**The South Has Risen Again: Thoughts on the Tea Party**

**and the Recent Rise of Right-Wing Racism**

by David Lotto

*presented at Psychohistory Forum, New York, NY, January 2016*

**Abstract**

*This paper examines the significance of racism in fueling the recent rise of the Tea Party and related Right-Wing political groups and activity. It briefly explores some of the history of racism in this country that has been directed toward African Americans and how it has influenced political developments from Colonial times to the present. It suggests that this racist resurgence can be seen, in part, as a re-enactment of the trauma of the Civil War by the descendents, and those who identify with them, who were on the losing side of that conflict.*

Racism has a long history in this country. From the colonial era until the Civil War its chief manifestation was through the institution of slavery. The degree to which racism, as opposed to other factors, such as economic motivations, was responsible for the enslavement of African Americans in this country is debatable but not the focus of this paper. Certainly it is hard to imagine that the institution would have become what it did if white people were the only ones available to be made into slaves.

The political, economic, and social consequences of racism certainly did not end with the emancipation proclamation. Some of this will be discussed later in the paper. However, in recent years, perhaps starting in 2008 with the election of the first African American president, there has been an increased awareness of the issue of racism. While many have seen the fact that a black man was elected president as an indication that racism, and its consequences, are in decline, there are other events that point to the opposite conclusion. In the past year, perhaps the most visible evidence for questioning the assertion that racism has diminished is the occurrence and accompanying media attention given to the killing and physical assaults on African-Americans by whites, mostly, but not exclusively, by police officers. The “Black Lives Matter” movement, and it's more militant offshoot “No Justice No Peace” are reactions to the white on black violence. Although they have not yet reached the level of protest or organized opposition of the Civil Rights and Black Power in the 1960’s and 1970’s, these movements have gathered a significant amount of support and have kept the issue in the public eye.

This paper will focus on a different expression of racism, the rise of racism in the political arena.

A feature of the Tea Party, which virtually all who have written about it have commented on, is the intense hostility directed at President Obama. In 2013 Obama was the target of more than 30 potential death threats a day. He is the most threatened president in history. The rate of threats against him is four times higher than it was for President Bush.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), which tracks right-wing hate groups, issued a report in 2012 which said that the peak in the number of hate groups was 1274 in 2011. There was a substantial increase in the number of hate groups starting in 2008 following Obama's election, although this was also the start of the real estate crash recession. The SPLC found that the largest increase was in groups “whose ideologies include deep distrust of the federal government”[[2]](#endnote-2) SPLC president Richard Cohen, responding to the recent massacre at a black church in Charleston South Carolina, said that the shooting was “an obvious hate crime by someone who feels threatened by our country’s changing demographics and the increasing prominence of African Americans in public life”[[3]](#endnote-3)

In 2010 Harvard historian and New Yorker staff reporter Jill LePore, wrote a book about the Tea Party titled: *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History.* In April of 2010, in the course of her research, she attended a Tea Party event featuring Sarah Palin. She reports that someone was wearing a T-shirt saying: **American Not Racist**. There was also an African American musician, a warm-up act for Sarah's speech, who started his performance by shouting: “I am not an African American I am Lloyd Marcus an American. When they call you a racist because you disagree that's another one of their nasty tricks.” He then called to the audience “are you racists?” And the crowd responded “no”.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Overt racism is no longer politically correct and is not acceptable in public discourse, even within the Tea Party. At the least, for a public figure, there is mandatory deniability. In the mainstream world you just can't say or do openly racist things, as Donald Sterling, the former owner of the Los Angeles Clippers basketball team, recently learned. In this paper I am suggesting that racism, although largely underground, is a powerful factor fueling both the intensity and popularity of the Tea Party and its fellow travelers.

As LePore says: “Whatever else had drawn people into the movement - a bailout, healthcare, taxes, *Fox News*, and above all, the economy - some of it, for some people, was probably discomfort with the United States' first black president, because he was black”[[5]](#endnote-5).

