Getting Away with Racism

A transparently racist statement can spell the end of a political career, so how do politicians get away with racial pandering? Dog whistling has long followed a standard choreography of punch, parry, and kick that tracks moves associated with colorblindness. More recently, rightwing politics has also sought cover by pushing nonwhite faces to the fore.

In the final month of the 2008 presidential campaign, a newsletter distributed by a local California Republican group claimed that if Obama was elected his image would appear on food stamps, instead of on dollar bills like other presidents. The broadside featured a phony $10 bill, now relabeled as “Ten Dollars Obama Bucks” in seals on each corner. In the middle, superimposed on the body of a donkey, was Obama’s face, eyes twinkling and with a wide grin. Above that, the mock bill read “United States Food Stamps.” Rounding out the racial parody, on the left there was a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken and a slab of ribs; on the right, a pitcher of Kool Aid and a large slice of watermelon.¹

In the swirl of controversy that erupted, the group’s president, Diane Fedele, accepted responsibility for circulating the cartoon, which she had received in a number of chain e-mails
before she decided to reprint it, and she was quick to apologize: “I absolutely apologize to anyone who was offended. That clearly wasn’t my attempt.” She was, nevertheless, just a little befuddled by the outrage.

In what way could this be construed as racist, she wondered? Nothing about the imagery suggested race, she explained, as fried chicken and ribs, Kool Aid and watermelon were “just food.” “I didn’t see it the way that it’s being taken. I never connected,” she said. “It was just food to me. It didn’t mean anything else.” Fedele also said she was making no effort to connect Obama to welfare, or to food stamps in particular. Yet her text introducing the cartoon said, “If elected, what bill would he be on?????? Food Stamps, what else!”

“It was just food to me. It didn’t mean anything else,” said the president of a local Republican group in denying that the
cartoon, which she reproduced in the group’s newsletter, had anything to do with race. © Tim Kastelein

What, then, was the intent behind circulating the cartoon? Fedele claimed she meant to criticize Obama—ironically, for nothing less than injecting race into the presidential campaign. Over the summer Obama had warned an audience in Springfield, Missouri, that John McCain’s campaign might stoop to scare tactics, charging: “Nobody really thinks that Bush or McCain have a real answer for the challenges we face, so what they’re going to try to do is make you scared of me. You know, he’s not patriotic enough. He’s got a funny name. You know, he doesn’t look like all those other presidents on those dollar bills. You know, he’s risky.”

Fedele was incensed. “I thought his statement was outrageous and uncalled for and inappropriate and everything else I can think to call it.” According to a local reporter, Fedele circulated the cartoon “to criticize Obama for saying over the summer that he doesn’t look like the presidents whose images are on dollar bills. She said she didn’t think it was appropriate for him to draw attention to his race.”

Fedele also had a trump to play. How could she be a racist, she wondered, if she had once supported a black presidential candidate? “She said she doesn’t think in racist terms, pointing out she once supported Republican Alan Keyes, an African-American who previously ran for president.”

One more detail deserves to be mentioned before we step back to assess this contretemps. The cartoon’s original creator was a liberal blogger who held a minor position with the
Minnesota Democratic Party and who planned to vote for Obama. He created the cartoon and posted it on his website “to lampoon Republicans who are afraid of government welfare programs and fearful of a Democratic president. He said that ‘there’s some people that are never going to get it.’” He was more right than he knew, as apparently many of those he sought to lampoon instead embraced and circulated his cartoon as a biting impeachment of Obama.

**RACE IS EVERYWHERE AND NOWHERE**

Even as late as the 1950s, it was commonplace for racial epithets to lace public discourse. Debates carried out on newspaper pages spoke regularly in terms we now regard as derogatory, and politicians routinely employed racial slurs. For instance, in November 1953 the *New York Times* ran a headline that blared “WETBACK INFUX NEAR THE RECORD; October Figure Second Highest in History—Crime Follows the Illegal Immigrants.”

Stimulated by and in turn fueling such fear-mongering, in 1954 the Eisenhower administration launched a mass expulsion campaign forthrightly called “Operation Wetback.” Slurs like “wetback” are now entirely absent from public discourse—or rather, almost entirely, as Republican senator Don Young demonstrated in 2013. Young’s reminiscences about the golden days when his family “used to hire 50 to 60 wetbacks to pick tomatoes” notwithstanding, today even direct references to race make relatively few appearances. Yet as we’ve seen, race has hardly disappeared from politics.
The once pervasive use of epithets has morphed into the coded transmission of racial messages through references to culture, behavior, and class. We live in a political milieu saturated with ugly racial innuendo.

