

‘Power Besieged and Power Protected’: Conservative Uses of COVID-19 to Attack Black Lives Matter

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This essay draws on positions outlined by Corey Robin in the two iterations of his study of conservatism, *The Reactionary Mind* (2011, 2018), where Robin reads the political and intellectual histories of transatlantic conservatism not, as its own canonical proponents have often done, as a reactive tradition instinctively anchored in what is familiar and known and intrinsically antipathetic to radicalism and reform. On the contrary, as his title suggests, conservatism for Robin is not so much reflexively reactive as driven by motivated reaction, its histories shaped by a reactionary ‘idea-driven praxis’ (Robin 2018: 18) whose principal and enduring objective is the suppression of challenges to ‘the established distribution of power’ (xiii)—a main theme in this essay’s treatment of conservative responses to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, in the age of Donald Trump, the alt-Right and the full penetration of the Republican party by the politics of white supremacy.

As a body of dynamic principles and ideas, Robin suggests, the conservative tradition ‘provides the most consistent and profound argument as to why the lower orders should not be allowed to exercise their independent will, why they should not be allowed to govern themselves or the polity’ (7-8). Forged thus, Robin contends, ‘in response to challenges from below’ (32), far from unthinkingly reflexive or grounded in unchanging verities, conservatism ‘is about power besieged and power protected. It is an activist doctrine for an activist time. It waxes in response to movements from below and wanes in response to their disappearance’ (33), reinventing itself pragmatically, as necessary, while borrowing from the

ideas of those it seeks to suppress according to the specificity of the historical threats it encounters. *The Reactionary Mind* offers us one way of understanding the radicalism, as it were, of modern conservatism in the United States, where from the later 1950s a succession of heterodox conservative factions have presented themselves as more effective defenders of established distributions of power than Republican party orthodoxy.

The Robin thesis also informs a second main theme of this essay, which addresses the flow of *modulated continuities* within movement conservatism across political generations since the early Cold War—meaning, the recurrence and periodic reframing of first principles and precepts, in an iterative process, where what may appear to be departures from received tactics or tropes often mask the deeper-lying persistence, or mutation, of received rhetorics and ideologies that are reconfigured as the Right adapts to, and adopts variegated forms to confront, the protean realities of ‘power besieged’ from below. Since the 1950s, this amalgam of the radical and the traditional propelling the idea-driven praxis of movement conservatism has often been at its most transparent in response to challenges posed to racialized distributions of power and rights by Black Americans; while the political agency of Black Americans, and the forms this agency has taken, have themselves been closely bound to the shifting modalities of the Right—not least in the contemporary example of Black Lives Matter (BLM), a hashtag founded in July 2013 after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the killing of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, that erupted into a continental mass protest movement during the summer of 2020 following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer, Derek Chauvin. As BLM co-founder, Alicia Garza, notes, her own trajectory as an activist and organizer took shape in direct relation to ‘the conservative consensus and the right’s rise to power’ during the 1980s and 1990s and the ‘entrenchment of conservative values, ideologies, stories, and policies in every structure, every system that organizes our lives’ (Garza 44).

The backstory to the emergence of BLM, in other words, and its location within a continuum of racial struggle that Jacquelyn Dowd Hall has influentially termed the ‘Long Civil Rights Movement’, is also a story of the reactionary conservatism arraigned against it. The relationality of these opposed political forces in a dialectical space of ‘power besieged and power protected’ is explicit in Hall’s stretching of the historical frame of reference in which the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) should be discussed. Rejecting the popular and, for Hall, conservative understanding that the CRM was contained in a relatively brief period of struggle between *Brown v Board of Education* in 1954 and the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts in 1964 and 1965, Hall’s long civil rights movement takes root in the liberal and radical milieu of the later 1930s, after which it is ‘continuously and ferociously contested’ (Hall 2005: 1235) for two decades prior to *Brown*, persisting in a continuum of struggle and reactionary contestation well beyond the historical markers traditionally used to delineate its collapse or exhaustion—the Vietnam War, urban riots, and reaction against the excesses of the late 1960s and 1970s, understood variously as student rebellion, black militancy, feminism, busing, affirmative action, or an overweening welfare state’ (1234). Integral to Hall’s more expansive narrative of the CRM is ‘the dialectic between the movement and the so-called backlash against it, a wall of resistance that did not appear suddenly in the much maligned 1970s, but arose in tandem with the civil rights offensive in the aftermath of World War II’, and that culminated, at least from Hall’s position in 2005, ‘under the aegis of the New Right’ (1235)—the moment at which Alicia Garza’s story as an activist, community organizer, and future founder of BLM, begins.

As Garza herself also does, in her memoir *The Purpose of Power* (2020), scholarship from a range of disciplinary backgrounds has positioned BLM within a lineage of struggle for Black civil rights whose immediate reference points include the conflicts of the 1950s and 1960s (Jones-Eversley et al 2017; Lebron 2017; McKersie 2021; Morris 2021; Staggers-

Hakim 2018; Yeboah 2018). BLM's political breadth and diversity, however, and the movement's fluidity as a still emerging site of resistance, also mark it as a distinctive new front in American racial conflict, whose originality and historical specificity musters new challenges to the established distribution of power and to the reactionary conservatism defending it. For example, as well as amplifying traditional CRM activism around inequalities in education, healthcare, housing, income, and voting and welfare rights, BLM has been notable for the new prominence it has given to proposals for police reform and the reallocation of police funding; for models of leadership and activism that are decentralized and diffuse; and for its channelling of identity politics as a core ideology—in its privileging of intersectionality, in its centring of identities that have often been marginalized within Black liberation movements (particularly LGBTQ+ communities), in its demands for diverse representation on public and private bodies, and in its calls for the removal of statuary and other public symbols commemorating the Confederacy.

