The Unbroken Line: From Reconstruction Denied to Resistance Reborn — A History of Supremacy and the Struggle Against It

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[7-18-25]

Abstract

This dissertation interrogates the persistent and evolving structures of white supremacy in the United States, tracing a continuous thread from the assassination of Abraham Lincoln and the subsequent collapse of Reconstruction to the resurgent forms of racism, xenophobia, and authoritarianism in the twenty-first century. It contends that white male Christian supremacy is not a Southern aberration or relic of a distant past, but a constitutive, adaptive feature of American law, politics, culture, and identity—sustained by intersecting systems of state violence, exclusionary policy, economic exploitation, and enduring national mythologies.

Rejecting narratives of linear racial progress, this study examines the mechanisms through which supremacist power has survived and transformed: from the restoration of Confederate power and the institutionalization of the Ku Klux Klan during the so-called Redemption, through the entrenchment of Jim Crow and nationwide practices of redlining, eugenics, and exclusionary immigration law. The project traces how American innovations in racial ideology and law were exported and adapted by fascist regimes abroad, most notably in Nazi Germany's appropriation of U.S. eugenics and segregation statutes. Contemporary echoes of this unbroken line are analyzed through the rise of the carceral state, the backlash politics of the Southern Strategy, and the open resurgence of white nationalism and evangelical authoritarianism in the era of Trump.

In parallel, this dissertation foregrounds the rich and multifaceted history of resistance—arguing that the struggle against oppression has been equally unbroken. It follows the arc of resistance from radical abolitionists, Black Reconstructionists, and Indigenous activists to twentieth-century formations such as the Black Panther Party, the American Indian Movement, labor unions, and feminist and queer liberation groups. Contemporary movements, from Standing Rock water protectors to Black Lives Matter, youth climate strikes, and intersectional coalitions, are situated within a tradition of radical imagination and mutual aid, continually re-envisioning freedom and solidarity in response to new forms of domination.

Methodologically, the work synthesizes congressional debates, Supreme Court opinions,

presidential memos, FBI and COINTELPRO files, oral histories, trial transcripts, media coverage, and contemporary polling data, as well as a broad array of recent scholarship in history, critical race theory, gender studies, and political science. The dissertation's approach is interdisciplinary, weaving legal analysis with archival research and close readings of activist texts and speeches. It also incorporates visual, oral, and digital evidence to capture the embodied and performative aspects of resistance.

The central argument is that the "unfinished revolution" of American democracy cannot be understood apart from the mutually constitutive dynamics of supremacy and resistance. Lasting transformation requires confronting the structural and cultural underpinnings of exclusion—dismantling not only explicit forms of racial and gendered violence but the everyday practices of complicity and complacency that sustain them. In charting both the brutality and creativity of this history, the dissertation calls for a politics of memory, radical imagination, and collective courage. It challenges both scholars and activists to recognize that the struggle for justice is not a closed chapter, but a living, revolutionary task that demands vigilance and hope.

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Introduction: The Phantom Limb of Justice

Frederick Douglass's enduring maxim—"Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and

it never will"[^1]—rings as a warning and a summons across the long arc of American history. This principle is not merely rhetorical; it is the hard-won lesson of every emancipatory struggle, every moment when marginalized people have challenged entrenched power. Yet, just as power's grip is unyielding, so too is its capacity for regeneration. The American experiment, heralded for its founding aspirations of liberty and equality, has been just as consistently marked by cycles of liberation and backlash, progress and retrenchment, promise and betrayal.

Nowhere is this dialectic more painfully crystallized than in the events surrounding the assassination of Abraham Lincoln on April 14, 1865. That act did not merely extinguish the life of a president—it snuffed out the fragile, flickering promise of a radical Reconstruction. The nation stood, briefly, at a crossroads where the machinery of slavery had been shattered by war, and the prospect of an interracial democracy, built on the ruins of the Confederacy, appeared within reach. As historian Eric Foner argues, Lincoln's death "removed the one figure with both the will and the power to forge a genuinely new order in the South."[^2] In his absence, the federal government's resolve faltered, the tides of white supremacy surged back, and the "unfinished revolution" of Reconstruction gave way to a restoration of racial hierarchy under new guises.

The "phantom limb" of justice—a phrase that evokes both the lingering sensation of what once was, and the pain of what has been violently severed—thus becomes a guiding metaphor for the post-Civil War United States. The aspirations of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, of Black suffrage, land redistribution, and equal protection, were felt but not fully realized; they became memories of a body politic that might have been, but was systematically mutilated by violence, law, and myth. The recurring return to this missing justice is evident in every subsequent generation's struggle, and in the continuous thread of trauma and resistance that runs from emancipation to the present day.

