and has declined to correct those who insist on keeping the conspiracy theory alive. In addition to questions about his citizenship, allegations have persisted that Obama is not a Christian but is a Muslim. According to an article in *newsweek.com* by

⁹⁷ P. Waldman. "Republicans are beginning to act as though Barack Obama isn't even the President." *The Washington Post*, March 9, 2015. Retrieved April 6, 2015, from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/wp/2015/03/09/republicans-are-beginning-to-act-as-though-barack-obama-isnt-even-the-president/>.

⁹⁸ E. Atkin. "Mitch McConnell Undermines Obama's Climate Plan with Other Countries," April 1, 2015. Retrieved April 8, 2015, from <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2015/04/01/3641594/mcconnells-inner-tom-cotton/>.

⁹⁹ C. Campbell. "George W. Bush: This is Why I Refuse to Criticize Obama," November 14, 2014. Retrieved April 8, 2015, from <http://www.businessinsider.com/george-w-bush-why-i-refuse-to-criticize-obama-2014-11>.

¹⁰⁰ S. Page & J. Kucinich. "Obama Releases Long-form Birth Certificate." *USA Today*, April 28, 2011. Retrieved June 10, 2011, from http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2011-04-27-obama-birth-certificate_n.htm.

journalist Lisa Miller, Obama was born to a Christian-turned-secular mother and a Muslim-turned-atheist, African father. In fact, Obama grew up in several locations around the world with plenty of spiritual influences, but without any particular religion. Obama became a Christian and was baptized in the early 1990s at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. There is no requirement according to the U.S. Constitution that one profess a particular religious faith as a condition of holding public office.

Obama is not the first presidential candidate to face scrutiny because of his race or perceived religious beliefs. In 1960, John Kennedy sought to become the first Catholic President of the United States. All of the previous presidents had been white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant. John Kennedy was challenged by many American liberals on his faith. According to an article by Thomas Carty, within the liberal community some “believed that Catholic candidates would be subject to pressure from their church hierarchy, and they feared that Catholic Church intervention in U.S. politics would undermine the religious liberty of non-Catholic Americans.”¹⁰¹ Not unlike the speech Obama gave on race on March 18, 2008, while still a candidate, in an attempt to assuage the fears of whites who felt that Obama would not represent their interests, Kennedy delivered a speech on religion and the importance of separation of church and state as being absolute. Despite continued opposition, Kennedy was able to win the Democratic presidential nomination by successfully distancing himself from unpopular Catholic positions and strongly asserting his commitment to separation of church and state.¹⁰² Ironically, some of those opposed to Kennedy after he became president in 1961 created a poster that appeared as a “mug shot” of President Kennedy with a caption below that said “Wanted for

¹⁰¹ T. Carty. “The Catholic Question: Religious Liberty and JFK’s Pursuit of the 1960 Democratic Nomination.” *The Historian*, 63 (2001):578.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 578

Treason” and a list of grievances. That same poster resurfaced on the internet after the election of Obama in 2008 with a picture of Obama instead of Kennedy with similar talking points.¹⁰³

Another attack leveled against Obama during the 2012 presidential campaign was concerning Obama’s use of the teleprompter. In the 2012 Republican primaries, Rick Santorum called Obama’s use of the teleprompter as Teleprompter Derangement Syndrome and referred to the president as “reader-in-chief.”¹⁰⁴ While campaigning in Mississippi for the Republican nomination for president, the former Pennsylvania senator remarked, “when you run for president of the United States, it should be illegal to read off a teleprompter. Because all you’re doing is reading someone else’s words to people.”¹⁰⁵ Representative Steve Womack (R-AR) proposed eliminating funding for President Obama’s teleprompter as a way to further reduce federal spending. Apparently, notes Schlesinger, the criticism of the President’s use of a teleprompter is the idea that he is reading remarks that were prepared in advance and with the assistance of others.¹⁰⁶ This criticism implies Obama is unable to speak extemporaneously without the use of modern technology, a veiled racist accusation that he is inarticulate.