This essay gathers together these perspectives from Corey Robin, Alicia Garza and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall to frame a discussion of conservative backlash against the BLM movement in the immediate aftermath of the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. In particular, the essay considers how the COVID-19 public health crisis was mobilized by conservative media organisation, *The Daily Wire*, as a 'dog whistle' platform from which to attack BLM demonstrators and their advocates in liberal politics and media. The essay traces modulated continuities with received conservative movement rhetoric in *The Daily Wire's* reporting of COVID-19 and BLM. It describes *Daily Wire* reportage as consistent with—but also, in its historical and political specificity, as divergent from—the reactionary idea-driven praxis of 'power besieged and power protected' characteristic of the conservative movement in the United States since the early Cold War, whose polarizing racial politics have been

dramatically recharged by Trumpism, the alt-Right and ‘Make America Great Again’ (MAGA) Republicanism.

Conservative identity politics and COVID-19

When Donald Trump resumed his Coronavirus Task Force (CTF) briefings on 21 July 2020, having cancelled them indefinitely in April, declaring them on Twitter to be ‘Not worth the time and effort!’ (Trump cited in Rummler 2020), his opening line to the White House press corps struck a familiar note, reiterating the nativist language he had been using to describe COVID-19 since March. ‘Today’, Trump announced, ‘I want to provide an update on our response to the China virus’ (Trump 2020a). At the following day’s briefing, having referred once more to ‘the China virus’ he then described it as ‘the China plague’, and identified cases ‘surging in Mexico’ along the southern border as a particular concern (Trump 2020b).

The implication that Americans trying to account for the spread of COVID-19 in the United States might look to foreigners, rather than to gaps in federal policy or executive leadership, was a well-rehearsed theme. Trump made his first recorded public reference to ‘the China virus’ on 16 March (Woodward 2020: 284), and had described ‘the Democrat policy of open borders’ as ‘a direct threat to the health and well-being of all Americans’ as early as 28 February, in a speech on the eve of the Democratic primary in South Carolina where he also labelled COVID-19 the Democrats’ ‘new hoax’ (Trump 2020c). In his remarks on 22 July, however, there was a significant new addition to the list of those Trump held responsible for rising rates of infection during CTF briefings. Nationwide protests at the killing of George Floyd by the Minneapolis Police Department, Trump suggested, had caused

a rise in COVID-19 cases among young Americans, and had ‘triggered a broader relaxation of mitigation efforts nationwide’ (Trump 2020b).

The claim that Black Lives Matter protestors were responsible for rising rates of coronavirus, and that the demonstrations had prompted a wider relaxation of lockdown measures across the United States, followed an established pattern of misinformation and misdirection in Trump’s public responses to the COVID-19 emergency. Data published by the National Bureau of Economic Research in June had found ‘no evidence that urban protests reignited COVID-19 case growth during the more than three weeks following protest onset’, and ‘no evidence that stay-at-home behaviors trended differently in treatment and control counties before the outbreak of the protests’ (Dave et al 2020). Critical coverage of the July 22 CTF briefing also pointed out that Trump, himself, had been publicly calling for ‘a broader relaxation of mitigation efforts’ since his series of tweets on April 17, where he demanded that Americans should ‘LIBERATE MINNESOTA!’, ‘LIBERATE MICHIGAN!’, and ‘LIBERATE VIRGINIA, and save your great 2nd Amendment’ (Trump cited in Torres 2020). Describing this moment in his second study of the Trump presidency, *Rage*, Bob Woodward recalls how CTF adviser Anthony Fauci’s ‘jaw dropped’ at the President’s ‘subversion of his own guidelines’ (Woodward 2020: 353)—an intervention that Woodward describes as emblematic, not only of Trump’s chaotic leadership on COVID-19 but also of his governance in general, ‘riddled with ambivalence, set on an uncertain course, swinging from combativeness to conciliation, and whipsawing from one statement or action to the opposite’ (385) in a manner that ‘enshrined personal impulse as a governing principle of his presidency’ (392).

Trump, however, is nothing if not a product of political tradition and history. While it became briefly fashionable in the later stages of his incumbency, particularly after the sacking of the US Capitol on 6 January 2021, to depict him as a rogue actor and his

grassroots supporters as a cult, such descriptions tended to ignore both the increasingly radical trajectory of movement conservatism in the US during the previous decade and Trump's efficacy as a lightning rod through which those forces flowed. The racialized, nativist discourse informing Trump's rhetorical construction of COVID-19 was clearly aligned to the identity politics of his presidential campaign during 2015, and to aspects of his governance, particularly on immigration; but it was also entirely consistent with main currents in contemporary US conservatism, whose sharp lurch to the populist Right during the Obama administrations helped shape the climate in which MAGA Trumpism was able to take root and flourish. One measure of this during the summer of 2020 was the extent to which conservative institutions beyond the White House, not all of them uncritically supportive of Trump, adopted a strikingly similar language and tone in the identity politics they brought to the coronavirus.