Rick Perlstein, who describes himself as someone who has spent the last 16 years in full-time study of the right, argues in his article in the *Nation* on the Tea Party that:

“All antigovernment rage in America bears a racial component, because liberalism is understood, consciously or unconsciously, as the ideology that steals from hard-working, taxpaying whites and gives the spoils to indolent, grasping blacks.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

Heather Cox Richardson in a recent article traces some of the history of this American political trope. Pres. Andrew Johnson, Lincoln's successor, was the first prominent politician to make this argument in his veto messages of several bills designed to provide educational and economic benefits to poor people, whites as well as the newly emancipated slaves. He claimed that these bills would “simply give a handout to lazy blacks, paid for by hard-working whites”[[7]](#endnote-7). This theme has continued to be an important part of right wing ideology from the Reconstruction era to the present. It fuels the opposition to any and all programs that may involve providing benefits for those in need paid for by public funds supplied by “hard-working taxpayers”. From the demise of reconstruction in the South, to Ronald Reagan's welfare queen who had:

“80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards” and who “is collecting veterans benefits on four non-existing deceased husband's. And she is collecting Social Security on her cards. She's got Medicaid, getting food stamps, and she is collecting welfare under each of her names.”[[8]](#endnote-8)

to the Tea Party hatred of Obama, the refrain remains the same.

Another little-known but telling incident from our history. In 1898 a coalition of blacks and white populists won the municipal election in Wilmington, North Carolina. A local White Citizens Council was organized. A black owned newspaper was destroyed by fire, at least fifteen blacks were murdered, and the elected officials were driven from office. In a comment particularly irrelevant to our present situation one white man declared: “We… will never again be ruled by men of African origin.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

Survey data indicates that Tea Partiers rated blacks (and Latinos) as lazier, less intelligent, and less trustworthy than even non-Tea Party conservative Republicans did.[[10]](#endnote-10)

The Tea Party clearly is driven by other factors in addition to racism; it is the latest manifestation of a long history of right-wing rage directed at many different targets. Richard Hofstadter's famous 1964 article *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* provides a good history, up until that time, of organized right-wing rage, fear, and bizarre belief systems. Most often there would be a designated enemy who was identified as the source of dire threat. Starting in Colonial Times these enemies included, in chronological order, Native Americans, Catholics, Bolsheviks, Germans, Japanese, Russians, International Communism, and now Islamic terrorists.

In February of 2014 there were forty-eight members of the Tea Party caucus in the House of Representatives, all of whom were Republicans. Thirty-three, more than two thirds, were from states that were part of the Confederacy or in which slavery was legal at the time of the Civil War. The rest are from the southwest, midwest, or the western mountain states that had not yet been granted statehood by the end of the war. Only five, including the chairperson Michelle Bachman from Minnesota and two from California, were from states which remained in the Union.

The intergenerational transmission of trauma is a topic which lately has generated a great deal of interest. As Vamik Volkan has written, one way that groups have suffered the trauma of losing a war react, is to bequeath, most often unconsciously, a mission of redemption to their descendents.[[11]](#endnote-11) Lifton refers to this phenomenon, where a group which has experienced trauma finds meaning and significance for their lives as engaging in a “Survivor Mission”.[[12]](#endnote-12) One way to fulfill the mission is to remain faithful to the beliefs, values and ideals for which their ancestors fought and to bring vindication. Some have referred to this type of phenomenon as a failure to mourn, as when the attachment to the old ways is never relinquished, one is never free of the past, and so one is not able to move on to something else. Thus, the rallying cry, not heard as frequently as in the past, but perhaps still in the hearts of many, that ”the South will rise again”, is transmitted down through the generations and gets enacted and expressed through the Tea Party.

The suggestion here is that the Tea Party is a manifestation of this arising. LePore suggests that some in the Tea Party have “some discomfort about a black president”. I think that the feelings involved are often far more intense than discomfort and that it is more than “some” Tea Party members who feel this way. For many, and not only Tea Partiers, the reality of a black president is just intolerable. For them his election has come to symbolize that whites are no longer the dominant political group as they have been throughout our history. They are aware of what Richard Cohen calls the “changing demographics”, namely, that in 2011, for the first time in our history, non-Hispanic whites accounted for less than one half of total births.[[13]](#endnote-13) Although, in 2012, non-Hispanic whites were 63% of the total population, projections are that by 2043 that number will fall below fifty percent.[[14]](#endnote-14) There is a feeling among Tea Party members and those who share their ideology that control is slipping away; that this in no longer the good old USA of the days of yore.

