

IDEAS

How White Backlash Controls American Progress

Backlash dynamics are one of the defining patterns of the country's history.

MAY 21, 2020

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A group of black marchers protesting school-board policies is met by white counterprotesters during a double demonstration in Memphis on August 31, 1963. (BILL HUDSON / AP)

Updated at 10:41 a.m. ET on May 22, 2020.

THE WORD *BACKLASH* gained popularity in the summer of 1963, when, after dallying on the issue for the first two years of his presidency, President John F. Kennedy proposed significant civil-rights legislation. In response, the word, which had primarily denoted the recoil of a fishing line, was repurposed, usually as “white backlash,” to refer to opposition to the increased pace of African American civil-rights activism or the Kennedy (and, after his assassination in November 1963, the Lyndon B. Johnson) administration’s legislative proposals and executive actions, or both.

In 1966, a commentator, speaking of “the grand new word, backlash,” claimed without much exaggeration that “just about everything that happened could be (and was) attributed to some form of backlash.” The word came to stand for a topsy-turvy rebellion in which white people with relative societal power perceived themselves as victimized by what they described as overly aggressive African Americans demanding equal rights. Backlash, as the *New York Times* columnist Tom Wicker wrote, “is nothing more nor less than white resentment of Negroes.”

Moving beyond an opposition to civil rights, the word *backlash*—less frequently qualified as “white”—quickly became a synonym for a new and growing conservative force, signifying a virulent counterreaction to all manner of social movements and cultural transformations that became central to American politics. Over time, observers noted manifestations of this reaction in a “Southern backlash,” a “male backlash,” a “heterosexual backlash,” a “property tax backlash” and a “backlash against environmentalists.” Just a month after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, a journalist described the United States as being in the midst of “a multitude of backlashes.” But as one commentator pointed out, “The word which gave rise to all sorts of other ‘lashes’ was coined in reference to white opposition to Negro gains.”

Backlash may have burst onto the scene as “the word of the year in American politics” in 1964, but it described one of the oldest and deepest patterns in American politics, one that is once again playing out today in the right-wing campaign against social distancing. Backlashes appear as seemingly serial and discrete events—against the civil-rights movement in the 1960s, or the women’s movement in the ’70s, or the gay-rights movement in the ’90s. But this obscures an underlying continuity: These individual backlashes are all instances of a reactionary tradition, one that is deeply woven into American political culture and that extends back to the era of Reconstruction, at least. And the backlashes are powerful not only for the fury they represent, but in the fear they instill in political leaders, even progressives, who hesitate to push things “too far.”

During Reconstruction, opponents of the black-freedom struggle deployed preemptive, apocalyptic, slippery-slope arguments that have remained enduring features of backlash politics up to the present. They treated federal support for African American civil rights, economic and social equality—however delayed, reluctant, underfunded, and incomplete it may have been—as a cataclysmic

overreaction and framed it as a far more dangerous threat to liberty than the injustice it was designed to address. In 1867, not even two years after ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* decried the placement of political power “in the hands of a property-less and ignorant class of the population,” and pronounced that “the pending Reconstruction scheme must be abandoned.”

Since then, such framing has done more than merely shape the politics of reaction in the United States; it has also constrained putatively supportive political leaders, who live in fear of setting off backlashes. Responding to a moderate plan to enfranchise only free blacks in Louisiana in 1864, the Union general Nathaniel P. Banks, worrying about a negative response from the state’s whites, who were being defeated in the Civil War, said, “Revolutions which are not controlled and held within reasonable limits produce counter-revolution.” That obeisance to a defeated group in 1864 was an extreme version of a general pattern that has remained a hallmark of backlashes ever since: solicitousness to white fears.

For many white backlashers in the 1960s, the era of what the historian C. Vann Woodward called the “second Reconstruction,” the first Reconstruction remained a negative model. They viewed its reform as overly fast-paced, and felt that it foregrounded black civil rights at the cost of white people’s peace of mind. They associated civil-rights activism with what popular historians and commentators of the day called the “excesses” of Reconstruction, by which they meant a combination of “militant” African American demands for basic equality with overweening, aggressive, and hasty federal action in support of interracial democracy. Thurman Sensing of the Southern States Industrial Council, a conservative business group, described the civil-rights movement in 1966 as an effort to force “the Reconstruction of American customs,” showing the degree to which the post–Civil War campaign for racial equality remained a central metaphor for white backlashers. The journalist in December 1963 who noted the political power of those opposed to “Negro pressure for equal opportunity and the Federal Government’s pace on the Civil Rights front,” could just as easily have been describing the origins of the counterrevolution of the 1870s.

