How has the GOP managed to elicit racial loyalty despite a national revulsion toward racism? The answer lies in the GOP’s use of coded language. Its racial entreaties operate like a dog whistle—a metaphor that pushes us to recognize that modern racial pandering always operates on two levels: inaudible and easily denied in one range, yet stimulating strong reactions in another.

The new racial politics presents itself as steadfastly opposed to racism and ever ready to condemn those who publicly use racial profanity. *We fiercely oppose racism and stand prepared to repudiate anyone who dares utter the n-word.* Meanwhile, though, the new racial discourse keeps up a steady drumbeat of subliminal racial grievances and appeals to color-coded solidarity. *But let’s be honest: some groups commit more crimes and use more welfare, other groups are mainly unskilled and*
illiterate illegals, and some religions inspire violence and don’t value human life. The new racism rips through society, inaudible and also easily defended insofar as it fails to whoop in the tones of the old racism, yet booming in its racial meaning and provoking predictable responses among those who immediately hear the racial undertones of references to the undeserving poor, illegal aliens, and sharia law. Campaigning for president, Ronald Reagan liked to tell stories of Cadillac-driving “welfare queens” and “strapping young bucks” buying T-bone steaks with food stamps. In flogging these tales about the perils of welfare run amok, Reagan always denied any racism and emphasized he never mentioned race. He didn’t need to because he was blowing a dog whistle.

In general, using a dog whistle simply means speaking in code to a target audience. Politicians routinely do this, seeking to surreptitiously communicate support to small groups of impassioned voters whose commitments are not broadly embraced by the body politic. The audiences for such dog whistles have included, at different times, civil rights protesters, members of the religious right, environmentalists, and gun rights activists. Dog whistling has no particular political valence, occurring on the right and left, nor is it especially uncommon or troubling in and of itself. Given a diverse public segmented by widely differing priorities, it is entirely predictable that politicians would look for shrouded ways to address divergent audiences.

Throughout this book, I use “dog whistle politics” to mean, more narrowly, coded talk centered on race; while the term could encompass clandestine solicitations on any number of bases, here it refers to racial appeals. Beyond emphasizing race,
racial dog whistle politics diverges from the more general practice because the hidden message it seeks to transmit violates a strong moral consensus. The impetus to speak in code reflects more than the concern that many voters do not embrace the target audience’s passions. Rather, the substance of the appeal runs counter to national values supporting equality and opposing racism. Those blowing a racial dog whistle know full well that they would be broadly condemned if understood as appealing for racial solidarity among whites.

This makes racial dog whistling a more complicated phenomenon than other sorts of surreptitious politics. It involves, as we shall see, three basic moves: a punch that jabs race into the conversation through thinly veiled references to threatening nonwhites, for instance to welfare cheats or illegal aliens; a parry that slaps away charges of racial pandering, often by emphasizing the lack of any direct reference to a racial group or any use of an epithet; and finally a kick that savages the critic for opportunistically alleging racial victimization. The complex jujitsu of racial dog whistling lies at the center of a new way of talking about race that constantly emphasizes racial divisions, heatedly denies that it does any such thing, and then presents itself as a target of self-serving charges of racism.

A final important difference between routine coded political speech and racial dog whistling lies in what the target audience hears. To be sure, some voters clearly perceive a message of racial resentment and react positively to it; politician W is with us and against those minorities, they may say to themselves. But many others would be repulsed by such a message, just as they would reject any politician who openly used racial epithets.
For these voters, the cloaked language hides—even from themselves—the racial character of the overture. Terms like gangbanger and sharia law superficially reference behavior and religion. Even as these terms agitate racial fears, for many voters this thin patina suffices to obscure from them the racial nature of their attitudes. Consider Tea Party supporters: “They are all furious at the implication that race is a factor in their political views,” writes Rolling Stone journalist Matt Taibbi, “despite the fact that they blame the financial crisis on poor black homeowners, spend months on end engrossed by reports about how the New Black Panthers want to kill ‘cracker babies,’ support politicians who think the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was an overreach of government power, tried to enact South African-style immigration laws in Arizona and obsess over … Barack Obama’s birth certificate.” No doubt very few of the Tea Partiers stampeded by race are racist in the hate-every-black-person sense; indeed, the overwhelming majority are decent folks quick to condemn naked racism. But this is a far cry from saying that racial fears do not motivate them. Dog whistle entreaties often hide racism even from those in whom it triggers strong reactions.
The turn to ethnicity in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a substitute language for race helped fuel dog whistle politics. Ethnicity told a story of groups either defeated or elevated by their own cultures. Dog whistle politicians embraced the ethnic fiction, amplifying themes of deviant nonwhite behavior and white innocence. The narratives promoted alike by the ethnic turn and racial demagogues—a lack of work ethic, a preference for welfare, a propensity toward crime, or their opposites—reinvigorated racial stereotypes, giving them renewed life in explaining why minorities lagged behind whites. These
stereotypes might have faded as society addressed racism. Instead, they became the staples of political discourse, repeated ad nauseam by politicians, think tanks, and media.