For many, Obama is just too difficult to identify with. He is not suitable to be the chief executive of this great nation. It may be all right for African-Americans to have equal rights or even equal opportunities but for an African American to be in the highest position in the nation, a superior figure, an idealized and exalted leader, the commander in chief of the world’s most powerful armed forces, goes too far. For the white people who are accustomed to being the rulers it violates something very basic: slaves shouldn't get to rule over their masters.

Thomas Jefferson's first draft of the Declaration of Independence listed as one of the several named grievances against King George the Third that:

“He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of the distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery.”[[15]](#endnote-15)

This sentence, at the insistence of the delegates from the southern colonies was not included in the final draft.

During the Revolutionary War there were large numbers of slaves, probably in the tens of thousands, who escaped from slavery taking hope in the promise by the British that if they were victorious, slaves would be freed. When the British evacuated, thousands of former slaves went with them, giving partisans of slavery another reason to hate and fear blacks.[[16]](#endnote-16) Another little known but very important piece of American history is the close connection between the perpetuation of slavery and the second amendment to the Constitution. Proslavery delegates at the Constitutional convention were strong advocates for the Second Amendment which was important for them in that it guaranteed that the federal government would not interfere with the states maintaining their slave patrols, whose main purpose was to put down slave rebellions and capture runaway slaves. Thus the “well organized militia” clause.

In Virginia and the Carolinas, most men between the ages of 18 and 45, with the exception of those in “critical” professions” which included judges, legislators, and students, but not doctors, lawyers or clergy, were required to serve in the slave patrol militias for at least some period of time.[[17]](#endnote-17)

By the 1780’s there had been hundreds of slave rebellions in the southern colonies. In large areas in the south, blacks outnumbered whites.[[18]](#endnote-18)

At the Constitutional Convention, southern delegates had several concerns about threats to the existence of slavery. One of their concerns was that Article 1, Section 8 of the proposed constitution, which gave the federal government the power to raise and supervise a militia, could allow the federal militia to take control of state militias. There were multiple concerns. As expressed by Patrick Henry at the Virginia ratifying convention: “In this state there are two hundred and thirty six thousand blacks, and there are many in several other states. But there are few or none in the northern states. . . May Congress not say, that every black man must fight? Did we not see a little of this last war? . . .acts of Assembly passed that every slave who would go to the army should be free” [the reference is to black soldiers serving under Washington in the Revolutionary War]

Henry was also worried that:

“They will search that paper [the constitution], and see if they have the power of manumission . . .And have they not sir? Have they not power to provide for the general defense and welfare? May they not think these call for the abolition of slavery? May they not pronounce all slaves free, and will they not be warranted by that power?”

He was quite right to be afraid for this is what did happen in 1863 when Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation.

Another little known part of the second amendment story was that the original draft composed by James Madison said:

“The right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed; a well armed, and well regulated militia being the best security of a free country: but no person religiously scrupulous of bearing arms, shall be compelled to render military service in person”

Because of the concerns of Henry, George Mason, and other southern delegates, the wording was changed to what is presently in the Constitution:

“A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.” [[19]](#endnote-19)

Note that the word country was changed to state, thus shifting the locus of control from the federal government to state governments, along with dropping the religious conscientious exception clause.

So there is a connection between the history of racism/slavery in this country and the bizarre and uniquely American firearms fetish, one of the consequences of which is the current epidemic of gun violence. Another legacy of the attachment to and defense of the institution of African American slavery.

As Americans pushed west killing or expelling Native Americans, Spaniards, Mexicans, and anyone else in their path through the first part of the 19th century one of the major domestic political conflicts was between partisans of “States’ Rights” and those who favored a strong federal government. States’ Rights became one of the cornerstones of the American conservative and libertarian tradition; morphing into the more diffuse “the less government the better” credo. Local and state government could be criticized for limiting the “freedom” of the individual citizens, but the real danger was from a centralized federal government which might wish to exert control over local affairs. The issue that this conflict coalesced around was, of course, slavery. As the newly settled areas of the frontier sought statehood, Congress became a battleground for the fight over whether the new state would be “slave” or “free”; John Calhoun versus Daniel Webster. This fight escalated through the middle of the century culminating in the Civil War. The argument is still made by many in the South that the Civil War, or as some Southerners prefer to call it *The War of Northern Aggression,* was about “States’ Rights” and not slavery. My contention is that at its heart, States’ Rights was primarily about protecting slavery which was essential for much of the economic activity in the South which was based on growing cotton, which could not have been done profitably without the use of slave labor.[[20]](#endnote-20)