Trump's characterisation of COVID-19 was consistent, for example, with positions taken by radical conservative media organisation *The Daily Wire*, the controversial news aggregation website founded in 2015 by political commentator and provocateur Ben Shapiro and filmmaker Jeremy Boreing, which by the summer of 2020 had a larger Facebook readership—measured by the number of engagements per story—than any other conservative news platform in the US, including Fox News and Breitbart. A radical conservative platform rather than an uncritical voice of Trumpism—during his tenure as *The Daily Wire*'s editor-in-chief, Shapiro described himself as 'sometimes Trump', and expressed disappointment in aspects of Trump's leadership (Anon. 2019)—*The Daily Wire* was established with seed-funding from petroleum industry billionaires Farris and Dan Wilks, who would later donate 15 million dollars to the super PAC, Keep the Promise, which backed Republican Ted Cruz in the 2016 presidential election (Schleifer 2019). The Wilks brothers' patronage of radical conservative causes has also included donations to the Tea Party-aligned free market

advocacy group, Empower Texans, ‘best known for using its political arm to threaten [Republican] incumbents it believes aren’t conservative enough with primary challengers’ (Goldenstein 2019).

In the months following the murder of George Floyd, *Daily Wire* reporting of COVID-19 regularly conflated coverage of the pandemic with news and opinion pieces on BLM demonstrations. As discussed in detail, below, the cumulative effect of this conflation was a sustained appeal to a politics of white backlash, utilising COVID-19 as a racialized wedge dividing those Americans characterized as authentic and deserving citizens from protestors, and their supporters, whose words or actions were presented as subversive of the legitimate body politic, a hugely provocative and loaded manoeuvre to make in the heat of an election summer.

Modulated continuities in conservative racial politics during the Trump era

Racially charged appeals to white backlash have been a traditional strategy within movement conservatism in the US—particularly during periods of upswing in civil rights activism, and notably so during election cycles—from the movement’s foundational phase during the early 1960s under the leadership of Barry Goldwater to the populist nativism and insurgent white supremacy groups of the MAGA movement and the alt-Right during the Trump era. Contextualized within this lineage, Trump’s harnessing of COVID-19 to attack BLM demonstrators in the summer of 2020 sounded less like a rogue voice ‘riddled with ambivalence’, as Woodward heard it, ‘set on an uncertain course’, and more like a discourse that was wholly continuous with and aligned to long-established traditions and rhetorical conventions in conservative movement racial politics.

The forms taken by these politics today have shifted and evolved since their inception in the Right's response to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Originally conceived with the aim of wresting control of southern states from the Democrats following Nixon's defeat by Kennedy in the presidential election of 1960, conservative 'Southern Strategy' courted white voters in the South by exploiting their resentment of the CRM and the threat it posed to the segregationist institutions of Jim Crow. Twenty-first century historians have shown how the impact of centralized, top-down Southern Strategy on electoral realignment in the South, and on the rise of the New Right, may have been overplayed by earlier voices (see Lassiter 2007; Kruse 2005). But the modulated articulation of Southern Strategy thinking by significant conservative actors remains a reliable index of the role played by racial polarization in the formative years of the movement. As Goldwater famously observed at a press conference in Atlanta, Georgia in 1961, 'We're not going to get the Negro vote as a bloc in 1964 and 1968, so we ought to go hunting where the ducks are' (Goldwater cited in Mulloy 2020: 83).

Hunting where the ducks were shaped the thinking of key figures in the emerging conservative movement, many of whom were at odds with the contemporary Republican Party establishment. In an influential essay, 'Crossroads for the GOP', William A. Rusher—publisher of *National Review*, the magazine at the intellectual epicentre of the early conservative movement—argued that segregationists should be welcome within the Republican Party (Rusher 1963). Another movement founder, *National Review*'s editor in chief, William F. Buckley Jr, made cultivation of white backlash against the Civil Rights Movement a keystone of his mayoral campaign in New York City in 1965 (Kabaservice 2012: 152-54). During his own campaign for President in 1964, Goldwater voted against the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act, citing federal overreach and the primacy of states' rights, and went to the polls that November on a GOP policy platform endorsing the continuation of

segregation in the South. This weaponizing of racial polarization outlived the end of the movement's foundational phase as an insurgency within the GOP—Goldwater's landslide defeat by Lyndon Johnson in 1964—and matured under Richard Nixon at the turn of the decade. Led by Nixon's 'benign neglect' of federal enforcement of civil rights (Maxwell and Shields 2019), his attempts at rolling back the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and his administration's 'new vocabulary of white ethnicity' (Robin 2018: 200)—turning 'whites into white ethnics burdened with their own histories of oppression and requiring their own liberation movements' (199)—the heterodoxy of early conservative movement racial politics blended seamlessly into mainstream Republican Party policy.

If the forms taken by conservative racial politics became more sophisticated under Nixon, so too did the language in which they were presented. Reflecting on this evolution in a famous interview with historian Alexander Lamis in 1981, Republican strategist Lee Atwater, a senior adviser to presidents Ronald Reagan and George HW Bush, described a turn toward language which switched an overtly racial frame of reference for a set of surrogate contexts that engaged racialized resentments while ostensibly talking about other things. As Atwater put it,

You start out in 1954 by saying, "Nigger, nigger, nigger". By 1968 you can't say "nigger"—that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like forced busing, states' rights and all that stuff. You're getting so abstract now you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a by-product of them is blacks get hurt worse than whites [...] it is getting that abstract, and that coded [...]. You follow me—because obviously sitting around saying, "We want to cut this" is much more abstract than even the busing thing, and a hell of a lot more abstract than "Nigger, nigger". (Lamis 1999: 8)

As Goldwater's appeal to states' rights in *Conscience of a Conservative* (1960) suggests, this 'dog whistle' coding of appeals to white racism was not entirely new, but its prevalence from Nixon onwards shifted the rhetorical ground on which conservative strategies of racial polarization were built. Reagan, famously, launched his southern campaign for president in 1980 with an address in Mississippi endorsing states' rights, while the major controversy of Bush's campaign in 1988 was a series of speeches, and TV ads orchestrated by Atwater, depicting Bush's Democratic opponent Michael Dukakis as dangerously soft on Black crime, a move that Bush artfully amplified by labelling Dukakis a card-carrying member of the ACLU (see Mendelberg 2001).