Precisely because ethnicity encouraged talk of group differences in culture and behavior, it kept alive a potent aspect of racial ideology, narratives of fundamental differences in capacity that supposedly explained group hierarchy. Ethnicity avoided what seemed central about race, its claims about differences rooted in nature. But in practice, direct references to nature mattered surprisingly little. Even absent this, racial narratives had tremendous social and political potency simply by emphasizing the racist commonsense that groups were divided by differences in habits, temperament, and ability rooted in the groups themselves. Ethnicity helped keep racism vibrant by preserving its core—the stories whites told about their essential superiority, and the tales they repeated about fundamentally inferior nonwhites. Racial demagogues could drop direct references to biology and racial groups, and still stir racial passions. Ethnicity helped establish a commonsense framework in which discussions of dysfunctional culture and menacing behavior were readily understood as describing the essential identity of nonwhites.

Yet racial demagogues did more than resurrect old stereotypes; they altered them in ways that combined assaults on nonwhites with attacks on liberalism. Shaped by the coded language of *conservative* dog whistle politics, racial stereotypes increasingly connected ideas of minority inferiority with rightwing political narratives. This dynamic was so powerful that it ultimately contributed to a marked evolution in the forms taken
by racial prejudice. Today, the most powerful racial stereotypes—the ones most generally credited and in widest circulation—dovetail precisely with dog whistle narratives jointly attacking minorities and liberalism.

Already in 1971, social psychologists studying racism began describing an evolution from “old-style” endorsements of white supremacy to new forms of prejudice that linked the failings of blacks to deficient cultures, especially to their refusal to adopt conservative precepts of rugged individualism. Support for bans on interracial marriage and restrictions mandating whites-only neighborhoods slipped, but endorsements of more abstract statements like “Negroes who receive welfare could get along without it if they tried” and “the streets aren’t safe these days without a policeman around” surged. By the mid-1990s, a strong consensus existed among social science researchers that racial prejudice had changed. Scholars remarked that “a new form of prejudice has come to prominence, one that is preoccupied with matters of moral character, informed by the virtues associated with the traditions of individualism. At its center are the contentions that blacks do not try hard enough to overcome the difficulties they face and that they take what they have not earned.” Harvard sociologist Lawrence Bobo’s term for this new prejudice, “laissez-faire racism,” highlights the close connection between present forms of racial resentment and the resurgence of an anti-government ideology.

In accord with the stories spun by dog whistle politicians, many whites have come to believe that they prosper because they possess the values, orientations, and work ethic needed by
the self-making individual in a capitalist society. In contrast, they have come to suppose that nonwhites, lacking these attributes, slip to the bottom, handicapped by their inferior cultures and pushed down by the market’s invisible hand, where they remain, beyond the responsibility, or even ability, of government to help. Today’s most powerful stereotypes blame minority culture in a manner tied closely to conservative myths of rugged individualism.

We can see the strong connection between group stereotypes and dog whistle themes in a recent survey on racial prejudice undertaken by social psychologists. The survey found that during Obama’s first four years in office, the percentage of Democrats expressing prejudiced views about blacks remained steady at just over 30 percent—still a discouragingly high proportion. It also found that the number of Republicans expressing anti-black prejudice increased significantly over those years, going from 71 percent to 79 percent, which is to say, to roughly four out of five. Beyond these high numbers, though, focus on the precise questions in the survey. To measure prejudice, the study asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with statements like:

- Over the past few years, Blacks have gotten more economically than they deserve.
- It’s really a matter of some people just not trying hard enough; if Blacks would only try harder, they could be just as well off as whites.
Irish, Italians, Jewish, and other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without special favors.65

While these statements reference race directly, they also track major themes in dog whistle politics: the notion that blacks receive more than they deserve; the stereotype of laziness; the use of an ethnic conception of race to blame blacks for their own failings.

Bucking the trend of seeing these sentiments as reflecting a modern form of prejudice, a few scholars have objected that instead survey questions such as these—which have been in use since the 1970s—measure a confounded mixture of racial sentiment and policy attitudes. These critics insist that because prejudice and policy are interwoven, it’s impossible to know to what extent prejudice alone continues.66 But this misses the point: the confluence of racial prejudice and conservative politics is the new racism. It’s a product of almost a half-century of ethnic discourse and coded race-baiting that has remade racism into a set of ideas jointly demonizing nonwhite culture and activist government. These ethnic-racial-political stereotypes have become staples of modern racial discourse, and now seem like self-evident truths to a staggering four out of five Republicans. It is now virtually commonsense, at least among the GOP faithful, that minorities fail, and they succeed, as rugged individuals.
In a 2011 poll, more than half of whites thought that discrimination against their race was “as big a problem” as the mistreatment of nonwhites. Among Republicans and Tea Party members, nearly two out of three sympathized with this view of whites as racial victims. Among those who “most trust Fox news,” the number stepped even higher. Colorblindness lies at the heart of the contemporary belief held by many whites that they are the true racial victims in US society today. Let’s reprise what colorblindness tells them:

- **Race** is just a matter of blood, and has no connection to past or present social practices.