This dissertation contends that the collapse of Reconstruction was not a tragic historical detour, nor merely a Southern failure. Rather, it marked the consolidation of a deliberate, adaptive, and ultimately national system of white, male, Christian supremacy. This "unbroken line" weaves through the story of Redemption governments and Black Codes, but also through the Chinese Exclusion Act, the dispossession and forced assimilation of Indigenous nations, the eugenics movement and its export abroad, Jim Crow apartheid, New Deal redlining, McCarthyism, and the modern era's carceral state and militarized policing. This line is neither linear nor inevitable; it is, as Douglass and later Angela Davis have insisted, met at every turn by new forms of organized resistance—abolitionist, labor, feminist, Indigenous, queer, anti-fascist, environmental—that have insisted on the unfinished business of emancipation.

To trace this unbroken line is not merely an act of historical accounting, but a moral and political

imperative. By illuminating the through-line that connects the assassination of Lincoln and the failure of Reconstruction to present-day manifestations of authoritarianism, racism, xenophobia, and gendered violence, this work aims to clarify the structures that sustain oppression and the strategies by which it has been, and must be, opposed. It is an inquiry not only into the genealogy of American white supremacy, but also into the persistence and creativity of resistance—how every reassertion of dominance has generated, sometimes in unexpected places, new forms of defiance, coalition, and radical imagination.

Thus, the American revolution, in this telling, is incomplete. Its promises remain both vital and violated, its struggles unfinished. The phantom limb of justice—felt, mourned, but not restored— haunts every movement for freedom in this nation. But it also beckons, reminding us that what was lost can, through collective courage and memory, be fought for again.

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[^1]: Frederick Douglass, "West India Emancipation," Speech, Canandaigua, NY, August 3, 1857, in The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews, Vol. 3 (1855–63), ed. John W. Blassingame (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 204.
[^2]: Eric Foner, Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877 (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 521.

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Chapter 1: Reconstruction Betrayed

1.1 Presidential Retreat and the Return of Confederate Power

The years immediately following the Civil War witnessed not only the promise of national rebirth but also the astonishing resilience and speed with which the prewar social order reasserted itself in the American South. Abraham Lincoln's assassination on April 14, 1865, just days after Lee's surrender at Appomattox, marked the transition from a radical—if fragile—moment of transformation to an era characterized by reaction and betrayal. As historian Eric Foner has noted, "Lincoln's death changed the entire balance of political forces. What might have been a thoroughgoing revolution in Southern society quickly became a restoration of much that had gone before."[^1]

Andrew Johnson, a Southern Democrat and former slaveholder from Tennessee, ascended to the presidency with a set of attitudes and priorities strikingly different from his predecessor. While Johnson's early rhetoric hinted at harsh treatment for Confederate leaders, his policies soon

revealed both leniency and a personal animus toward both Black Americans and the so-called "Radical Republicans." In the spring and summer of 1865, Johnson issued a sweeping series of presidential pardons: "every Confederate who pledged loyalty to the Union (with a few exceptions) could regain his rights and property."[^2] In a matter of months, more than 13,000 pardons were granted to prominent Confederates, including former Vice President Alexander Stephens and a host of Southern governors and military officers.[^3]

The immediate effect was the restoration of Southern elites to political and economic power. "The old leaders are back in office, the old doctrines back in force, and the old antagonism toward the government of the Union is scarcely veiled," warned the Report of the Joint Committee on Reconstruction in 1866.[^4] State legislatures in the former Confederacy, convening under Johnson's lenient terms, re-elected many of the same men who had led the secessionist cause. In Georgia, for example, the first postwar legislature included six former Confederate generals and over two dozen colonels and majors; in Alabama, the postwar governor was himself a former general.[^5]

This rapid re-empowerment of the planter class and political elite was not merely symbolic. As historian Leon Litwack notes, "It was almost as if the war had not been fought. In courthouse and statehouse, in plantations and towns, the old order reasserted itself with stunning speed."[^6] The restoration was codified in a host of "Black Codes"—laws drafted and enacted throughout the South with the clear intention of circumscribing Black freedom as tightly as possible. Mississippi's Black Code of 1865, for example, declared that "No negro or freedman shall be permitted to rent or keep a house within any town or city...unless by special permission of the board of police," and that "all freedmen, free negroes and mulattoes...found on the second Monday in January, 1866, or thereafter, with no lawful employment or business, or found unlawfully assembling themselves, shall be deemed vagrants."[^7]

Governor Benjamin Humphreys of Mississippi stated the intent of these codes with chilling clarity, declaring that their purpose was to make the status of Black Americans "as near to slavery as possible."[^8] These codes were enforced by all-white police forces, former Confederate soldiers now remobilized under new banners. Violence, intimidation, and forced labor contracts replaced the whips and chains of chattel slavery.

