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The Trump Voter and the Question of Race

Todd Alcott · Wednesday, February 15th, 2017

Early in the evening of November 8, 2016, before the shock had set in, before the ballots were counted, before all the states had even reported results, before Trump had even given his victory speech, a mysterious directive suddenly emanated from our nation's media outlets:

Don't call Trump Voters racist.

The very idea of it is laughable on its face. Of course Trump Voters are racist. Of *course* they are. We can tell by a cursory examination of the plainest of facts:

They were presented with a deeply racist candidate. One with a decades-long, proven history of racism. Who based his candidacy on racist ideas and slogans. Who built his popularity by expanding upon racist ideology. Who encouraged his followers to beat and humiliate minorities. Who enthusiastically welcomed racists into his camp.

They were presented with this candidate. And then they voted for him.

Trump was endorsed by the KKK and actual living, breathing, self-identifying Nazis. His doom-laden, divisive campaign speeches were intended to stoke fear and paranoia in racist whites, and they worked. Of *course* Trump Voters are racist. Of *course* they are. The evidence is resoundingly clear. What I can't find is a single shred of evidence, anywhere, that they are *not*.

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And yet, On November 9, all over the media, from Fox News to the *Washington Post*, suddenly, everywhere you looked, on TV, on the radio, on the internet, articles and op-eds and think-pieces multiplied and sub-divided and multiplied again, overflowing their margins, all intent on proving the bizarre idea that Trump Voters Are Not Racist.

No, these articles insisted, calmly, with great authority and solemnity, Trump Voters are not racist, they are merely concerned about the economy, or frightened about the future, or wish for strong borders, or want to "drain the swamp," or are terrified of ISIS, or are strong supporters of the Second Amendment, or desire a return to "law and order," or are "sick of all this political correctness." All the hundreds of articles compiled from all the thousands of individual opinions gathered after the election found a thousand ways to embroider, decorate and polish variations on not-at-all-racist opinions are all based on the most racist philosophy imaginable.

Why?

Why, in the hours after the election results were in, was the media, *en masse*, so intent on cleansing the Trump Voter of the stain of racism? The more right-leaning outlets, of course, promoted the idea for the simple reason that it made them look good: “The election is over, we all had fun, now we can pretend it was healthy exchange of ideas and good for the nation.”

But then, strangely, the left side of the media dial promoted the exact same idea, with the reasoning “We’re going to need these voters in the future, so let’s not alienate them now.” Anyone who called a Trump Voter “racist” was roughly shouted down, as though calling something by its name was suddenly a rude act. One mustn’t be rude to the racists, or else they might not like us! It’s as though a dog had jumped up on the table during Thanksgiving dinner and proceeded to eat everyone’s turkey, but the one who got yelled at was the child who called it a dog.

(And please don’t think I’m ignorant of Mr. Trump’s many other appalling personality traits that made him appealing to his voters. For now it’s enough to discuss his racism.)

Relatively few Trump Voters, I’m sure, went out of their way during the campaign to beat minorities, or spray paint swastikas, or hang black men from tree limbs. And yes, if you accuse a Trump Voter of being racist, oftentimes they’ll respond with an aggrieved anger and maybe show you a photo of one of their kids with a black friend, so there.

These voters, and the liberals who wish to appease them, still don’t understand what racism *is*.

And yes, that’s a lot of people.

We could go down the list. Shall we? Trump Voters were “concerned about the economy.” Yes, they’re “concerned about the economy” because the white man in the suit with his name on the side of a plane told them that their jobs are being stolen by nonwhites. They’re “frightened about the future” because the racist right-wing noise machine has been shrieking for eight years about how the president is a secret Muslim intent on destroying America. They “want strong borders” to serve as a brutal reminder of white supremacy in North America. They wish to “drain the swamp,” yes, of the liberal influence on American politics. They’re “terrified of ISIS” because they’ve been trained to be. They “support the second amendment” because they have dark fantasies of getting to shoot imaginary black men who invade their houses in the middle of the night. They desire a “return to law and order” because “law and order” means that black people aren’t so lippy all the time. And they’re “sick of all this political correctness” because, for eight whole years, they had to watch their mouths around minorities.

It always comes back to race. Always. Trump’s presidential campaign was the living embodiment of Lyndon Johnson’s quote: “If you can convince the lowest white man he’s better than the best colored man, he won’t notice you’re picking his pocket. Hell, give him somebody to look down on, and he’ll empty his pockets for you.”