- **Racism** means being treated differently on the basis of race. Since affirmative action treats whites differently because of race, it constitutes racism. Thurgood Marshall and Martin Luther King, Jr., agree. On the other hand, there is little racism against minorities today: witness the absence of proven malice.

- **Ethnicity** shows that whites do not exist as a dominant group, but only as ethnic minorities with just as much right as other minorities to protect their own group interests.

- **Group cultures** differ, and it’s not racist to acknowledge that white ethnics have succeeded, and nonwhite groups have failed, on the basis of differences in group capacity and behavior. Moreover, since groups are the masters of
their own fate, it is futile (in addition to being racist) for government to give some groups special handouts.

When laid out this way, it’s no surprise that Reagan and other political leaders since have embraced colorblindness. It sounds liberal yet works like a racial cudgel, denying that there’s discrimination against minorities, elevating whites as racial victims, justifying white superiority, and facilitating dog whistle racial appeals that emphasize culture and comportment.

And one more thing: colorblindness also protects dog whistle race-baiting against charges of racism. Even though conservatives repeatedly use an ethnic vocabulary, they always hold in reserve the colorblind insistence that race is just a matter of blood. This provides a stock defense of dog whistling, for it allows politicians to demagogue culture and behavior, while insisting that they cannot possibly be engaged in racial pandering because they have not directly referenced biology. In the next race chapter, Chapter Six, we will examine at length how colorblindness facilitated the rise of new ways of communicating and defending racism. Before then, however, we turn to consider important evolutions in dog whistle politics since the 1990s.
the decisive ideological struggle of the 21st century, and the calling of our generation.... This struggle has been called a clash of civilizations. In truth, it is a struggle for civilization. We are fighting to maintain the way of life enjoyed by free nations.  

With language like this, Bush helped cement the culturally potent image of US society locked in mortal combat with Arab Muslims. True, Bush was careful to cabin his remarks in terms of extremists and “a perverted vision of Islam,” but the global terms in which he framed his analysis belied such fine distinctions. Bush transmuted our attackers from particular individuals and small factions of extremists into a whole civilization bent on our deaths and on the destruction of our way of life.

Even so, however, the reductive ugliness of Bush’s analysis did not descend to old-fashioned racism. Rather, it was operating more in the register of a dog whistle, a way to advance a basically racial message while still maintaining plausible deniability. By deemphasizing biology and focusing instead on religion—on values and beliefs, rather than on physical essences—Bush could claim he was only criticizing a religion, or even more narrowly, the perversion of a religion. Whereas those engaging in open racism used racist epithets and direct references to biology to impugn this group, Bush was more careful, using religion and also behavior as a cover. His speech—like the virulent opposition to mosque-building in the United States and the xenophobic ranting about sharia—was decidedly
a form of racial demagoguery, hidden, however transparently, behind references to religious differences.

The Bush administration’s initial public round-up campaign wasn’t dog whistle politics in the normal sense of pandering for votes. But it was a political response built around a coded use of race: it endeavored to satisfy the urge for action and indeed revenge by showing that the administration was aggressively pursuing sinister nonwhites, yet while using religion and geography rather than race to identify those supposedly menacing the public. Moreover, after its initial use to justify domestic round ups, the administration expanded the Arab Muslim threat to legitimize war. The transformation of those who perpetrated the 9/11 attacks into a generic, implacable Middle Eastern foe helped Bush rally the nation for a war against Iraq initiated on fraudulent claims. Perhaps here more than anywhere else, a subliminal racial message proved key to the administration’s aims. Yes, hyped weapons of mass destruction helped hoodwink the public. But even more fundamentally, it was the construction of an Arab Muslim threat that duped the majority of Americans into believing that Saddam Hussein and Iraq were deeply connected to Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda. In turn, the racial and religious bigotry that justified the war also gravely tainted its conduct. Practices ranging from extraordinary rendition to torture could only have occurred at a state-sanctioned level, accompanied by broad public acquiescence, in the presence of widespread racist views about the nation’s foes. Ultimately, the Bush administration defined itself and indeed the whole country in terms of a global confrontation with an Arab Muslim enemy, a confrontation widely perceived as a racial and
religious clash. Yet as presented publicly, religion and geography helped thinly obscure the racial element, allowing Bush to garner support for his actions on the basis of coded racial appeals.

THE “Illegal Alien” Threat

If religious conflict provided a microscopically thin veneer of legitimacy to dog whistle attacks on Arab Muslims, cultural conflict played that same role with respect to the “illegal alien” threat. While this boogeyman has been decades in the making, it currently operates with a potency that rivals or exceeds the racial scapegoating of African Americans. Here, too, the 9/11 hijackings fanned the flames of xenophobia to new heights. Especially on the country’s southern border, the War on Terror became a war on migrants.  