But if so, why is there so little pushback from liberals? Why is racial pandering allowed to continue virtually unchallenged? As we’ve seen, partly the answer is that some liberals have themselves adopted dog whistle politics, whether out of sympathy to the underlying stereotypes or as a step toward getting Democrats elected. Beyond this, however, with assistance from colorblindness, conservative race-talk has adopted several strikingly effective strategies to insulate constant race-baiting.

**Punch, Parry, Kick**

The Obama Bucks controversy crossed the line into forbidden territory. Just as with Ronald Reagan when he first referred to the stereotypical food-stamp recipient as a “strapping young buck” before switching to the more ambiguous “some young fellow,” Fedele’s reprinted cartoon was too transparently racial. Even the chair of the California Republican Party conceded Fedele had sinned, saying “any material that invokes issues related to race is absolutely unacceptable,” and adding that the cartoon “inspires nothing but divisiveness and hostility and has absolutely no place in this election, or any public discourse.”

If overly exuberant, however, Fedele was in other respects simply practicing the rhetorical punch, parry, and kick of dog
whistle racial jujitsu. Here are the basic moves: (1) punch racism into the conversation through references to culture, behavior, and class; (2) parry claims of race-baiting by insisting that absent a direct reference to biology or the use of a racial epithet, there can be no racism; (3) kick up the racial attack by calling any critics the real racists for mentioning race and thereby “playing the race card.”

*Punch.* The punch is dog whistle’s coded race-talk. In Fedele’s case, it lay in circulating a caricature of a grinning Obama visually linked to food stamps as well as to victuals stereotypically beloved by African Americans. Here was the “happy coon” from the era of black face minstrelsy, grinning in childish delight over fried chicken and watermelon showered on him by the foolish largess of welfare. *This buffoon could soon be president,* the cartoon chided.

More generally, recall the various bugaboos politicians have mobilized the country against: criminals, welfare cheats, Arab Muslim terrorists, and illegal aliens. All of these invoke a new demonology that looks remarkably like the old one: nonwhites threatening the nation. On one level, the terms have changed: the menace arises from defective cultures and reprehensible behavior, rather than from these as they directly link to biology, as in the past. But the core dynamic remains: punch race into the conversation at every possible turn by bombarding white society with messages about the need to rally together. The colorblind invocation of ethnicity as a coded language for race is indispensable here. It is ethnicity, after all, that facilitates constant insinuations about fundamental group differences.

*Parry.* Dog whistlers then parry any resulting outrage by
playing dumb, refusing to see the supposed connection between their comments and race. This too is pure dog whistle theater. A dog whistle is a \textit{coded} racial appeal—one core point of the code being to foster deniability. The explicit racial appeal of yesteryear now invites political suicide. Dog whistle politics trades instead in studied ambiguity, where the lack of a smoking-gun racial epithet allows for proclamations of innocence. Fedele mimics this defense brilliantly when she says “it was just food to me. It didn’t mean anything else.” Fedele didn’t use a slur or directly refer to race; she didn’t say “coons like watermelon.” So how could this be about race? It was just a watermelon—and some fried chicken, ribs, and Kool Aid.

Also reprising these basic jujitsu moves, consider Newt Gingrich’s repeated besmirching of Obama as “the most successful food stamp president in American history.”\textsuperscript{6} In January 2012, during a Republican primary debate, Fox News political analyst Juan Williams challenged Gingrich on this and other racially provocative remarks, asking, “Can’t you see this is viewed, at a minimum, as insulting to all Americans, but particularly to black Americans?” “No, I don’t see that,” Gingrich huffed. When Williams refused to be put off and repeated the question, the audience booed. Then they cheered when Gingrich bombastically retorted, “First of all, Juan, the fact is that more people have been put on food stamps under Barack Obama than any other president in history.”\textsuperscript{7} Set aside that food stamp use was at an all time high because of economic calamity rather than the president’s policies. Focus instead on Gingrich’s rhetorical steps. First, like Reagan and Fedele and countless
others, he used references to food stamps to push the poison of race into the public’s veins. Then, when challenged, he reacted with studied indignation—he was shocked, just shocked that anyone would see race in his comments. But of course the barbed point of those three words—food stamp president—was to link Obama to indolent blacks on welfare, and to communicate that Gingrich would stand with hardworking whites who earn paychecks. “How do I know this is true?” asked the novelist Walter Moseley after making a similar argument. “Because Mr. Gingrich is a political poet and good political poets always have their finger on the jugular vein of the nation. Mr. Gingrich has told me in three words that the battle line will be drawn by fear-stoked hatred.”