Among the aforementioned “dog whistles” acquired by the fringe of the Right and mainstream Republicans, invoking Obama’s paternal Kenyan ancestry, was the argument that Obama believed in “anti-colonial Mau-Mausim.”¹⁰⁷ Former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee picked up on this, claiming that Obama grew up in Kenya where he learned to despise

¹⁰³ Madascheck. “JFK’s ‘Treason’ versus Obama’s ‘Treason’: Notice any Similarities?” *Daily Kos*, June 18, 2010. Retrieved October 8, 2015, from <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2010/06/18/877384/-JFKs-treason-vs-Obamas-treason:-Notice-any-similarities>.

¹⁰⁴ R. Schlesinger. “Obama’s Teleprompter: The GOP’s Dumbest Attack.” *U.S. News and World Report*, March 20, 2012. Retrieved June 2, 2015 from: <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2012/03/20/obamas-teleprompter-the-gops-dumbest-attack>

¹⁰⁵ Ibid

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

¹⁰⁷ D’Souza, D. “How Obama Thinks.” *Forbes.com*, September 27, 2010. Retrieved April 23, 2015 from: <http://www.forbes.com/forbes/2010/0927/politics-socialism-capitalism-private-enterprises-obama-business-problem.html>.

colonialism from his father and grandfather. Subsequently, Huckabee relocated Obama's supposed third world radicalization from Kenya to Indonesia, saying, "Most of us growing up going to Boy Scout meetings and, you know, our communities were filled with Rotary Clubs, not madrassas."¹⁰⁸ Likewise, Newt Gingrich, former Speaker of the House, asked, "What if [Obama] is so outside our comprehension that only if you understand Kenyan, anti-colonial behavior, can you begin to piece together [his actions]?"¹⁰⁹ More recently, denying his statement that Obama does not love America, former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani said, "This isn't racism. This is socialism or possibly anti-colonialism."¹¹⁰

Healthcare Reform Town Hall Meetings

The larger question is not whether Obama was really born in the United States or whether he is secretly a Muslim. Are some opposed to Obama because they believe since he is African American, he lacks legitimacy to be in the White House? Therefore, whether he is constantly referred to as a "Muslim," not born in America, a "Socialist," a "terrorist," or a "Nazi," he is considered to be something "other." Political writer Toynaa Weathersbee, in referring to the 2009-2010 healthcare town hall meetings held by members of Congress to discuss proposed healthcare legislation, writes that the script Obama-hating Americans are reading from is an old one. According to Weathersbee, "Their forbearers, in fact, wrote the script in the late 1950s—the last time that a black man, Martin Luther King Jr., was making headway in changing an oppressive system that wasn't working for millions of Americans."¹¹¹ In essence, Weathersbee is

¹⁰⁸ L. Savan. "Huckabee Replaces N-word with 'Mau-Mau,'" *The Nation*, March 7, 2011. Retrieved March 30, 2015 from: <http://www.thenation.com/blog/159059/huckabee-replaces-n-word-mau-mau>.

¹⁰⁹ Bump, P. "A History of President Obama being Called 'Anti-Colonial,'" February 20, 2015. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2015/02/20/a-history-of-president-obama-being-called-anti-colonial/> (Accessed April 13, 2015).

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ T. Weathersbee. "For Obama Foes, It's Not the Plan— It's the Man." August 20, 2009. Retrieved October 2, 2009, from http://www.blackamericaweb.com/?q=print/news/baw_commentary.

comparing attacks against Obama to attacks made against Martin Luther King Jr. and saying that some of the tactics used now are similar to the tactics used by racists during the Civil Rights Movement. For example, Martin Luther King Jr. and others who supported integration in the 1950s and 1960s were labeled as Communists, just as Obama is being labeled a Communist by some of his detractors today.