Throughout the twentieth century, the increasing presence of Latinos had been a cause for anxiety among some whites as well as a basis for political pandering, principally in the Southwest though occasionally across the country. After 2001, however, an old frame gained new urgency: the sense that Hispanics imperiled national security. In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan had warned that migrant workers from Mexico, as well as war refugees from Central America, constituted a potentially traitorous group in the nation’s midst.  

To many, this suggestion seemed farcical. After 2001, though, hysteria concerning national security made alarm about invaders from abroad seem well-warranted, thus creating a new opening for indicting Latinos as a menace to the country. This sense of crisis
was also exaggerated for many by major demographic changes, as the Latino population grew to become the largest minority group in the United States, and also, as Hispanics increasingly moved into regions where they had not previously had a strong presence. During the Bush II presidency, even as the White House kept some distance from the most extreme expressions of racial panic around Latinos, many Republicans searched for electoral gold in warnings about the Hispanic threat.

Consonant with dog whistle techniques, conservatives publicly avoided the old racial language of spics, greasers, and wetbacks, and talked instead in the purportedly race-neutral language of cultural conflict. Consider Pat Buchanan, speaking in 2006: “If we do not get control of our borders and stop this greatest invasion in history, I see the dissolution of the U.S. and the loss of the American Southwest—culturally and linguistically, not politically—to Mexico. It could become a part of Mexico in the way that Kosovo is now a part of Albania.” Or observe the more erudite version, offered by Samuel Huntington, a Harvard professor of political science, in the pages of the establishment journal *Foreign Policy*: “The persistent inflow of Hispanic immigrants threatens to divide the United States into two peoples, two cultures, and two languages. Unlike past immigrant groups, Mexicans and other Latinos have not assimilated into mainstream U.S. culture, forming instead their own political and linguistic enclaves—from Los Angeles to Miami—and rejecting the Anglo-Protestant values that built the American dream.”

Both Buchanan and Huntington show coded racial appeals at work: avoiding the language of race, they draw on the ethnic turn
in conservative racial discourse to emphasize a potentially country-killing clash of cultures.

Beyond culture, those stirring dread around Latinos also frequently targeted behavior, in particular the act of migrating to the United States without lawful authorization. In a 2005 memo, Frank Luntz, a leading Republican wordsmith, offered some thoughts about immigration under the heading “Words that Work”—work, that is, to get Republicans elected. Luntz encouraged Republicans to hammer key themes: “Let’s talk about the facts behind illegal immigrants. They do commit crimes. They are more likely to drive uninsured. More likely to clog up hospital waiting rooms. More likely to be involved in anti-social behavior because they have learned that breaking the law brings more benefit to them than abiding by it.”

Not just politicians learned to use this language; from the Supreme Court bench, Justice Antonin Scalia proved a quick study. Criticizing a decision curtailing Arizona’s effort to harass undocumented immigrants, Scalia wrote: “Arizona bears the brunt of the country’s illegal immigration problem. Its citizens feel themselves under siege by large numbers of illegal immigrants who invade their property, strain their social services, and even place their lives in jeopardy.”

As always, the propaganda deviated from the reality. First, it bears mention that “illegal” is a misnomer: crossing into or remaining in the United States without proper authorization is not a crime, but rather a civil matter. Thus, contrary to Scalia’s preference, the Court majority eschewed the term “illegal alien,” noting that “as a general rule, it is not a crime for a removable
alien to remain present in the United States.”

On the more fundamental question of assimilation, scholars recognize that today’s immigrants from Latin America (and also from Asia), no different from the generations of European immigrants before them, are “being successfully incorporated into American society”; indeed, studies find “great continuities between the experiences of earlier European immigrants and current, predominantly non-European immigrants.” Moreover, the notion that crossing the border without authorization generates a pervasive disdain for the law is demonstrably false. Research shows that undocumented immigrants from Latin America commit far fewer depredations, not far more, than citizens. Evidence shows too that undocumented immigrants are far less likely than others to use expensive social services, including hospital emergency rooms. Indeed, unauthorized immigrants pay considerably more in taxes—typically through payroll withholding—than they receive in social services. Because much of this goes to the federal government, this may be small comfort for states with large immigrant populations, but problems in the federal-state distribution of tax money paid by undocumented immigrants is a far cry from the falsehood that such migrants do not pull their weight in tax payments.

Notwithstanding its departure from reality, the “illegal alien” rhetoric is highly popular with racial demagogues. Stressing illegality provides a way to seed racial fears without directly referencing race. Scapegoating unauthorized immigrants carries a façade of neutrality insofar as it purports to refer to all persons present in the United States without proper authorization.
Ostensibly, this would include the German citizen here on a
tourist visa who takes a job, or the Canadian who enters as a
visitor but decides to live in Aspen indefinitely. Yet these are not
the faces that come to mind when the term is bandied about.
Rather, the usual suspects—the unavoidable suspects when Tea
Party patriots spit out the phrase at rallies on the southern border
—are undocumented immigrants from Latin America, especially
Mexico. Indeed, often it seems the term is not limited to
immigrants at all, but rather expresses an alarm that applies to
almost all persons of Latino descent, most of whom are US
citizens. By constantly drumming on the crises posed by
“illegals,” the right fuels a racial frenzy but can deny its intention
to do any such thing.