There was, then, nothing particularly novel about the constituent elements of white backlash to the civil-rights movement: its smoldering resentment, its belief that the movement was proceeding “too fast,” its demands for emotional and psychological

sympathy, and its displacement of African Americans' struggles with its own claims of grievance.

What is particularly noteworthy is that the white backlash in this case was in place *before* the passage of the Civil Rights Act in July 1964. The pattern is this: American reactionary politics is nearly always preemptive, predicting catastrophe and highlighting potential slippery slopes. “White backlash,” after all, got its name in 1963, just months after African Americans in Birmingham risked attacks from police dogs and high-pressure fire hoses in order to demand justice, and immediately after Kennedy mooted the idea of substantive legislation—both events taking place well before the Civil Rights Act became law. What one reporter called “white panic” was driven by fears of “favoritism” and “special privileges” for African Americans—that white “workers would be forced out of their jobs to make way for Negroes,” as one article put it that year, when Jim Crow still prevailed. “Many of my people think the Negroes want to take over the country,” a midwestern Republican politician said in a *Wall Street Journal* article published on April 10 of the following year, still months before the Act’s passage. “They think there are things in the bill that just aren’t there, like forced sales of housing to Negroes and stuff like that.” White backlashes imagined coercion where it did not exist. They embraced a lexicon and posture of victimization that hearkened back to the era of Reconstruction and anticipated the deceiving, self-pitying MAGA discourse that drives reactionary politics in Donald Trump’s America.

 Residents of Levittown, Penn., are shown during a rally to protest plans by William Myers, a black man, to move into a home in the all-white community of 60,000 persons, Aug. 17, 1957. (Bill Ingraham / AP)



Residents of Levittown, Pennsylvania, are shown during a rally on August 17, 1957, to protest plans by William Myers, a black man, to move into a home in the all-white community of 60,000 people. (Bill Ingraham / AP)

SINCE RECONSTRUCTION, many backlash campaigns have imposed a politics of white fragility and frustration onto racial-equality struggles. Reporting on the “hate vote” in *The Saturday Evening Post*, in October 1964, one month before the presidential election, Ben H. Bagdikian highlighted the “churning, emotional conflict within each voter,” by which he meant white people. He noted that the backslashers “are not against a better life for the Negro, but they are strongly against this being achieved at the cost of white tranquility.” The elevation of “tranquility” over equal justice for all was a hallmark of backlash discourse, which ranked white feelings over black rights.

Backslashers understood civil rights as zero-sum, and therefore treated campaigns for African American equality as an inexcusable undermining of what they saw as deserved white privileges and prerogatives. A *New York Times* poll revealed, in condensed form, the emotional landscape of the white backlash: “Northern white urbanites have no sympathy for the Negro’s plight, and believe the Civil Rights movement has gone too far, while a considerable percentage believes Negroes ‘don’t appreciate what we’re doing for them.’” The extension of sympathy, such as being in favor of a “better life for the Negro,” was, then, conditional on personal convenience and easily withdrawn. “In general, the persons interviewed were mildly in favor of a better break for Negroes—as long as it wouldn’t affect them personally,” the reporter Dave Allbaugh observed in 1963.

“Too far. Too fast.” Although Kennedy’s proposal came more than 80 years after the last significant piece of civil-rights legislation was passed in 1875, backslashers often spoke in these terms, deputizing themselves as judges of the proper scope and pace of social change. On February 23, 1964, in *The Washington Post*, the journalist Robert Baker described the backlash as white “resentment of Negro boycotts and dramatic protests” that they had determined to be “ill-advised and unreasonable,” which suggested that white critics should determine the standard for advisable and

reasonable protest. They charged African American protesters—who sought to end nearly a century of Jim Crow segregation, lynching, and disenfranchisement, as well as job and housing discrimination—with moving “too militantly.” To backslashers, the potential passage of the Civil Rights Act marked the dangerous acceleration of a process that needed to proceed more deliberately, according to *their* schedule and on *their* terms. “There is wide agreement on Capitol Hill that the polls are right in saying that the white majority believes that the Negro is pushing too far, too fast and that the Kennedy administration is trying to do too much to help the Negro,” Chalmers M. Roberts of *The Washington Post* wrote in October 1963, in the first story of a three-part report on “the current status of the racial issue in America.” A few months earlier, in his “Letter From a Birmingham Jail,” Martin Luther King Jr. criticized white moderates (“who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation”) on the ground that their charges of excessive haste were a cover for the racist status quo: “For years now I have heard the word ‘Wait!’ It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This ‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’ We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that ‘justice too long delayed is justice denied.’”