The polarizing racial politics established by early movement conservatives like Goldwater, Rusher and Buckley, and honed under Nixon, Reagan and Bush, continue to exert a powerful influence within both the conservative movement and mainstream Republicanism today, the movement's sharp rightward turn following the election of Barack Obama—most influentially in the rise of the Tea Party caucus—marking another decisive moment. Tea Party activism, whose influence in grassroots campaigning, often in direct conflict with the GOP establishment, led to significant conservative gains in Congress and state legislatures in the 2010 midterms, often sublimated its racial animus in rhetoric about federal spending on undeserving causes, or in language expressing anxiety about social and demographic change. In their engagement with Tea Party groups, Skocpol and Williamson found activists who strove 'to marginalize overtly racist and other extreme voices in their rallies and meetings' (Skocpol and Williamson 2012: 11). But they also found a predominantly white membership convinced that 'the United States as they have known it is slipping away', for whom 'deservingness' was 'a cultural category, closely tied to certain racially and ethnically tinged assumptions about American society in the early twenty-first century' (74), and whose

determination to ‘take our country back’ formed ‘the most characteristic and persistent theme’ in Tea Party activism (7).

Reminiscent in many ways of the Goldwater insurgency during the early 1960s, the Tea Party catalysed further the radical momentum of the twenty-first century conservative movement, accelerating an ‘increasing migration of ... agendas that originated on the racist far right into mainstream conservatism’ (Neiwert 2017: 60-61), opening the door in turn to the white supremacist influences of the alt-Right that would gather in support of Trump in 2016. Trump’s foundational statements of MAGA identity politics—his promulgation of the ‘birther’ conspiracy alleging that Obama was born in Kenya and thus ineligible to sit as President, and his denunciation of Mexican immigrants as criminals and rapists in the speech where he announced his candidacy—may have horrified the Republican establishment. But the racial and ethnic politics of Trump’s MAGA movement are entirely consistent with main currents in populist US conservatism since Goldwater. The prescience of Trump in 2016, as Joshua Green notes in his dissection of the birther controversy, was that he simply ‘intuited correctly that a racist attack targeting a black president was the surest way to ingratiate himself with grassroots Republican voters’ (Green 2017: 99-100).

This, then, is the historical tradition and contemporary context in which conservative responses to the BLM civil rights demonstrations of June and July 2020, and the co-opting of COVID-19 as a site of racial and ethnic polarization during an election year, might be understood. Conservative harnessing of the coronavirus to attack a major campaign for Black civil rights can be seen within the same lineage that Lee Atwater described in 1981, adding COVID-19 and a public health emergency to busing, states’ rights, taxes and crime, as subjects enabling a tapping of racialized white resentments and a stimulating of racial backlash without the need to talk explicitly or openly about race. During the summer of 2020, responses to COVID-19 in White House briefings and conservative media dramatically

expanded the rhetorical and representational spheres in which racialized conflict played out, exemplifying both the diffuse and pervasive nature of white backlash politics in contemporary conservative discourse and the modulated continuity of that discourse with patterns established during the 1950s and 1960s.

Racializing COVID-19 in *Daily Wire* coverage of Black Lives Matter

During 2019 and 2020, news aggregation website *The Daily Wire* established a huge readership among American conservatives by promoting its stories on a co-ordinated network of Facebook pages owned by the Christian conservative group Mad World News, a number of which had millions of followers having ‘built their readership by framing stories to exploit racial and religious bigotry’ (Baragona 2020). According to analytics service NewsWhip, by May 2020, the month in which George Floyd was killed, NewsWhip recorded 60,616,745 Facebook ‘engagements’ with *Daily Wire* stories—a combination of likes, shares and comments—giving the organisation a larger Facebook distribution per article published, 53,125 engagements per article, than any other major publisher (second placed CNN registered just 18,129 per article) (Nicholson 2020).

Between 26 May, the day after Floyd was murdered, and the end of July, *The Daily Wire* published more than 50 articles conflating coverage of COVID-19 with news and comment about BLM demonstrations, attacking their legitimacy partly by depicting them as violent riots, despite findings that the overwhelming majority of BLM events were peaceful and orderly. Between 26 May and the end of June, 7,305 anti-racism demonstrations took place across all 50 states in the US, with data collated from these events by *The Washington Post* showing that ‘The overall levels of violence and property destruction were low, and

most of the violence that did take place was, in fact, directed against the BLM protesters. ... 96.3 per cent of events involved no property damage or police injuries, and in 97.7 per cent of events no injuries were reported among participants, bystanders or police' (Chenoweth and Pressman 2020).

A second approach, apparently aimed at undermining the proportionality of BLM protests by evading the broader contexts of racial injustice and inequality that Floyd's killing laid bare, seemed implicit in the language used to describe his death. In this language there was no suspected murder, or murderer, no intimations of race prejudice or hate, and no broader historical traditions of unequal civil rights or police violence: there was simply, iteratively, 'a black man who died in police custody' (Pearce 2020a, 2020c), 'a black man who died while in the custody of Minneapolis police' (Curl 2020d; Zanotti 2020d), a Black man 'who perished while in police custody' (Zanotti 2020c, 2020f), or a Black man who experienced a 'police-involved death' (Schow 2020a, 2020c).