THE DEMOCRATS FOLLOW

In the Democratic response to race-baiting around immigration,
one sees a trajectory distressingly similar to that which produced
racialized mass incarceration. As the Republicans agitated voters
with dire warnings of “illegals,” Democrats responded by
adopting the same discourse, and often by offering their own
draconian policies. Again, the Clinton administration led the way.
Clinton met furor over immigration by dramatically increasing
appropriations for border security and promising to crack down
on “illegal aliens.” Yet reflecting how the scapegoating of
undocumented immigrants connected to broader animosity
toward brown-skinned immigrants in general, in 1996 Clinton
signed a series of laws targeting immigrants lawfully present in
the country. These laws vastly expanded grounds for deportation of lawful immigrants; created powers of “expedited exclusion” for immigrants who had ever crossed the border illegally, even if they subsequently achieved lawful status; and stripped lawfully present non-citizens of many federal benefits.

The Obama administration has continued the hard line against immigration. In 2010, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency removed roughly 400,000 persons in one year alone, higher than the highest totals ever achieved by the Bush administration. 66 Virtually all of the immigrants who were deported in 2010—an astounding 97 percent—were Hispanic, a number highly disproportionate to the share of Latinos among all undocumented immigrants in the United States. 67 As of July 2012, the Obama administration had expelled 1.4 million undocumented immigrants, at a rate 1.5 times greater than the Bush administration. 68 Obama appeared to have listened to Democratic strategists who concluded in 2008 that the party needed to take a “tougher” tone when discussing immigration reform. 69 The rationale was to show that the Democrats were serious about enforcement, hoping to trade this off against eventual immigration reform. During Obama’s first administration, however, this calculus produced record levels of toughness and no reform whatsoever. Only after the 2012 election, when Republicans decided that they needed some Latino votes, did a genuine possibility of reform open up. Prior to that, the harsh Democratic crackdown on Latin American migrants purchased very little at a terribly high price in human misery.
Before we leave this chapter, let me use a personal story to connect the targeting of Latinos with a larger point about dog whistle racism. We have been principally focused on the claim that it wrecks the middle class; again, as with racialized mass incarceration, we should not forget that dog whistle racism takes a particularly devastating toll on those it racially demeans. We might see this in the hundreds of thousands of persons deported every year—a wrenching process that tears apart families and causes enormous emotional devastation. But sometimes the numbers are so large, and the social distance so vast, we cannot see the damage politicians do in our names. In such circumstances, perhaps a simple story, even one from the margins of the calamity, can help bring into focus the human toll.

In 2011 I taught a seminar on Arizona’s anti-immigrant legislation. This was a small seminar, and unbeknownst to me until well into the semester, one of my students was undocumented. She was much like the others: smart, passionate about social justice, and outraged by the blatant racial demagoguery of Arizona’s leaders, but also temperamentally cool, rational, and restrained, perfectly exhibiting the professional deportment law schools seek to inculcate. Each week she came to class, and together the whole group observed Arizona from the academic stratosphere: surveying the history of Mexican immigration; studying theories of racism; parsing the mutating forms of racial discourse. Midway through the semester, though, she broke down. In the midst of tears, trauma, and pain, she choked out her personal connection to the subject.
matter, how she was actually one of “them.” Her shattered façade jolted the class, and myself, out of academic detachment.

In the immediacy of her grief and distress, I was reminded of a profound truth. I had let slip from my analysis the most basic and human of facts: people were being hurt. All the hate and fear stoked by racial provocateurs wasn’t just wafting away, a putrid miasma gradually dissipating into the air harmlessly. The hostility was penetrating peoples’ hearts, wearying and wounding their souls. As she sobbed and shared stories of her family, her siblings, the people she loved and their pain and stress, and as her fellow students rushed to console her, I sat there muttering reassuring words but really just dumbfounded by a simple point, an insight that can too easily be lost in the midst of academic critique: when demagogues use offensive caricatures to inflame passions, they are demonizing people. Dog whistle politics turns people’s lives into nightmares. People just like us. People whose heights of joy and depths of pain are no less real than our own, even as their humanity is rendered invisible by slurs about their behavior and culture. In our inability to recognize their humanity, we as a nation have lost part of our own.
COMMONSENSE RACISM

