

Racism, Right-Wing Rage and the Politics of White Nostalgia

by **tim wise**

Mon Aug 17, 2009 at 06:25:30 AM PDT



"How dare you say this is about racism!"

And a pleasant Monday to you too sunshine, I thought, as I stared at my computer screen this morning, reading over the first e-mail of the day.

It was from someone who had apparently seen **my presentation** on CNN last night, in which I explained why racism is indeed a driving force behind the outpouring of anger we've been seeing at the various town halls around the country, in opposition to health care reform and pretty much all things Obama.

Although I had been careful to point out that not everyone who opposes the President's agenda is a racist, but rather had made the more nuanced argument that racial resentment and white racial anxiety was the background noise of that opposition--often being stoked quite clearly by the radio talk show hosts on whom the mobs have been relying--my electronic interlocutor was having none of it. He had no more listened to me than he had actually read the health care proposals about which he was frothing so at the mouth.

tim wise's diary :: ::

The message continued:

"You know full well that no one is talking about wanting to go back to the days of segregation."

Well, no, I don't know it. I don't know that at all, seeing as how so many of the tea-bag set and anti-health care folks make "taking their country back" one of the most prominent lines of their vocalized outrage. What does that mean, coming from people in their 60s and 70s, for whom the America of their youth was indeed a white supremacist place? A place where white hegemony could be taken as a given, something that could be presumed in perpetuity? What does it mean when someone says that they want to go back to the country the way the founders envisioned it, as many have also explained at these rallies? After all, they envisioned a white republic. They envisioned and sought out the extirpation of indigenous peoples, most believed in the enslavement of African peoples, and none truly believed that blacks should be treated as equals.

"But that's not what we're talking about when we say we want our country back," another writer intoned, also angered by my televised comments: "We aren't talking about the racism part. We mean the rest of it." How fascinating. That it is factually impossible to separate out the "racism part" from the rest of it is something many white folks seem not to understand. They seem to think there was once a time of innocence when oppression wasn't happening, or that we can easily extract from our accounting of those crimes the great and noble things about our forefathers and view them in some patriotic vacuum. But we can't. Anymore so than we can say that the man who beats his wife might still be a loving father. Or that the company that poisons the air and water with toxic chemicals is still okay because they have a good record on labor or because they give a percentage of their annual profits to charity.

This second writer sought to explain herself further however, just so as not to be misunderstood. When people like her claim they want to return to "what our forefathers started," she continued, they simply mean the part about being dependent on God, rather than government.

Okay, I suppose. Of course, last time I checked God wasn't offering to pick up the tab for chemo treatments, organ transplants, or any other medical procedure for that matter. Oh, and not to put too fine a point on it, but the founders actually did foster quite a lot of government dependence: enshrining slavery was about government protecting white people from the competition of free black labor, and white folks becoming quite dependent on that protection. Stealing native land and then redistributing it to white people was about dependence on government-imposed violence. And later, yet still in the supposedly "good old days," government dependence was at the heart of segregation--which artificially subsidized white people in the job, school and housing markets--and was at the heart of the FHA and VA loans that white families used (and from which black families were all but completely blocked) in the 40s and 50s, which literally built the white middle class.

Menu

Home

Diaries

dKosopedia

Search

Create account

Login

Lose Your Password?

Advertising

Premium Ad

[Advertise here!](#)

Advertisers

Do You See the Light?



"...a high caliber, one-of-a-kind action thriller executed to perfection." -*Associated Press*

A masterpiece of suspense, intrigue, and terror. - James Rollins, NYT bestseller

Buy it now at **Amazon**, **BN** or **Borders**. Prepare to be hooked!

[Read more...](#)

SEIU.org Sponsored Headlines

SEIU.ORG

SPONSORED
EMPLOYEE FREE CHOICE
HEADLINES



Reminder: No coercion in majority sign-up

In case you missed it...August 17th round-up

Be the first to know...Sign-up for mobile alerts from SEIU

A Lesson in Free Speech and the Law for Corporations

Why is the Chamber outsourcing American jobs?

But I'm guessing that when she uses a phrase like "dependence on government" she isn't thinking about the white folks who were given 270 million acres of essentially free land under the Homestead Act. Or the 15 million or so white families who got those racially preferential home loans, with government underwriting and guarantees, thanks to programs implemented by liberals and thanks to pressure from the left. I'm thinking she isn't talking about the white soldiers (but typically not the black ones) who were able to return from World War II and make use of the GI Bill to go to college, or get job training. And the fact that she likely doesn't think of *those* kinds of things and *those* kinds of people as being dependent on government is, of course, precisely the problem, and the point I was trying to make.