White backslashers did not just wallow in their fear, anger, and resentment. In broadcasting these feelings widely, they shaped the limits of acceptable reform. Recommending a “go-slow course,” they could extend sympathy or not, and sought to determine when equal rights crossed the line into “special privileges.” A reporter noted “the apprehension of suburbanites and others in white neighborhoods that their residential areas will face an influx of Negroes.” In this worldview, whites presented themselves as victims, the crimes perpetrated against them by campaigns for equality were anxiety, inconvenience, and fear. Long before the passage of the Civil Rights Act, a politician told the *Post*’s Roberts in October 1963, “For the first time, I’m getting mail from white people saying, ‘Wait a minute, we’ve got rights too.’” The “too” was especially telling because at that time a large number of African Americans still lacked federal protection for basic civil and voting rights.

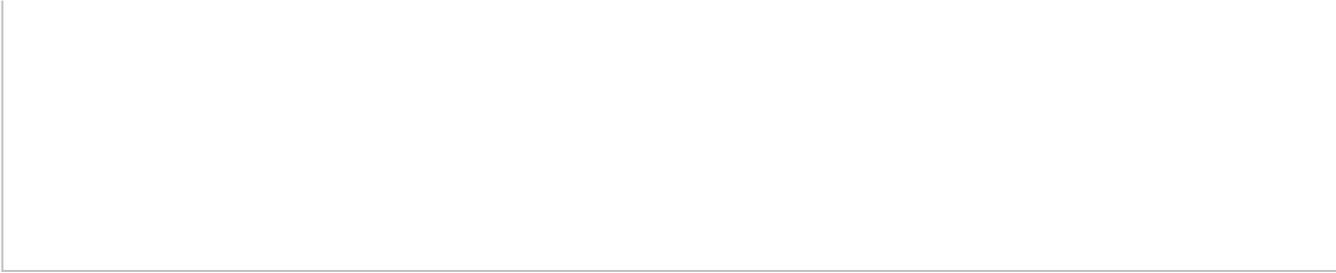
The “white backlash” thus produced a politics of displacement, shifting the focus from those denied equality under the law and demanding justice to those who imagined threat or inconvenience in the possibility of social change. In September 1963, the *Dayton Daily News* highlighted the “Northern whites who are growing increasingly jittery as the wave of Negro protest washes home on their doorstep,” and in November of that same year, the *Los Angeles Times* noted “the welter of ill-

feeling generated by Negro marches and sit-ins.” The feelings that mattered were those of white people.

The reporting on the backlash foregrounded white fears and anxieties in a way that coverage of African Americans rarely did. Jerry Landauer’s April 1964 report for the *Wall Street Journal* highlighted white people’s “emotion-laden struggle,” appropriating even the word *struggle* to describe the psychological challenges for white Americans of adjusting to the possibility of racial equality. Landauer noted “the intense resentment of large blocs of whites in the North,” which was amplified by the likelihood that the Civil Rights Act might actually become law (which it did in July). “To them, the bill has become a symbol of fear—fear of losing jobs to Negroes; fear that neighborhood schools will be flooded by Negro kids ‘bussed in’ from across town; fear that homeowners will be forced to sell, if they wish to sell at all, to Negro newcomers.” These were fears of the consequences of African American equality, framed as unfair victimization.

Throughout what we might call the “backlash era,” African Americans offered a clear-eyed analysis and robust critique of backlashes and white defenses of them, taking them to be, as the ex-baseball star and longtime activist Jackie Robinson put it in a 1966 *New York Amsterdam News* article, “a great big fat alibi for bigotry.” Whereas many white observers in the early 1960s highlighted the novelty of white backlash, Martin Luther King Jr. more accurately called it “a new name for an old phenomenon” that “had always existed underneath and sometimes on the surface of American life.” Langston Hughes wrote a poem, “The Backlash Blues,” which Nina Simone later set to music and recorded.





Members of the Arkansas-based white-pride organization White Revolution protest on May 21, 2005. (David S. Holloway / Getty)

Perhaps Lorraine Hansberry most directly put her finger on the issue in a June 1964 talk titled “The Black Revolution and the White Backlash,” which she gave at the Town Hall in New York City. She spoke during an event organized by the Association of Artists for Freedom, a group of African American artists and intellectuals, about two weeks before the passage of the Civil Rights Act. Pointing to the long history of the black-liberation struggle, Hansberry said, “The charge of impatience is simply unbearable.” Her request to the “white liberal to stop being a liberal and to become a radical” was largely a call for those liberals to recognize that the true victims of racism were not resentful white Americans but African Americans demanding equality.