It seems that race agitates most whites at the unconscious level. But how? We can answer this in terms of commonsense racism, a concept briefly introduced back in Chapter Two. “Commonsense” evokes the overwhelming ordinariness, pervasiveness, and legitimacy of much social knowledge; it expresses the intuitive certainty that many things are just what they are, widely known, widely recognized, and not needing any further explanation.²⁵ For many in our society, whites and nonwhites too, racial beliefs operate in this fashion. For many, it simply seems “true,” an unquestioned matter of commonsense, that blacks prefer welfare to work, that undocumented immigrants breed crime, and that Islam spawns violence. How is this commonsense generated? Four different forces impel us to think in racist terms. I separate them below to make describing them easier, but in practice they are mutually reinforcing and
The first time I turned on *The Wire*, I abruptly clicked it off. An HBO series built around urban devastation and drug crimes in the burnt wreckage of Baltimore, the show struck me as just another voyeuristic portrayal of ghetto dysfunction. It seemed a slicker version of the jangly reality TV ride-alongs that bring into livingrooms all across the country images of police officers interrogating groups of young black men attired in sagging pants and hoodies, or accosting Latinos leaned up against chain-link fences. More than simply over-representing nonwhites among the criminal class, such fodder strips the context from the lives of those it portrays. Oblivious to life stories, the camera reduces complex individuals to the sum total of the behavior that lands them in the lights’ glare. Their lives’ larger trajectory, including the structural forces that opened and shut various avenues leading to that moment, remain obscured by deep shadows. We don’t just learn that nonwhites commit crimes. We learn that they are criminals, and little else.

This is where *The Wire* differs. Despite my initial misgivings, over five seasons the show explored the interconnected lives of drug dealers and cops—and longshoremen, journalists, and bureaucrats—illuminating the complicated humanity of those trapped by forces of urban deterioration. The more complete background shifted the perception of those perpetrating “crimes”: now this term seemed to include not only the street
hoodlums but also those who would never be charged with breaking the law, yet who in the socially destructive dimensions of their actions seemed at least equally culpable of great social and moral wrongs. The long arc and broad field of view helped lead to a better understanding of those who acted reprehensibly and often self-destructively, while also revealing the responsibility borne and often shirked by those with actual political and economic power.

Comparing *The Wire* to standard media fare—meaning not only Hollywood and TV, but also journalism—helps bring into focus the damage done by most media representations of race. Rather than treat nonwhites as complex persons, the media often reduce minorities to walking stereotypes: rapists, gang members, maids, terrorists, and so forth. White characters, though all too often also flat, nevertheless are typically the only ones allowed to blossom into multifaceted personalities, persons who respond to and also change their relations with others and, on occasion, alter their environment. As a result, media consumers learn to see nonwhites only as racial archetypes, while simultaneously being reminded that whites are unique individuals shaped by and in turn capable of shaping the world around them.

Beyond repeating tired stereotypes, by following the political debates of the day, media representations of minorities also greatly amplify dog whistle themes. In one striking example, media depictions of welfare over several decades tended to carry more black faces during presidential election years, and relatively more images of whites during periods of economic recession when the public was more sympathetic to the need for government assistance. In another example, when Ronald
Reagan first began to address unauthorized immigration as a national threat, this issue hardly merited attention among journalists. Within a few years, however, news stories proliferated on this topic, and the overwhelming majority of these used brown faces to illustrate the danger.\textsuperscript{28} The adage that an image is worth a thousand words applies to the power of the media to “teach” about race. Often, the lessons are deeply imbued with racist stereotypes that buttress dog whistle themes torn from political campaigns.

The media is one component—albeit a very powerful one—of a larger process of social learning. We begin to learn about race as children, yet even as adults we continue to learn about race through a constant bombardment of messages, images, and storylines from myriad sources. In a society like ours, no one can escape a racial education that often occurs by osmosis, gradually filling one’s head with racial understandings of the social world.

In turn, social learning has a self-fulfilling character. Consider a striking experiment conducted several decades ago by Jane Elliot, a third-grade teacher in Riceville, Iowa, a town “so homogenous that many of her students had never seen an African American.”\textsuperscript{29} The day after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., Elliot struggled to illustrate to her students the significance of King’s life. She struck upon the idea of teaching them what segregation meant. Elliot divided her students between those with blue and those with brown eyes. Discriminating first against the brown-eyed children, she put felt collars around their necks to further the differentiation. Then she
began to favor the blue-eyed children, seating them at the front of the room, and giving them first choice of the toys at recess. The effects were profound. The brown-eyed children "were humiliated; they huddled together on the playground … They said almost nothing in class and barely spoke all day. The blue-eyed students, meanwhile, were relaxed, happy, unself-conscious participants in class." The next day, Elliot reversed the positions, elevating the brown-eyed kids and stigmatizing those with blue eyes. The brown-eyed children returned to being eager learners, but their blue-eyed classmates became downcast and withdrawn. These differences carried through to lessons about arithmetic and spelling. The stigmatized children "barely paid attention. They receded to the back of even these small groups. They spoke only if spoken to. They didn’t remember instructions. They were slow to respond. They got a lot of answers wrong." In contrast, on the day these students were favored, "these same students responded like the exuberant, cognitively adept children they apparently were.”