Or recall the “Obama Phone Lady,” the gesticulating, overweight, visibly poor black woman shouting her support for Obama in a video that went viral in the months before the 2012 election. Filmed at an Obama rally in Ohio, the woman explained her enthusiasm for the president in terms of his ability to deliver goods to the poor. “Everybody in Cleveland, low minorities, got Obama phones…. Keep Obama in president, you know! He gave us a phone, he’s gonna do more,” she yells—and race-baiters loved her for providing a powerful caricature of the black Democratic voter. The video was posted to YouTube by a conservative activist in late September 2012, and within ten days had been viewed over four million times—aided by being featured on the conservative Drudge Report website and by Rush Limbaugh replaying the soundtrack on an endless loop on his radio program.

Yet when criticized for racial pandering, the right responded
with incredulity. Said the person who posted the video: “I have no idea how it could be construed as racist because it’s simply a woman speaking for herself.”

Said another defender, “the above video is hilarious. It is representative of a group of Obama voters who feel entitled to handouts from government. It does not matter what the color of the speaker is….

Conservatives should not have to shy away from such amusing examples of entitlement mentality simply because the particular proponent of that mentality happens to be black.”

As Elspeth Reeve correctly retorted in *The Atlantic Wire*, “The point of the video—and the reason Drudge and Limbaugh hyped it—is to say, this is what Obama voters look like: black, poor, stupid, and after your money. The video’s subject wasn’t picked out because she ‘happens to be black,’ she was picked out *because* she is black”—or more precisely, because she seemed to embody so many stereotypical attributes of blackness. Reeve continued: “This video, if placed in a Romney ad, would make George H.W. Bush’s 1988 Willie Horton ad look subtle by comparison: the other guy is supported by scary black people, vote Republican!”

Yet by mid-October, the video was indeed featured in a Tea Party-supported ad running in three predominantly white Ohio counties.

How could these provocateurs insist with a straight face that footage of an impoverished black woman as well as jabs about food stamps, stereotypical food stuffs, and entitlement mentalities had nothing to do with race? What made this at all plausible? It’s colorblindness that provides crucial cover. Colorblindness allows conservatives to insist that race means
blood and nothing more, so that references to culture and behavior cannot be about race. And it’s colorblindness that promotes the claim that racism only exists when someone confesses to malice or uses an epithet, so that coded speech is never racism so long as it remains in code. Here then is the essence of the parry: the colorblind avowal that nothing but biology is race and that racism cannot be present until someone utters the wrong term. This is word magic at its most potent: say food stamps and entitlement mentality, and racism is nowhere to be seen; say black and suddenly racism springs into being. Colorblindness transforms the absence of any express reference to race into a broad shield against every charge of racism. As long as dog whistle demagogues stick to racial euphemisms, colorblindness defends them against every charge of racial pandering.

Conservatives now apply the colorblind rule that racism requires the use of an epithet to all rightwing discourse, with one further restriction: if a slur is used it must be electronically recorded, or it never happened. In the spring of 2010, multiple witnesses, including congressional representatives, reported that someone in a Tea Party crowd called Congressman John Lewis a “nigger.” According to the right, though, this testimony was not sufficient to establish what actually happened; rather, conservative partisans demanded electronic proof—a video or at least an audio recording. Absent that, allegations of racial attacks amounted only to self-serving and indeed “racist” propaganda. According to a rightwing website, “these radical liars will stop at nothing to ram their socialist agenda down America’s throat. And, the state-run media will report their racist filth without
Kick. Beyond the repeated punch and parry, dog whistle politics almost invariably launches a stinging counterattack. This is the kick: when accused of racism, turn the tables and accuse your accuser of injecting race into the conversation. The retort to John Lewis’s allegation of racist abuse was, in keeping with the standard playbook, to label this charge “racist filth.” Or return to Fedele. Charged with racial provocation, she followed the dog whistle script and claimed that she was merely responding to Obama’s egregious racial pandering. Recall that she explained her cartoon as a response to Obama’s having mentioned that Republicans might try to scare voters by pointing out that “he doesn’t look like all those other presidents on those dollar bills.”