The Daily Wire's most significant strategy for attacking the civil rights uprising of summer 2020 was the assertion of an equivalence between anti-racism demonstrations and anti-lockdown protests; an equivalence which, once asserted, enabled several months of reportage accusing civil rights campaigners and their supporters of hypocrisy and ideologically motivated double-standards, for sanctioning one form of public assembly but condemning another. Using public health as its pretext, this assertion of an equivalence between anti-lockdown and anti-racism protests reduced debate about the legitimacy of a historic, nationwide, civil rights uprising to a tussle over 'first amendment rights' (Curl 2020b)—a reduction given short shrift by political historian Gary Younge, who distilled the magnitude and historical significance of the moment by echoing Ralph Ellison's famous observation, in 1949, that the American Civil War had never really ended. Military defeat for the Confederacy may have led to the abolition of slavery, Younge wrote, but first

Reconstruction, then Jim Crow, then the rolling back of the landmark legislative achievements of the 1960s, including the Supreme Court's gutting of the Voting Rights Act in 2013, meant that the Civil War never came close to delivering racial equality, even in the longer term. Political polarization in the contemporary US, Younge noted, is often described as the portent of a new civil war, but 'viewed through the lens of this summer's Black Lives Matter rebellions, this moment is better understood as the death throes of the first civil war than the birth of a second', a working through of 'the unfinished business of securing the fruits of freedom of full citizenship for all Americans' (Younge 2020).

Conservative attributions of equivalence between anti-lockdown protests and civil rights demonstrations were also contested on public health grounds by medical professionals, including epidemiologists Julia Marcus (Harvard Medical School) and Gregg Gonsalves (Yale School of Public Health) whose article in *The Atlantic* on June 11 laid out a clear case for why 'these two kinds of protests are not equivalent from a public-health perspective' (Marcus and Gonsalves 2020). Whereas anti-lockdown demonstrations 'were explicitly at odds with public health, and experts had a duty to oppose them', the anti-racism protests were a grassroots uprising against systemic racism, the primary driver of 'a pervasive and long-standing public-health crisis that leads to more than 80,000 excess deaths among black Americans every year'. As Marcus and Gonsalves explained, condemning anti-lockdown protests but supporting public demonstrations against racism was not a hypocritical or ideological choice, it was simply a reflection of 'what public-health experts have always tried to do: maximize the health of the population across all aspects of life', an aim that was 'about more than simply remaining free of coronavirus infection'. (Marcus and Gonsalves were writing in support of the open letter signed by 1,288 public health professionals, infectious disease professionals, and community stakeholders, widely published across US media the previous week. The letter called for 'an anti-racist public health response to demonstrations

against systemic injustice occurring during the COVID-19 pandemic’, identifying BLM protests as ‘vital to the national public health and to the threatened health specifically of black people in the United States’ [the full letter is given in Simon 2020]).

Daily Wire coverage of COVID-19 asserting a false equivalence between these different protests took two broad forms, alternately denouncing support for one form of public assembly but not another, or measuring attitudes to specific anti-racism events against stances taken on particular localized lockdown prohibitions. In late May and early June a preponderance of the coverage focused on broad principles, noting ‘the different standards that were set during the coronavirus pandemic versus the standards that the media and some state and local-level officials have accepted during the protests that have morphed into riots across the nation over the past couple of weeks’ (Anon. 2020c). A variation on this approach that became established as a core theme in *Daily Wire* reports throughout the summer specifically targeted ““public health experts”” (their expertise deliberately ironized by the use of “scare quotes”) who ‘drew distinctions between the anti-racism and anti-lockdown protests, approving of the former and disapproving of the latter’ (Zanotti 2020b).

By mid-June, *Daily Wire* reportage conflating coverage of COVID-19 and BLM demonstrations was primarily focused on the double standards it alleged were displayed in attitudes to specific kinds of public event, and community or family gatherings. Articles compared the closing of children’s playgrounds with ‘the massive protests and riots over George Floyd’ (Pearce 2020b) and with New York Governor Andrew Cuomo’s decision allowing ‘thousands to traipse through the city during protests’ (Curl 2020c). The Democratic Mayor of NYC, another story noted, locked children out of playgrounds ‘but let the protestors and rioters run loose in the street’, while health care workers who had ‘shamed’ anti-lockdown demonstrations in April now ‘cheered on the May and June protestors’ (Erickson 2020). Similar articles asserted the hypocrisy of support for civil rights demonstrations in

light of the closure of beaches, piers and bike paths (Barrett 2020), restaurants and bars (Barrett 2020; Pearce 2020a; Zanotti 2020a), ‘summer sleepaway camps’ (Zanotti 2020a), and fireworks displays (Quintanar 2020). Others attacked Democrats who ‘blame family gatherings for spreading the virus’ (Schow 2020b), and Cuomo’s condemnation of a concert audience ‘for “egregious social distancing violations” while he maintained silence over a social justice march involving hundreds the very next day in Manhattan’ (Berrien 2020a).

Daily Wire writers reserved particular scorn for liberals who ‘watched rioters and looters burn and pillage through America’, cheering ‘screaming crowds’, but who remained silent about restrictions on ‘worshipping in your church’ (Berrien 2020b). In stark contrast with the burning, pillaging and screaming attributed to ‘rioters and looters’, for many devout Americans losing ‘The grace and peace of Sunday’, one writer observed, had been ‘the most painful consequence of the coronavirus lockdowns’. Whereas regular churchgoers ‘were willing to observe lockdowns as a public health necessity’, BLM protestors ‘were praised and glorified on a global scale’. Such hypocrisy, the article suggested, signalled a demotion of ‘religious believers of all colors and creeds ... to second-class citizens in a dizzying display of “affirmative discrimination”’, a ‘blatant double standard that strongly suggests that in today’s America, protests are the most sacred activity, far more sacred than Americans gathering to worship God’ (Graham 2020).