Just one day as a disfavored child produced these heart-breaking changes. Imagine the toll of a whole childhood spent facing belittling messages. Now consider how children’s responses to years of mistreatment would confirm the very stereotyping that produced the harm in the first place. Withdrawn and anxious from mistreatment, these students’ poor performances would only harden the destructive suspicion of their inferiority. The insights of the liberal race theorists from the first half of the twentieth century seem relevant again. As Gunnar Myrdal summarized, “All our attempts to reach scientific
explanations of why the Negroes are what they are and why they live as they do have regularly led to determinants on the white side of the race line.”

Social learning both draws on and reinforces racial patterns.

THE ENVIRONMENT

As with social learning, the environment both teaches about race and has a self-fulfilling dynamic. By the environment, I mean our built world, for instance the narrow streets just north of the University of California, Berkeley, where I teach, which wind up through hills overlooking San Francisco Bay. Gorgeous views complement the varied homes in the area, an architecturally interesting mélange of Tudor, Craftsman, and California Mission style, and the people you see walking their dogs, cycling through the neighborhood, and driving by typically exude the confidence common to privilege—and they are almost exclusively white; a nonwhite face may cause a double-take. Looking further north, though, you spy Richmond, home to oil refineries, urban blight, extreme poverty, and lots of nonwhites. Looking south, you discern Oakland, with a downtown enjoying a renaissance, but also with pockets of intense poverty and spikes of violence, some in black neighborhoods, some in Latino barrios. There’s also an Oakland Chinatown, constantly rejuvenated with new immigrants.

Combined with the stereotypes acquired through social learning, these environmental differences make the idea of race seem real, powerful, and supremely relevant. The strong
correlation between whites and wealth makes each seem an attribute of the other: wealthy people are white; and white people are wealthy, or soon might be. Likewise, the environment conjoins poverty with nonwhiteness. Poor people are brown and black; black and brown people are poor, or curious exceptions. Sometimes the environment also links race to foreignness: Americans are white; browns and yellows are perpetual strangers. More deeply, these different environments seemingly testify to racial character: white folks keep their neighborhoods nice and work hard to earn the good things in life. In contrast, nonwhites trash their homes and streets, refuse to lift themselves out of poverty, and cling to foreign ways.

All of this seems “obvious,” but this very quality of being commonsense depends on the environment obscuring underlying racial processes. It’s very difficult to discern the racial advantages that favored those whites who reside in the beautiful North Berkeley abodes: the education and jobs they excelled at through hard work but also with help from racially informed presumptions of competence; the government programs and market opportunities open to their parents and grandparents, but closed by racial barriers to many others. Nor can you readily observe the racial mechanics that over decades have trapped nonwhites in parts of Richmond and Oakland, where areas of concentrated poverty severely limit opportunities, and older generations often have little to pass on in terms of net worth because past segregation in housing, jobs, and education truncated their own potential. Beyond that, it’s almost impossible to easily perceive how behavioral norms conducive to success are fostered by
settings in which success is possible, while behavioral patterns likely to lead to further marginalization are often encouraged in destructive environments without exits. The social world through which we move reflects centuries of racism that extends right up to the present. But this is hard to grasp in its particulars. Instead, we see clearly only the results, and with the underlying causes hidden, we tend to accept the extant world as a testament to the implacable truth of racial stereotypes. The environment itself seems to confirm the power of race to explain group differences, and also group fates.

**Cognitive Routines**

Social learning and the environment constantly bombard us with racial messages. How do we process this information? To handle the millions of bits of data we daily receive, our brains have developed a number of cognitive routines for efficiently sifting and sorting information. Many of these processes contribute to race’s power. Here, I briefly mention three aspects of human cognition that seem especially helpful in understanding the power of race in shaping how we engage others. Yet underlying this discussion is the essential caveat discussed when I first introduced the concept of commonsense racism: while these cognitive elements may be hardwired into how humans think, *race* is not natural to our thinking. Our neural networks may process information in ways that facilitate racial beliefs, but the actual content of our thoughts remain a matter of society and environment.
Categorization. Among our standard repertoire of cognitive tricks, perhaps the most important to race is that the human mind leaps at the chance to categorize others into groups, and then discriminates on that basis. We’re deeply accustomed to quickly sorting people into categories, and then to judging individuals in our group much more favorably than others. This dynamic of in-group favoritism and out-group mistreatment operates even when the basis for distinguishing between groups is transparently arbitrary, for instance after a group of children count off, one-two, into opposing teams. Making group distinctions is natural to us, though again the actual groupings reflect social arrangements. The propensity for humans to categorize, and to favor their own while disfavoring others, goes some way toward explaining the power of race in social relations.