But in many ways the Civil War settled little regarding racism. There was a brief period from the North’s victory in 1865 until the late 1870s, the reconstruction era, where there was an effort made to make a significant difference in the Southern way of life. African Americans exercised their voting rights and there were even some African Americans who won elections and had some power in local and state government. However, with the demise of the Reconstruction Era, when federal troops were withdrawn, virtually all African American political gains were undone; the era of Jim Crow descended.

Douglas Blackmon in his book, *Slavery by Another Name,* documents some of the ways in which de facto slavery was reconstituted, chiefly by means of convicting black men of mostly fictitious crimes and sentencing them to “penal servitude”, which was functionally indistinguishable from slavery. These practices didn’t end until the advent of the New Deal in the 1930s.

Michelle Alexander has recently written a widely acclaimed book titled: *The New Jim Crow,* in which she describes the workings of the latest iteration of political and institutional racism - the huge number of African-Americans who are incarcerated, on probation or parole, or whose economic opportunities have been severely curtailed because of having a criminal record.

David King, was the plaintiff in the King vs. Burwell case, which, had the plaintiff prevailed, would have nullified parts of the Affordable Care Act and resulted in thousands losing their health insurance. The case was recently heard by the Supreme Court, which found against the plaintiff. When asked why he agreed to become involved in the lawsuit King said the only benefit he anticipated was: “the satisfaction of smashing the signature achievement of the President he loathes”.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Barbara Lee, the African-American Congresswoman (and the lone legislator to vote against the resolution giving President Bush the authority to go to war after 9/11) pointed out, when the Republicans were threatening to not raise the debt ceiling and shut the government down, that there has been a long history of Congress routinely voting debt ceiling increases no matter which party was in control of the legislative or executive branch. It was only when there was a black president that this well-established precedent was broken.

The Journal *Psychoanalysis, Culture, and Society* recently published an entire issue on *Psychoanalysis, African-Americans, and Inequality.* Jones and Obourn’s article: *Object Fear, the National Dissociation of Race and Racism in the Era of Obama* suggests that: “President Obama's presence has tapped into a national psychic location for internal violence and despair, resulting in a cultural atmosphere in which racial oppressions increase and in which civil rights protections can be stripped away. . .”[[22]](#endnote-22) They also write: “The danger of white American losing “our country” . . . is threatened by the figure of a black president”[[23]](#endnote-23)(p. 398).

I believe that the single-minded opposition of the Republicans, as epitomized by the congressional Republican leaders’ cabal on the evening of Obama’s 2009 inauguration, vowing to do anything and everything they could to oppose any legislation that Obama supported, has a significant racist component.

Southern congressional representatives have also wielded a great deal of political power in our federal government throughout the history of this country: from the days of the Constitutional convention, with the debate about counting slaves for purposes of representation which led to the infamous 3/5th compromise and the second amendment, through the present.

Ira Katznelson, in his book *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time*, points out that Democratic Southern representatives, in return for supporting New Deal legislation were able to ensure that New Deal mandated protections did not apply to agricultural and domestic workers, the majority of whom, in the South, were African Americans, and that Jim Crow could continue undisturbed.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Melvin Dubofsky in his article: *The Roots of the Tea Party* concludes: “The Tea Party's agenda may be partly funded by the antediluvian Koch Brothers, . . . but its mass participants danced to tunes first played by the Southern Democratic lawmakers.”[[25]](#endnote-25)

Ian Haney Lopez recently in his book *Dog Whistle Politics* writes about the increasing use of code words or phrases, particularly those with racist meanings, in political discourse. Phrases such as “taking personal responsibility”, “food stamp recipients”, “or “illegal aliens” among others, have latent or unconscious associations that trigger whites to resent nonwhites. Although this is not a new development, having been used extensively by the Reagan’s presidential campaign n in 1980, Right-Wing and Tea Party politicians use this technique to feed racial animus, while maintaining plausible deniability.