Indeed several of the e-mails made this same argument about opposing "government dependence," all the while oblivious, it appears, to the way in which that concept has become so color-coded in the white imagination over the past several decades. In fact, this is a point I had made on the program: that according to a significant body of social science research (among the most prominent, Martin Gilens's [brilliant book](#), *Why Americans Hate Welfare*), most whites perceive social program spending aimed at helping the have-nots (be they income have-nots, housing have-nots, or health care-have nots) as being about giving something to *those people*, who are, of course, conceived of in black and brown terms, and taking from "hard-working" white folks in order to do it. So if the notion of government dependence itself has been racialized--and the evidence says it has been--to say that it is only *this* dependence you oppose, and that racism has nothing to do with it is to either lie or engage in self-deception of a most unfortunate and unbecoming variety.

There were of course others who wrote to me, and who felt no need to finesse their hostility; those who wore that hostility quite clearly on their electronic sleeve, in fact. Like the one guy who called me, in big capital letters, a "FUCKING FAGGOT," because nothing demonstrates a keen command of the health care issue better than a little random homophobia.

Or the guy who mentioned--in response to an incident I had discussed on the show--that he too had cheered when the white man attacked the black woman holding a Rosa Parks poster in the Missouri town hall meeting. To him, the woman deserved to be assaulted and thrown out of the hall because she was (and here he was simply stealing [the latest line](#) from the woefully under-medicated Michael Savage) "nothing but a race baiter." This, unlike, say, the whites in the crowd with signs calling the President a nigger, or the talk show hosts who have been claiming for months that Obama [hates white people](#), hates white culture, and really only wants health care reform as a form of [reparations for black people](#). To him, the black victim of white thuggery is a race-baiter, but the white kid [with the sign](#) calling Obama a monkey is probably just an all-American boy, and the whites with the signs [comparing the President to Adolf Hitler](#), are just under-appreciated amateur historians, making obvious analytical points that real historians are just too obtuse, or, ya know, educated, to understand.

In the end, although there are many people, with many different reasons for opposing the President or his health care proposal, the role that race and racism is playing cannot be ignored. With major conservative spokespersons stoking the fires of racial resentment daily, and with most whites having long ago come to the conclusion that social program spending is something done on behalf of racial "minorities" at their own white expense, it is not too much to insist that race is operating, for some quite overtly and for others more subtly.

And for those who insist racism has nothing to do with it, the question remains why they have said nothing to those persons coming to their rallies and giving exactly that impression by way of the signs they carry. Where are their letters or calls to Limbaugh or Beck, chastising them for saying Obama hates white people, or that health care is just a form of reparations--racial payback of white America? Of course they have written no such letters. They have made no such calls. They are too busy. Busy waxing nostalgic for bygone days, which they mis-remember as a time of innocence, of decency, and of self-reliance, but which days were really days of widespread injustice, profound indecency, and institutionalized racial preference for people like them.

They can neither accept the present as it is, nor, interestingly, the past as it was. So they invent a phony version of the latter, while hoping against hope for a reversal of the former. Let us deny them the ability to do either for very long.

Tim Wise is the author of four books on racism. His latest is [Between Barack and a Hard Place: Racism and White Denial in the Age of Obama](#). (City Lights, 2009)

Tags: [racism](#), [health care](#), [Barack Obama](#), [Black Kos](#), [Recommended](#) (all tags) :: [Previous Tag Versions](#)

[Permalink](#) | 820 comments

Comments: Expand Shrink Hide (Always) | Indented Flat (Always)

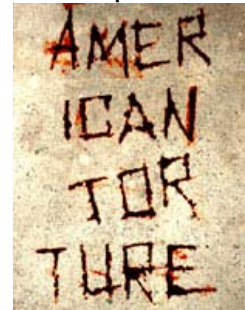
[Shock: Corporate Advocates Who Break the Law Don't Want to Be Punished](#)

[Wall Street: Contracts for Me, Not for Thee](#)

Sponsored By
[SEIU.org](#)

[Read more...](#)

American Torture Exposed



[CIA power drills only scratch the surface. Learn the deep history of US torture at SERE, Vietnam, Latin America, GTMO, Black Sites and beyond.](#)

["Otterman writes as a patriot - one who expects much of his country and is angry when it fails him."](#)
- [The Age](#)

[Buy today for only \\$10!](#)
[Read more...](#)

[Advertise here](#)

Classifieds

The Trial of George W. Bush

At last! The trial we've all been waiting for. Can he get away with torture, fraud, trashing the economy, wiretapping and the inability to pronounce the word 'nuclear'? Check out this hilarious (but serious) new MP3 satire with music which goes boldly where the Obama administration is still afraid to tread. Featuring Kevin Corbett of Capitol Steps and the Nightmare of Reason Band. Listen online, on your MP3 player or mobile phone. It's free.

[Read more...](#)

[Advertise here](#)