Another theme familiar to *Daily Wire* readers by the middle of June, as Trump prepared to re-launch his campaign for re-election, was ‘the media’s double standard in how it has covered left-wing protests in recent weeks versus how it has covered President Donald Trump’s upcoming rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma’ (Anon. 2020b). Articles attacked hypocritical coverage of the rally by the news networks CNN (Camp 2020a) and ABC (‘Thousands of maskless protesters running rampant through the streets? No problem. A political rally for President Trump? Out of the question!’ (Curl 2020a)), while another cited Rush Limbaugh’s

observation that ‘It’s okay for BLM, Black Trans Lives Matter, Occupy Wall Street, whatever ... to congregate and sardine themselves everywhere. That’s so cool. That’s fine. ... Let Trump do a rally and, somehow, he’s going to be responsible for murder!’ (Pearce 2020c).

A particularly striking trend in *Daily Wire* denunciations of demonstrators’ hypocrisy was the use of bait-and-switch headlines, under which stories ostensibly addressing a range of unrelated COVID-19 contexts abruptly morphed into attacks on civil rights protestors. One article, headed ‘U.K. Cracks Down, Declares Sex With Individuals From Outside Your Household “Illegal” Amid Coronavirus Pandemic’, began

Even as American cities are struggling with whether to release coronavirus-related restrictions altogether, now that most major cities have seen thousand-individual protest that, in most cases, flouted social distancing recommendations and defied shelter-in-place orders, the United Kingdom is continuing to crack down on interpersonal contact, hoping to stop the spread of COVID-19 in its tracks. (Zanotti 2020e)

Another, headed ‘Is Mandating Face Masks An Appropriate Measure?’, led by comparing guidance on face masks with the historical evolution of legislation on seatbelts in cars, but pivoted halfway through to attack ‘the large public protests and riots’. For months, the article said, ‘mainstream media maintained that to leave the house without a mask was tantamount to “killing grandma”’, and ‘when anti-lockdown protests occurred in several states, the media coverage was largely negative’.

That mindset rapidly changed when hundreds of thousands of people flooded the streets in protest over the death of George Floyd. [...] Wearing a mask became less a necessity and more a personal choice, so long as it was under the auspices of a political movement sanctioned by progressives. The hypocrisy was astonishing to many observers. Not only had the media changed its tune in neck-snappingly quick fashion, but progressive politicians were also using their platform to bend the narrative in the same way (Camp 2020b).

Bait-and-switch headlining also featured in stories pairing headers implying that BLM demonstrations were transmission hotspots with text whose substantial content actually conceded that the opposite might be true. One example, published with the headline ‘Atlanta Mayor Who Joined Protests Tests Positive For Coronavirus’, quoted Erika Lautenbach, Director of Whatcom County Health Department in Washington State, saying ‘We did have a rally in Bellingham, which is our county seat, and there was also a protest, and we have not been able to connect a single case to that rally or to the protest, and what we’re finding is in large part that’s due to the use of masks. ... Almost everyone at the rally was wearing a mask, and it’s really a testament to how effective masks are in preventing the spread of this disease’ (Schow 2020a).

Other articles reversed the switch, attaching headers playing down concerns that the protests might be spreader-events to content playing them up. One example, discussing a study analysing data from 315 American cities, 281 of which had seen protests, ran with the headline ‘New Study Claims Black Lives Matter Protests Actually SLOWED The Spread of Coronavirus’. The text, however, referred to ‘state officials [who] just don’t know why cases of the virus are rising, even though the uptick is coming just a few short weeks after the

massive protests, many of which drew thousands of people who did not abide by social distancing requirements’. Referring to the study’s co-author, the article noted that

his paper doesn’t try to figure out whether the protests spread the virus among the people at the protest. Instead, he said the research took the bigger-picture view: What did the protests mean for overall transmission of the virus within the entire community? (Curl 2020b)

The story was accompanied by a photograph showing a biracial crowd of young demonstrators, none of them wearing masks, marching directly at the camera, and therefore directly, threateningly, at the viewer. ‘While many state and local governments across the country are now demanding that all Americans wear masks whenever they go out in public’, the writer added, ‘protesters and rioters have been given a pass by officials, who even applaud them for exercising their First Amendment rights’.

Illegitimate citizenship and un-American activism. Racial justice is not ‘our culture’

Claims that the legitimacy, or otherwise, of a historic new phase in the Long Civil Rights Movement should be measured against decisions to close bike paths, beaches and fireworks displays, become easier to make if their proponents feel able to dismiss, a priori, any suggestion that the prevailing social order may actually need transforming—in the event that it is exclusionary, for example, or prejudicial, or unjust, or systemically racist. Dismissal of precisely this suggestion was the primary rhetorical effect of the allegation of hypocrisy levelled against anti-racism campaigners by conservatives during the summer of 2020, the

immediate impact of the charge being a simple refusal to entertain the claim or engage the debate, redirecting attention away from the alleged inequity of existing institutions and cultures, and back upon the behaviours and values of those bringing the grievance.

Rhetorically, that is, the ‘whataboutery’ charge of hypocrisy deflects or dismisses the claims as originally framed—about police violence, systemic racism, unequal civil rights—shutting down, in effect, the agency of those who present their case for civic discussion, ignoring their grievance, marginalising their presence as deserving complainants under the terms of the democratic social contract and as legitimate actors within the national civitas as such.