In the short run, the media spotlight on the white backlash of 1963–64 appeared to have been spectacularly misplaced. The movement proved to be an electoral failure, one almost immediately demonstrated to have been on the wrong side of history. Not only did the Civil Rights Act pass in 1964, but later that year, Lyndon B. Johnson won an overwhelming election victory, leading him to speculate that a “frontlash” of civil-rights support was far more significant than what he labeled the “so-called backlash,” which suffered crushing double defeats that year. Johnson predicted at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City that “for every backlash that the Democrats lose, we pick up three frontlash [votes],” and his shellacking of Barry Goldwater on Election Day seemed to prove him correct.

But, as Johnson was also well aware, the forces of backlash were far from defeated. “I think we just delivered the South to the Republican Party for a long time to come,” LBJ told Bill Moyers, his press aide, shortly after he signed the Civil Rights Act. With the hindsight that history offers, we can see that Goldwater’s campaign was less a sign of the backlash’s vanquishing than a harbinger of modern conservatism. In 1966, the influential columnists Rowland Evans and Robert

Novak called white backlash “a permanent feature of the political scene,” where it has remained ever since.

Using the same phrase that General Banks had employed a century earlier, but to different purposes, a columnist wrote that the proper way to understand white backlash was as “a counter-revolution against the black man.” *Counterrevolution* is a phrase that Americans rarely use to describe our politics. But it is not unfair or inaccurate to apply this label to white backlash, whose explicit goal was to slow or halt the civil-rights revolution.

The backlashers lost a number of key political battles in the 1960s, the decade in which they got their name. From Reconstruction to the New Deal, they had been vanquished before, and they’ve been defeated more recently, too, in a variety of areas—LGBTQ rights, for example. But both before and since, the preemptive politics of grievance and anti-egalitarianism they championed, whereby the psychology of privilege takes center stage while the needs of the oppressed are forced to wait in the wings, has left a deforming and reactionary imprint on our political culture. It has done so not just by emboldening reactionaries but by making the fear of setting off backlashes a standard element of the political conversation.



Neo-Nazis, members of the alt-right, and white supremacists take part in a “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017.* (Zach D Roberts / NurPhoto via Getty)

Consider, as examples, when last year the economist Larry Summers tweeted about the dangers of a wealth tax “boomerang,” and David Brooks warned about the “ugly backlash” that would likely follow an impeachment trial. Or, in a similar vein, when the columnist Ross Douthat wrote that if the Democrats adopt the Green New Deal, it “will empower climate-change skeptics, weaken the hand of would-be compromisers in the GOP” and “possibly help Donald Trump win re-election.” In this way, backlash politics has become a constraint on modern liberalism.

Backlash dynamics have played out over and over again through the latter half of the 20th century and into the 21st. They appeared in the reaction against the women’s movement—which, as Mary Wieggers wrote in 1970, faced a “built-in backlash” before it even got started—that culminated in the successful campaign against the Equal Rights Amendment as it came close to becoming law. Such dynamics remained central to campaigns against social provisions, such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) in the 1980s and ’90s, and have been reflected in the genre of “angry white male” movies, including *Falling Down* and *Gran Torino*. More recently, and more consequentially, these forces helped elect Donald Trump, who framed his campaign and continues to treat his presidency as a backlash against his predecessor, Barack Obama, the first African American president.

The backlashes have been out in force at recent anti-social-distancing protests, which have been dominated by white people proclaiming that public-health measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 are robbing them of their birthright of liberty. Making the connection to prior backlashes explicit, some protesters have waved Confederate flags and held signs that read GIVE ME LIBERTY OR GIVE ME DEATH. While in some ways laughable, given their complaints about being unable to get a haircut or having to “get two iced teas in the drive thru,” some of the protesters also incite fear, with their ostentatious weapon-wielding and threats of violence, to say nothing of their willingness to potentially infect others with the coronavirus. Drawing upon the template of the backlashes of earlier historic moments, these protesters, too, combine the paranoia and insecurity that have long warped our political culture with acclamations of freedom for some at the expense of freedom for all. As during Reconstruction and the civil-rights era, we face once

again the danger that a politics of freedom *and* equality may be eclipsed by the psychology of white resentment.

** A photo caption in this article previously misstated the date the photo was taken. It is from the 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia.*

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