In complaining that Obama outrageously inserted race into the conversation, Fedele followed the McCain camp, which went after Obama as a racial opportunist for implying that the GOP might stoop to scaring voters about race. Obama’s warning was hardly far-fetched. Beyond the long history of dog whistling, the 2008 campaign itself was so saturated in racial ugliness—with vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin accusing Obama of “palling around with terrorists” and campaign crowds yelling “kill him!”—that the *New York Times* editorial page eventually castigated the McCain campaign for “race-baiting and xenophobia.” Nevertheless, McCain’s people fumed about Obama’s summertime warning. A day after Obama’s remarks, McCain’s campaign charged that “Barack Obama has played the race card, and he played it from the bottom of the deck,” adding
“it’s divisive, negative, shameful and wrong.” On the Today show, McCain campaign manager Rick Davis indignantly insisted “we are not going to let anybody paint John McCain, who has fought his entire life for equal rights for everyone, to be able to be painted as racist.”

When the McCain camp went on the racial offensive, how did Obama’s team respond? Backpedaling furiously, Obama campaign strategist David Axelrod initially adopted the techniques of the right. Axelrod employed his own parry, responding implausibly that Obama’s remarks about presidents on dollar bills had nothing to do with race. Obama, Axelrod claimed, was simply referencing “his status as a young, relative newcomer to Washington politics.” Then he kicked back, charging that “race became an issue only when the McCain campaign cast a racial slant on Obama’s remarks.” Axelrod could play the same rhetorical game, denying Obama had invoked race and claiming to be offended by the very insinuation. Or perhaps this wasn’t precisely the same game: not an effort to introduce and then avoid race, so much as an effort to recover from an unscripted slip. Obama probably never intended to mention race in the first place, and once he did, he calculated it was smarter politics to retreat than be dragged into a conversation about race that would only heighten doubts about his own racial identity. Be that as it may, the bottom line is that the Republican kick forced Obama off-balance, prompting him to withdraw his caution to expect race-baiting. Accepting the rightwing frame that Obama’s remarks offensively cast McCain as a bigot, Axelrod was quick to clarify on national television
that “Barack Obama never called John McCain a racist.”

Note how the dog whistle kick parallels the colorblind attack on affirmative action. Under colorblind constitutional law, racism has become any use of race, making “racists” out of those who use affirmative action to foster integration. In conservative discourse, meanwhile, the corollary practice is to malign as racial bombthrowers those who protest continuing racial injustices. Ostensibly, the real racists are those who publicly critique the on-going centrality of race in American society.

This claim that the critics of racial pandering are the real racists has a pedigree going back to the original dog whistle politician himself, George Wallace. As Wallace put it while on the hunt for angry white voters in 1968, “you know who the biggest bigots in the world are—they’re the ones who call others bigots.” He caviled, “Well, it’s a sad day in the country when you can’t talk about law and order unless they want to call you a racist.” According to Wallace’s logic, protesting racial pandering makes you the biggest bigot in the world—and, presumably, pulling a fire alarm means you set the fire, while dialing 911 means you committed the crime.

Routed by these attacks, most progressives have stopped talking about race and racism, lest they be accused of being “the biggest bigots in the world.” Like colorblindness, dog whistling is both a form of race talk and a way to ensure silence about race. Among conservatives it facilitates a constant din of racial insinuation couched in references to culture and behavior, while insisting there’s no racism without an epithet or a direct mention of race. And among liberals it enforces a cowed silence, kicking
up the racial conflict by accusing any critics of opportunistically injecting race into the conversation.

“I GUESS I’M A RACIST”

When Obama briefly referenced race as one of the ways that the GOP might try to scare voters, in addition to the typical “race card” retort, the McCain camp also struck back with the charge that Obama had sought to “paint John McCain … as racist.”

This assailment deserves a bit more attention.

The claim to have been slandered as a racist frequently crops up on the right in response to liberal efforts to focus on troubling racial dynamics, and there may be a fair level of cynical strategizing at work in such conservative carping. By translating the claim that race continues to play a distorting role in American life into a narrow indictment of mean-spirited bigotry, conservatives are more able to easily dismiss the allegation as absurd. The invented charge of being a closet Klan member is readily repudiated. In addition, because the charge of being a racist is freighted with social opprobrium, alleging they have been so charged allows conservatives to cast themselves as unfairly maligned victims. The claim to have been called a racist sucks all the air out of the room, ending any substantive conversation; the only thing left is for the race critic to apologize and to deny that she intended to call anyone a racist. In short, for conservatives, alleging that they’ve been called a racist is good strategy.