Implied as a primary rhetorical effect of the allegation of hypocrisy, such judgements about ‘deservingness’—to recall Skocpol and Williamson’s term for racially charged distinctions between authentic and inauthentic citizenship in Tea Party conservatism during the 2010s—also figured more overtly, at times, in *Daily Wire* reporting of COVID-19, where commentary on un/deserving citizenship emerged as another regular refrain. One such story observed that ‘radicals will continue their insatiable campaign of destruction, and innocent citizens will be left in the rubble to rebuild’ (Knowles 2020). A similar contrast was made in an article attacking the double standards applied to ‘regular churchgoers’ unjustly ‘demoted to second-class citizens’ by the closure of places of worship, while ‘dangerously disobedient and unscientific citizens among the “progressives”’ ran loose in the streets (Graham 2020). One of several articles attacking Bill de Blasio’s closure of children’s playgrounds posed his support for BLM protestors against his decision to ‘come down hard on average citizens’, whose refusal to be cowed was recorded in a headline celebrating their authentic, public-spirited civic virtue, ‘NYC Workers Welded Gates Shut At Children’s Park. Residents Rose Up, Took Back Playground’ (Curl 2020c).

Perhaps the most striking example was a story about Republican Governor Kristi Noem’s refusal to implement coronavirus stay-at-home orders in South Dakota, and the

response of ‘grateful citizens’ who thanked her with a public parade featuring ‘firetrucks blaring emergency sirens, a pickup hauling a stock trailer, a concrete truck, and even construction equipment’ (Berrien 2020c). Here, the distinction between authentic and deserving citizenship on one hand, and reckless subversion by undeserving campaigners for Black civil rights on the other, was clear and explicit. Where ‘citizens’ staged anti-lockdown parades, anti-racism sympathizers, Noem said, were conducting ‘an organized, coordinated campaign to remove and eliminate all references to our nation’s founding and many other points in our history’. The appeal to a politics of white backlash in the article about Kristi Noem was noteworthy not only for the language of un/deserving citizenship in which it was couched, but also because any attempt to sublimate the story’s underlying racial animus seemed barely worth the effort. Elaborating the implication that campaigners for Black civil rights had denied themselves a legitimate place in the national *civitas* into an openly McCarthyite register—where civil rights protests became a motivated attack on ‘our nation’s founding’ and ‘history’—Noem’s words explicitly judged the protestors to be un- or anti-American.

A similar register informed an apocalyptic *Daily Wire* opinion piece written by evangelical Christian conservative, David Limbaugh, ‘The Silent Majority Can Be Silent No More’ (Limbaugh 2020), a resonant and racially charged title whose best known antecedent in conservative movement discourse remains Nixon’s slogan appealing to the ‘silent majority’—for Nixon, those Americans not engaged in civil rights activism or protesting the Vietnam War— during his campaign for President in 1968, but whose genealogy, as Rick Perlstein notes, extends further back to a speech by Barry Goldwater in January 1961. In this speech, often referred to as Goldwater’s ‘Forgotten American’ address,

Goldwater argued that in a political scene jammed with minority and pressure groups, the only population left unorganized were those Americans “who quietly go about the business of paying and praying, working and saving”. The GOP, he said, must become the party of these “silent Americans”. (Perlstein 2009: 138)

Very little ground was ceded to minorities and pressure groups in Limbaugh’s ‘The Silent Majority’. In his early paragraphs Limbaugh attacked Trump’s critics for weaponizing COVID-19 against him, for refusing to work with Trump to defeat the virus, for misrepresenting Trump’s reliance on medical experts, for accusing Trump of responding too slowly when they would have opposed international travel bans, and for shutting down the economy in Democratic states then blaming economic downturns on him. Limbaugh’s main aim, though, was to condemn civil rights protestors and rally conservatives against the activism of ‘the left’. Conservatives must ‘wake up’, he demanded, ‘and rededicate ourselves to preventing the destruction of America’, because ‘the country is under siege’, not just from COVID-19 and the closure of the economy but also from ‘the riots’ perpetrated by an ‘organized mob’, a ‘lawless mob’, ‘an unquenchable mob hellbent on eradicating all traditions, systems and laws’; a mob who have ‘seized’ on the killing of George Floyd ‘to condemn the nation’, and who have raised ‘the insanity to French Revolution-crazy levels’. Such behaviour, Limbaugh claimed, was to be expected from ‘leftists’—by which he also meant Democrats, who had ‘fanned the flames’—because it is simply in their nature as anti-Americans. Too many conservatives, Limbaugh continued, ‘mistakenly believe that this Democratic frenzy and leftist unrest is all based primarily on their contempt for President Donald Trump’. They assume that Trump ‘has made them crazy, and they’ll do anything to get rid of him. Then everything will return to normal’. The error conservatives were making, Limbaugh suggested, was in underestimating the left’s engrained propensity for activism

itself. Trump had made the left ‘crazier, more desperate and unreasonable ... but he didn’t make them leftists, and leftists don’t need any prompting to unleash their hell on America. It stands for everything they hate’.

Rhetorically, then, it was not solely the politics of anti-racist ‘leftists’ that make them crazily anti-American. For Limbaugh it was their commitment to *activism* as such. The left, he noted,

has been at war with America as founded for decades, and it has made great progress in transforming our culture and institutions. Leftists are activism-oriented and relentless. They pursue their goals 24/7, exhausting their less activist and less calculating opponents, and advance their agenda by sheer attrition.

Activism, as described here, is conceived in stark contrast to the political agency of conservatives, whose opposition to the BLM demonstrations sought to advance no ‘agenda’, and whose defence of ‘America as founded’ against those who would destroy ‘our culture’ is pitched as passive, or at worst as reflexive. Here, only the left are guilty of activism— notwithstanding Limbaugh’s immediate and contradictory insistence that it is vital for conservatives to ‘counter them’, to ‘Stay in the fight’, to ‘wake up and rededicate ourselves to preventing the destruction of America’, and to follow the example of Trump who is ‘fighting them hammer and tongs’. Where good conservative citizens simply stand reflexively upon American foundations, in this logic campaigners for racial equality are positioned beyond the pale of legitimate citizenship (‘our culture’) precisely because their activism is *transformative*, seeking as it does to remake, artificially, a virtuous America as founded, a rational and organic status quo, a prevailing natural order of things that should simply be left to be.