Town hall meetings, held in 2009 and 2010 surrounding the passage of the healthcare proposal, often included “birthers,” anti-tax Tea Partiers, and town hall hecklers that occasionally turned violent. Attendants sometimes showed up carrying placards depicting Obama as Adolph Hitler with a toothbrush moustache, with a hammer and sickle on his forehead, or wearing a feather headdress and a bone through his nose, calling him a “Socialist” and a “Communist,” among other things. Journalist David Dishneau wrote that outside one town hall meeting in western Maryland, a man held signs reading “Death to Obama,” and “Death to Michelle and her two stupid kids.”¹¹² At an anti-Obama rally in September 2009, there was a sea of Confederate flags, and numerous signs with racial overtones, such as one that read “The zoo has an African lion—the White House has a lyn’ African”¹¹³ and others that “demanded Obama be sent back to Kenya.”¹¹⁴

Weathersbee acknowledges that many participants at the town hall meetings had legitimate concerns about the health care proposals in Congress. But others, she notes, weren’t attending these meetings to help solve the problem, but to stop progress. Furthermore, she asserts that people attending the town hall meetings where they hurled insults and screamed about

¹¹² D. Dishneau. “Maryland ‘Death to Obama’ Sign Holder Detained,” August 14, 2009. Retrieved October 2, 2009, from http://www.Blackamericaweb.com/?q=print/news/the_state_of_blac

¹¹³ K. Richburg. “Jimmy Carter was right. ‘Post-racial’ America is still a forlorn hope.” *The Guardian*, September 20, 2009. Retrieved September 22, 2009, from <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2009/sep/20/jimmy-carter-barack-obama-racism>

¹¹⁴ Ibid

proposed efforts to devise a health care system to cover everyone felt “disenfranchised because a black man now sits in the Oval Office. They couldn’t stop Obama from being elected, so now, they’re bound and determined to prevent him from governing.”¹¹⁵ Since President Obama took office, Republicans in the Congress have attempted to stall, delay, or reject many of the president’s policy initiatives. The Senate has refused to confirm many of President Obama’s judicial appointments at the appellate and district court levels. Moreover, they have failed to confirm numerous appointments made by the president to key regulatory commissions and agencies, which has prompted the president to make several recess appointments. In 2011, Congress refused to consider President Obama’s jobs bill, which was the centerpiece of his push to revive the economy. During the payroll tax-cut debate at the end of 2011, the Republicans in the House balked at continuing the tax cuts but ultimately they agreed to the extension, so as not to be seen as so mean-spirited during a time of economic recession. More recently, the Senate delayed the confirmation of President Obama’s choice on Loretta Lynch, the first African American female nominee for Attorney General, for a historic five months.

Opposition to the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) remains constant and is still a large source of animosity against President Obama. The United States House of Representatives has held over 50 votes to repeal the act since it was signed into law. It was challenged in lawsuits on more than one occasion all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. On June 28, 2012, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the Affordable Care Act’s individual mandate as Congress’ legitimate exercise of its taxation power. However, those opposed to Obamacare have continued their fight to repeal it, both in the court of public opinion and in the actual court system. On March 3, 2015, the Supreme Court heard oral arguments for the second time on provisions of the

¹¹⁵ Weathersbee, “For Obama Foes, It’s Not the Plan— It’s the Man.”

Affordable Care Act. On June 25, 2015, the Supreme Court ruled 6-3 in favor of the Affordable Care Act by holding that the ACA authorized federal tax credits for eligible Americans no matter where they live.

Political Protest in America

History shows that personal and conspiratorial attacks leveled against a sitting president may not be new. In an article in the *Washington Post* titled, “In America, Crazy is a Preexisting Condition,” journalist Rick Perlstein writes that “in the 1950s, Republicans referred to the presidencies of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry Truman as 20 years of treason and accused the men who led the fight against fascism of deliberately surrendering the free world to communism.”¹¹⁶ Moreover, notes Perlstein, “there were right-wingers claiming access to secret documents from the 1920s proving that the entire concept of a ‘civil rights movement’ had been hatched by the Soviet Union.”¹¹⁷ Examples of conspiracy theories have been a frequent part of the American political landscape since the founding of this nation. Perlstein further muses, “Anti-Catholic conspiracy theorists existed in the 1840s and 1850s” and “when the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act was introduced, one frequently read in the South that it would ‘enslave’ whites.”¹¹⁸ It appears the carnival-like atmosphere that has accompanied protests by the “birthers,” anti-tax Tea Partiers, and town hall hecklers continues a longstanding tradition. However, in a National Public Radio discussion of the sometimes-bitter discourse that occurred over healthcare reform when it was being debated by Congress, Faya Rose Toure, founder of the Voting Rights Museum, stated “race is a major factor... There are people with legitimate