Of course Trump Voters are racist. *Of course* they are.

When Trump announced his surprise Muslim Ban, my Facebook feed was suddenly flooded with folks sharing the stories of their immigrant ancestors, the war-torn countries they came from, the stories of how they succeeded in the United States. For a few days, everywhere I looked I saw faded, grainy photos of stalwart men and square-faced women in unusual foreign clothing, posing

with luggage, posing with infants, posing with dogs, gleeful and daring in their adventure of finding a new life in America.

Me, I have no immigrant story. I'm a WASP. My family didn't come here, it's always been here. Oh, we must have come over from Europe at some point, England or France or Germany or Holland or someplace. But we have no dinner-table legends of narrow escapes from ruthless dictators, no heartbreaking tales of fleeing plague or war, no inspiring narratives of dreamers who built their lives on the shores of opportunity. This land is ours. We just belong. We're the gatekeepers to the club everyone wants to join.

That's the kind of racism no one wants to talk about. It's the kind of racism so ingrained that you don't know it's there until someone starts to poke at it.

I'll tell you a secret:

Deep in the heart of every Republican is the sincerely-held belief that "rights" are something that can only be possessed by white men. One is not *born* with them, as the Declaration of Independence suggests. (Unless of course one is, like the author and signers of that declaration, a white man.)

If an individual or group of people has served white men well, or have proven themselves adept at playing at life by white men's rules, white men will, if they *deem it proper*, decide to grant those people rights. But in the heart of the Republican, they themselves are still the only ones who truly "belong" here. In the heart of the Republican, all rights are given out on strict condition and can be recalled at any time.

I don't know how else to put it. This is a core belief of conservatism. It's one no one likes to talk about, but it's one every conservative knows without even thinking, as natural as drawing breath, as natural as meeting the eye of the white cashier at the store when a black family walks in and they have the little nod of understanding that says, "You and I may not be much, but we belong and they do not."

Now look at how black people in the US got rights. And look at how women got rights. And look at how gay people got rights. All those people got rights because they *demand*ed them, as human beings, as living souls, who, the Declaration says, are all created equal.

Those people were awarded their rights — rights that were never anyone's to award — not by conservatives, not even by conservatives, but by liberals. In most cases, by white liberals. Because that is, after all, the natural order. That's how ingrained this racist ideology is in the United States. It's the thread that binds the stars and stripes. How many times has a white liberal been offended by a rude black man and thought, "And after all we've *done* for them!" That's how deep the sense of entitlement goes. "We gave you rights, and this is what you do with them?" And it's the sentiment that goes along with every sigh of, "You got the right to vote, do you *have* to have a parade *too*?"

It's the difference between the racism that says "You are not equal to me" and the racism that says "I recognize that you are equal to me, now congratulate me for my benevolence."

Republicans feel — *know* — that the liberal politicians that granted rights to non-whites — and to women, for that matter — are race traitors. That, I maintain, is the reason for the deep

conservative-liberal divide in the United States, the reason why conservatives seem to spend so much time not fighting for conservative ideals but fighting to make liberals angry. It's the reason why working-class families will cheer for the demise of Obamacare without having any idea that they're slitting their own throats.

In 2008, the GOP screwed up so badly, so baldly, so blatantly, with such devastating repercussions, that, yes, there were some counties in the United States where white people felt that they were ready to, yes, *give a black man a chance to be president*. It couldn't have been just any black man though. It had to be a *specific* black man. He had to be well-spoken, he had to be "articulate," he had to have manners and style beyond reproach (read: indistinguishable from white), he had to have succeeded beyond all expectations on white terms, and, most importantly, *he could not be descended from African slaves*. For that *specific* black man, yes, certain white voters were willing to grant that specific right. And then, eight years later, those same voters, at the prodding of an outrageously racist candidate, decided they needed to make an example of that black man, and *take away* his right again, by taking away the right of the female candidate who promised to extend his legacy. Because *enough is enough*.

Trump's slogan, "Make America Great Again," is just a variation on the Republican evergreen "Take Our Country Back." To answer the question "Are Trump Voters Racist?" all you have to ask is "Back from whom?"

Top photo taken at the LA Women's March by Alexis Rhone Fancher.

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