There has also been a recent surge in interest in the concept of implicit or unconscious racism. There is a procedure called the Implicit Association Test, which can be accessed online, and has been by more than two million people, which claims to measure racial prejudice that is independent of the individual’s level of overt or conscious racism. The average score for white people is .4 on a zero to one scale, where zero indicates no racism. .4 is in the “moderate bias” range. The conclusion drawn is that many of those who deny that they are racist are more likely to be deceiving themselves than to be lying to others.

I think thatObama's denial of racism is a crucial factor in his presidency and the current domestic political situation. Barack Obama's life, up to his election as president in 2008, has been a remarkable American success story. A bi-racial child growing up in a considerably less than ideal environment gets to graduate from an Ivy League College and go to Harvard Law School and become accepted as a member of the nation’s power elite. He receives the prestigious honor of being named editor of the Harvard Law Review, goes on to become a rising star in Chicago politics, a United States Senator, and finally president.

His story is dramatic proof that, for him, racism has not been a barrier to success. His wish that this be true for everyone is powerful and dearly held. It is a crucial aspect of his identity. There is a strong resistance to seeing the prevalence and power of racism in this country, that his personal success story is very much the exception to the rule.

Obama still doesn’t see the full force of the racist rage that is directed against him. His 2015 State of the Union speech reiterated his belief, first articulated in his keynote address at the 2004 Democratic convention, when he proclaimed that there's not a black America and a white America and there's not a liberal America and a conservative America - there is just a United States of America.

To summarize and conclude: the central argument here is that the current resurgence of right wing paranoid political groups, particularly the Tea Party, is driven by an upsurge of racism. It can be seen as an enactment on the part of southerners and their descendents and sympathizers, of the trauma of the civil war. The trauma involving the losses of life, limb and property as well as the humiliation of being defeated in the war. I also argue that racism has a long history of influencing the political behavior of the United States in that it is closely associated with one of the central tropes of the right wing in this country - that the enemy is a federal government which tyrannically intrudes on the rights of local government (chiefly states) and the individual; and its corollary - that less federal government is good and more is bad.

Until the Civil War this fight against the federal government had primarily been in the service of preserving slavery. Although the justification for an antigovernment stance these days is most often presented as a valorization of freedom and liberty, I believe that there are powerful disavowed currents of racism that fuel the antigovernment stance of the Tea Party and related right wing groups.

1. Daily Kos.com/story – 11/25/12 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *New York Times* – 3/7/2012 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Salim Muwakkil, *In These Times,* August 2015“Our Neo-Confederacy”, p. 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. LePore, J. *The Whites of Their Eyes,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, p. 136. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. p. 95. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Rick Perlstein, *Nation,* “The Grand Old Tea Party”, p. 14-19. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Heather Cox Richardson, *Jacobin,* summer 2015, p. 74. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. p. 78. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Christopher Parker et. al. *2010 Multi-State Survey of Race and Politics,* University of Washington Institute for the Study of Ethnicity, Race, and Sexuality. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Volkan, V. *Chosen Trauma, The Political Ideology of Entitlement and Violence* Berlin meeting 6/10/2004 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Lifton, R.J. *The Future of Immortality,* New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1987, p. 241. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Wikipedia, *Non-Hispanic Whites.* [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. usnews.nbcnews.com/in/18934111 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. LePore, p. 132. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid. p. 139. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Hadden, S. *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas.* Harvard University Press, 2003. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Tom Hartmann, *Truth Out,* 1/15/2003. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. http://jgiganti.myweb.uga.edu/henry\_smith\_onslavery.htm) [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. See Christopher Hayes’ article in the *Nation*, 5/12/2014, *The New Abolitionism.* p. 11-15, for an account of the economic importance of slavery to the South. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. *Mother Jones*, May & June 2015, p. 5 [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Jones, A. L. & Obourn, M. Object Fear, the National Dissociation of Race and Racism in the Era of Obama. *Psychoanalysis, Culture, & Society,* Vol. 19, #4 Dec. 2014, p. 393. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid. p. 398. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Katznelson, I. *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time.* Liveright Publishing, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. *In these Times*, Jan. 2014, p. 45

    David Lotto is a Psychoanalyst and Psychohistorian. He is a co-editor of this journal. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)