¹¹⁶ R. Perlstein. “In America, crazy is a preexisting condition.” *The Washington Post*, August 16, 2009. Retrieved September 25, 2009, from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/08/14>.

¹¹⁷ Ibid

¹¹⁸ Ibid

concerns,” she noted, “but they have never [before] expressed their legitimate concerns with such vengeance and hatred.”¹¹⁹

There has always been political dissent in this country, as well as a long history of conspiracy fears and anti-immigrant campaigns. In fact, that is the nature of an open society where free speech is a cherished principle of the democratic process. Criticism of presidents is nothing new; it did not start with the election of Barack Obama. It is a routine part of our political discourse, and at times it is vicious and nasty. According to journalist Keith Richburg, writing for the *Guardian* newspaper, “Ronald Reagan was derided as lazy and ill-informed. George W. Bush was mocked as the ‘toxic-Texan’ and an imbecile who bumbled us into Iraq.”¹²⁰ But, notes Richburg, “Obama-hatred among a certain segment of the extreme right has crossed a line into something else—it borders on the pathological. When a southern congressman shouted ‘You lie!’ in the middle of Obama’s speech to a joint session of Congress, it was a stunning display of disrespect, not just to the institution, but to the president himself.”¹²¹ Kevin Connolly, writing for BBC News, felt that Rep. Joe Wilson’s (R-SC) comment “was something that went beyond disrespect of the president’s office implied by mere heckling. Here was something that implied to anyone who knows the codes and tones of American politics a contemptuous sense of racial superiority over the commander-in-chief.”¹²²

The continuous attacks on President Obama come largely from his enemies to score political points, but racism has been a constant undertone for the continued disrespect of Obama and his family. Some of Obama’s political opponents are often heard saying, “We want our

¹¹⁹ “View from Selma: Can Obama Debate Be Colorblind?” *National Public Radio*, September 25, 2009. Retrieved September 25, 2009, from <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=113>.

¹²⁰ Richburg, “Jimmy Carter was right. ‘Post-racial’ America is still a forlorn hope.”

¹²¹ Ibid

¹²² K. Connolly. “Race debate grips America.” *BBC.com.uk*, September 16, 2009. Retrieved September 18, 2009, from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/Americas/8260112.s...>

country back!” Implicit in that statement is that someone who is not American or doesn’t truly believe in American values has usurped or stolen their country from them, and they want to take it back. In their minds, this country is white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant. Thus, Obama represents something different to them, something foreign, something “other.” According to journalist Bob Reynolds, “racism simply compounds something that runs even deeper; this fear of the ‘other’ is not a new phenomenon.”¹²³

Conclusion

The election of Barack Obama as the 44th U.S. president heralded a new era in race relations in America. A majority of Americans elected the first African American president. There was renewed hope that America had finally gotten beyond its ugly racist past. Many Americans seemed excited to elect Barack Obama as president because he *was* an African American. President Obama represents the realities of the changing demographics in this country in a new millennium—a multicultural and multiracial nation. However, there are those in America who fear the changing face of America and appear reluctant to let go of the past. The Jim Crow era of legalized racial segregation no longer exists in America. But President Barack Obama is the first African American to occupy the White House. He is the leader of the most powerful nation in this world. Some in this country – a country that has a legacy of slavery and segregation – are opposed to President Obama because he is an African American. Moreover, we have argued that this vehement opposition to Obama has not only lessened President Obama’s stature at home and abroad, but it has damaged the office of the presidency, and has weakened the powers of the presidency. Future research will be needed to evaluate the extent

¹²³ B. Reynolds. “Fear, racism at town hall meetings.” *Aljazeera.net*, August 22, 2009. Retrieved October 28, 2009, from <http://english.aljazeera.net/focus/2009/08/200982075754210254.html>

that the relentless attacks on President Obama during his two terms in office have damaged and diminished the office of the presidency and to what degree.