Automaticity. Almost equally importantly, the tendency to categorize occurs unconsciously and automatically. Once you gain familiarity with racial groups and their relative social positions—unavoidable knowledge when living more than briefly in the United States—racial misjudgments will occur even before you know it. Indeed, because of race’s high social salience and its typically easy visual identification, “of all the dimensions on which people categorize each other, race is among the quickest and most automatic.” The social science on this is abundantly clear. As we encounter each other in the social world, our minds have already recognized racial distinctions and activated racial stereotypes, no matter how much we might wish it were otherwise.
Loss aversion. A third cognitive dynamic, albeit one not connected closely to groups, also bears mention. We tend to react to losses very differently from how we respond to unrealized gains. If someone takes $5 from you, you’re likely to resent it much more than if someone fails to give you $5 they owe you. Rationally, there should be no difference: in either case, you’re out five bucks. Perhaps so, but we nevertheless tend to experience losses more intensely. This dynamic seems relevant to understanding the high level of resentment expressed when whites confront demands for integration. Many take the status quo as a neutral starting point. Certainly this reflects racial ideology, which seeks to assure whites that their superior position is warranted rather than illegitimate. But it seems likely to also reflect a cognitive predisposition to greatly resent any effort to take away what we presently hold. This same predisposition also leads us to undervalue potential gains. Thus, even if gains from integration exceed the losses, the losses will be counted much more heavily in how whites experience them.

MOTIVES

Our minds automatically process information gleaned about race from society and the environment, contributing to a commonsense about race. Contrast this with strategic racists: they interact with race consciously and purposefully. This may lead to a sense that there’s a division between those who unconsciously engage with race, and those who do so completely mindfully. This division is too stark. Instead,
engagements with race occur along a continuum between fully strategic and fully automatic, with everyone somewhere along that spectrum. This means that strategic racists both manipulate and draw on commonsense ideas. And it also means that commonsense racism involves some element of motivation.

We can start with strategic racism, combining cold calculations and also a reliance on existing racial ideas. We’ve seen this exemplified in politicians from George Wallace to Mitt Romney, brainstorming over how best to stoke racial grievances; and by William Rehnquist and Clint Bolick, working diligently to harness civil rights rhetoric to enhance the plutocrats’ power. Notice here, though, that strategic racism is not simply the purview of presidential candidates and political operatives; instead, it has always functioned at every layer of the social stratum. To give an example, consider Justice Frank Murphy’s dissent from *Korematsu v. United States*, a World War II case which blessed the internment of roughly 110,000 persons of Japanese descent, the majority of them American citizens. Murphy vigorously objected, emphasizing the combined racial and financial motives of those pushing for prison camps:

> Special interest groups were extremely active in applying pressure for mass evacuation. Mr. Austin E. Anson, managing secretary of the Salinas Vegetable Grower—Shipper Association, has frankly admitted that “We’re charged with wanting to get rid of the Japs for selfish reasons. We do. It’s a question of whether
the white man lives on the Pacific Coast or the brown men. They came into this valley to work, and they stayed to take over…. They undersell the white man in the markets…. They work their women and children while the white farmer has to pay wages for his help. If all the Japs were removed tomorrow, we’d never miss them in two weeks, because the white farmers can take over and produce everything the Jap grows. And we don’t want them back when the war ends, either.”

Anson laid bare his ulterior motives for favoring the removal of Japanese farmers, but like all strategic racists, he also at least partially subscribed to the racial antipathies he endeavored to exploit.

From here, motives become more attenuated as persons adopt particular ideas depending not on their material interests but on how these notions protect their self-image and, for the privileged, confirm society’s basic fairness. For instance, the dominance of colorblindness today surely ties back to motives, not on the fully conscious level, but in many whites being drawn to conceptions of race that affirm their sense of being moral persons neither responsible for nor benefited by racial inequality. Colorblindness offers whites racial expiation: they cannot be racist if they lack malice; nor can they be responsible for inequality, since this reflects differences in group mores. Colorblindness also compliments whites on a superior culture that explains their social position. In addition it empathizes with whites as racism’s real victims when government favors
minorities through affirmative action or welfare payments. Finally, colorblindness affirms that whites are moral when they oppose measures to promote integration because it’s allegedly their principled objection to any use of race that drives them, not bias. Colorblindness has not gained adherents because of its analytic insight (that race is completely disconnected from social practices blinks reality); rather, it thrives because it comforts whites regarding their innocence, reassures them that their privilege is legitimate, commiserates with their victimization, and hides from them their hostility toward racial equality.

Finally, people seem “motivated” to act racially in the even looser sense of seeking to minimize their discomfort in dealing with race. In contrast to the foundational questions of self bound up in world views, this involves managing immediate anxiety in interactions with others. Seeking to avoid strain or embarrassment, we search for strategies that help us avoid or manage unsettling situations. Here again colorblindness often comes in, though now not as a complex set of ideas so much as an interactional strategy. Many whites find it stressful to engage with someone nonwhite, at least partly because they worry they may come across as prejudiced. In such settings, “one approach many Whites adopt is strategic colorblindness: avoidance of talking about race—or even acknowledging racial difference—in an effort to avoid the appearance of bias.” Especially in cross-racial encounters, many whites opt to act as if they simply don’t see race. Not altogether surprisingly, this often backfires, as their evident discomfort and strained self-management causes them to be perceived as more prejudiced. Motivation, in this context, is
less akin to deliberately comparing costs and benefits, or even subtly weighing which ideas protect one’s ego, and more like managing anxiety or discomfort.

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