This is the key point that Limbaugh makes, partly because of the lacunae audibly collapsing his assertion that ‘our culture’ is natural and reflexive while that of campaigners for racial equality is artificial and ideological. As Corey Robin has shown in *The Reactionary Mind*, conservative movements since the French Revolution can be characterized by an intensely ‘idea-driven praxis’ (Robin 2018: 18), whose defence, and reinventions, of the ancien régime have often been entirely radical in their commitment to warding off a ‘fundamental change in power’ (5). Stemming change in the established distribution of power, Robin argues, and containing or suppressing the progressive forces that might deliver it, is what gives conservatism its intellectual and political purpose and direction. Conservatism, as Robin has it, and as the lacunae in Limbaugh’s language make clear, ‘is not reflex. It begins from a position of principle—that some are fit, and thus ought, to rule others—and then recalibrates that principle in light of a democratic challenge from below’ (18).

A second reason, then, why Limbaugh’s key point in ‘The Silent Majority’ is his distinction between the virtuous-because-reflexive agency of conservatives and the un-American activism of the ‘mob’, is that it throws into relief a set of assumptions about hierarchy and power embedded in conservative understanding of what constitutes artificial transformation on one hand, and the natural order of things on the other. Historically, Robin writes,

the conservative has favored liberty for the higher orders and constraint for the lower orders. What the conservative sees and dislikes in equality, in other words, is not a threat to freedom but its extension. For in that extension, he sees a loss of his own freedom. “We are all agreed as to our own liberty”, declared Samuel Johnson.

“But we are not agreed as to the liberty of others: for in proportion as we take, others

must lose. I believe we hardly wish that the mob should have liberty to govern us”.

Such was the threat Edmund Burke saw in the French Revolution: not merely an expropriation of property or explosion of violence but an inversion of the obligations of deference and command. “The levellers”, he claimed, “only change and pervert the natural order of things”. (8)

Inversion of those ‘natural’ obligations of deference and command was also the threat, Robin observes, posed by the progressive insurgencies that gave rise to movement conservatism in the United States during the middle of the twentieth century—in the New Deal, the Cold War, and the liberation movements of the 1950s and 1960s. And such is the threat, all over again, audibly present in Limbaugh’s ‘lawless mob’ of demonstrators, subverting the natural order of things with their ‘French Revolution-crazy levels’ of un-American activism, as they protest against police violence, racial inequality and the murder of George Floyd.

Limbaugh’s counterposing of ‘our culture’ against the hateful artifice of the mob unlocks again the very traditional conservative politics of racial backlash informing *Daily Wire* coverage of COVID-19, while also pointing toward a redirection and intensifying of that tradition. Conservative claims that what others may construe as an opposition to racial justice is simply a principled and patriotic defence of America as founded can be tracked back to the movement’s earliest days: Goldwater’s appeal to states’ rights for the segregated South in *Conscience of a Conservative*, after all, helped establish the tradition of the racialized dog-whistle as early as 1960. While Limbaugh’s use of COVID-19 to attack a campaign for Black civil rights is true to that lineage, it also, simultaneously, turns the dog-whistle tradition inside out. Where Goldwater denounced a notional abuse of the Constitution in order to appeal to segregationists, Limbaugh denounces a civil rights campaign in order to appeal to America as founded. It is a subtle but revealing inversion, and one that stretches

The Daily Wire's harnessing of COVID-19 as functional cover for a politics of race hate close to breaking point.

Again, such rhetorical distention is nothing if not symptomatic, and historically specific. In the post-Tea Party era of the Freedom Caucus, the MAGA movement and the alt-Right, conservative statements about preserving national heritage, institutions, values and culture, often openly disclose the politics of racial polarization they once were designed to obfuscate or encode. MAGA Republicans carry confederate flags and wear 'Camp Auschwitz' T-shirts while storming Congress to protect the Constitution. Armed crowds rally in defence of statues and monuments dedicated to men who fought a civil war to preserve slavery. A defeated presidential candidate declares the outcome of the election unconstitutional, citing majority Black cities that voted against him (Philadelphia, Detroit, Atlanta, Milwaukee) as 'the most corrupt political places anywhere in our country – easily' (Anon. 2020a). And *The Daily Wire* covers COVID-19 via Kristi's Noem's description of BLM as a 'coordinated campaign to remove and eliminate all references to our nation's founding and many other points in our history', and via David Limbaugh's denunciation of 'an unquenchable mob hellbent on eradicating all traditions, systems and laws'.

At the turn of this century another prominent conservative, previously an elected Republican representative in the Louisiana state legislature, wrote very similar words when suggesting

We are fighting for the preservation of our heritage, freedom and way of life in the United States and much of the Western World. Ultimately, we are working to secure the most important civil right of all, the right to preserve our kind of life. (ADL 2012).

That writer was David Duke, former Grand Wizard of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. As the parallels between Duke's words and *Daily Wire* treatments of COVID-19 might suggest, by the summer of 2020 conservative movement approaches to race, to reverse Lee Atwater's famous dictum, at times seemed a long way, rhetorically, from 'busing, states' rights and all that stuff', and much closer, once again, to the politics of open polarization and exclusion, and the barely concealed race hatred, that the dog whistle tradition once aimed to sublimate or camouflage.

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