Indeed, America has not entered into a post-racial society, but, rather, remains a society that is divided by race, where basic assumptions and stereotypes about race continue to serve as the cornerstone of the contemporary social hierarchy. To that end, future research should also examine usage of the term post-racial because post-racial is looking at race as though it is in the rearview mirror. But race still matters in this country and we do not live in a color-blind society. This racism, put on display during Barack Obama's election and presidency, is a new, more subtle form, but is ultimately part of a long continuum of conservative opposition to change, grounded in racist attitudes.

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Table 1: Percentage of White Support for Obama Under 35 Percent

State	2008	2012
	Obama's Percentage of White Vote	Obama's Percentage of White Vote
Alabama	10	15
Arkansas	30	30
Georgia	23	23
Louisiana	14	14
Mississippi	11	10
South Carolina	26	26
Tennessee	34	34
Texas	26	26

Source: CNN: 2008 and 2012 Presidential Exit Polls

Table 2: Percentage of White Support for Obama in the Three Southern States that He Carried in 2008

State	Obama's Percentage of White Vote
Florida	42
Virginia	39
North Carolina	35

Source: CNN: 2008 Presidential Exit Poll

Table 3: Percentage of White Support for Obama in the Two Southern States that He Carried in 2012

State	Obama's Percentage of White Vote
Florida	37
Virginia	37

Source: CNN: 2012 Presidential Exit Poll

Table 4: Stereotypes About Blacks by White Tea Party Approval

Questions:	True Skeptics of the Tea Party	Middle of the Road	True Believers	Never Heard Of	All Whites
Number of Observations (N) and Percent Total White	N=66	N=171	N=117	N=157	N=511
Blacks Hard Working (1-3)*	55%	40%	35%	41%	40%
Blacks Somewhat Hard Working (3)*	12%	7%	15%	10%	18%
Blacks Very Hard Working (2)*	15%	13%	7%	14%	12%
Blacks Extremely Hard Working (1)*	28%	20%	13%	17%	10%
Blacks Intelligent (1-3)*	59%	48%	45%	51%	49%
Blacks Somewhat Intelligent (3)*	14%	13%	16%	11%	23%
Blacks Very Intelligent (2)*	14%	10%	10%	18%	13%
Blacks Extremely Intelligent (1)*	31%	25%	19%	22%	13%
Blacks Trustworthy (1-3)*	57%	41%	41%	50%	47%
Blacks Somewhat Trustworthy (3)*	18%	15%	17%	9%	21%
Blacks Very Trustworthy (2)*	18%	7%	9%	20%	12%
Blacks Extremely Trustworthy (1)*	30%	21%	15%	21%	14%

Note: Cell entries represent the percent in the corresponding category. Rows denoted with * significant at $p < .05$ or better.

Source: University of Washington, March 2010 Multi-state Survey of Race and Politics

Prof. Christopher Parker, Principal Investigator

Online: <http://depts.washington.edu/uwiser/racepolitics.html>

Table 5: President Obama Traits by Tea Party Approval

Traits	True Skeptics of Tea Party	Middle of Road	True Believers	Never Heard Of	All Whites
The following phrases describe President Obama Extremely Well or Quite Well					
Number of Observations (N)	N=66	N=171	N=117	N=157	N=511
Knowledgeable	79%	60%	38%	66%	60%
Intelligent	74%	65%	37%	71%	63%
Moral	86%	64%	32%	68%	61%
Strong Leader	79%	65%	44%	71%	64%

Note: Cell entries represent the percent in the corresponding category. All rows significant at $p < .05$ or better.

Source: University of Washington, March 2010 Multi-state Survey of Race and Politics

Prof. Christopher Parker, Principal Investigator

Online: <http://depts.washington.edu/uwiser/racepolitics.html>