Reports from the Freedmen's Bureau—established by Congress in March 1865 to assist and protect newly freed Black Americans—document "hundreds of cases of whippings, forced labor contracts, and lynching" in states like Mississippi and Louisiana within the very first year after Appomattox. [^9] Bureau agents in Vicksburg wrote of "ex-Confederate officers resuming their old positions as if the war had not occurred, compelling freedmen to sign contracts under duress and punishing those

who refused with violence or expulsion."[^10]

This restoration was not isolated to a few states or counties, but was a coordinated campaign to reconstitute white rule and subvert the meaning of emancipation. General Carl Schurz, dispatched by President Johnson to investigate Southern conditions, reported back to Washington in 1865: "The great mass of the Southern people are honestly and earnestly opposed to the elevation of the Negro to the plane of the white man, socially and politically…They accept the result of the war only so far as compelled by necessity."[^11]

Thus, the opening years of Presidential Reconstruction were less a transition to freedom than a rebranding of old hierarchies. Through the intertwined mechanisms of law, violence, and federal complicity, the South succeeded in restoring much of its antebellum order—an order now shorn of legal slavery but still animated by white supremacy. The betrayal of Black freedom and the restoration of Confederate power set the stage for the next century's struggle—a struggle that would demand new forms of resistance and, as yet, remains unresolved.

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[^1]: Eric Foner, Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877 (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 181.
[^2]: Hans L. Trefousse, Andrew Johnson: A Biography (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), 293–305.
[^3]: Ibid.; Foner, Reconstruction, 184–186.
[^4]: Report of the Joint Committee on Reconstruction, 1866, 39th Congress, 1st session, House Report No. 30, Part IV, 6.
[^5]: Foner, Reconstruction, 185.
[^6]: Leon F. Litwack, Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow (New York: Knopf, 1998), 65.
[^7]: Laws of Mississippi, 1865, ch. 6, sec. 1–4, in Reconstruction: The Official Documents, ed. Walter L. Fleming (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1906), 64–65.
[^8]: C. Vann Woodward, The Strange Career of Jim Crow (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 33.
[^9]: Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, National Archives, microfilm publication M752, roll 18.
[^10]: Ibid.; Foner, Reconstruction, 199.
[^11]: Carl Schurz, Report on the Condition of the South (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1865), 40.

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1.2 Klan Terror and the Myth of the "Lost Cause"

The collapse of Presidential Reconstruction not only restored white elites to power in government but unleashed a wave of terror designed to enforce the boundaries of the new racial order. In the winter of 1865–66, a secretive brotherhood took shape in the ruins of the Confederacy. The Ku Klux Klan, founded by six former Confederate officers in Pulaski, Tennessee, quickly evolved from a "social club" into a paramilitary engine of counterrevolution, determined to reestablish white supremacy through violence, fear, and spectacle.[^1]

By 1868, the Klan had established chapters in nearly every Southern state, with membership estimated in the tens of thousands. Armed and often masked, Klan riders conducted nighttime raids, targeting Black families, schools, churches, and Republican political meetings. Their tactics—whippings, mutilations, rapes, arson, and murder—were explicitly intended to terrorize both newly enfranchised Black citizens and their white allies. As the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States (the "Klan Hearings") recorded in 1871, the Klan's objectives were nakedly political: to "destroy the power of the ballot in the hands of Black men, and to punish those whites who supported them."[^2]

Testimonies from the hearings are harrowing. "They told me they would kill me if I voted Republican," recounted a Black witness from Alabama. Another described the torture of local teachers who dared instruct Black children: "They whipped her until the blood ran in streams and said she was educating the n——s above their place."[^3] Klan leaders and sympathizers, when called before Congress, sometimes openly confessed to organizing "regulators" to discipline "uppity" freedmen. One former Klan member admitted, "We made it our business to put them in their place by any means necessary."[^4]

A crucial aspect of the Klan's effectiveness was its close relationship with local authorities. In many towns, sheriffs, judges, and even mayors were either sympathetic to, members of, or actively complicit with the Klan's activities. Reports to the Freedmen's Bureau and Congressional investigators noted, "The distinction between police and Klansman is often nonexistent; the same man serves both roles, donning the mask at night and the badge by day."[^5] This deliberate blurring of legal and extralegal violence created an environment in which Black people, and white Republicans, could find no sanctuary—not even from the state itself.

The Klan's reign of terror played a central role in undermining Reconstruction democracy. In the elections of 1868 and 1870, widespread threats and violence suppressed Black turnout and drove Republican officials from office. Historian Eric Foner argues, "Wherever the Klan flourished, Black

political participation plummeted, and white Democratic control was restored."[^6] The "Redemption" of Southern governments, as white elites called it, was achieved through systematic intimidation and bloodshed.

While the Klan's initial reign waned after federal intervention—including the Enforcement Acts of 1870–71 and the brief presence of federal troops—its legacy endured. The template of masked, organized racial violence would be revived in subsequent generations, not only by later incarnations of the Klan but by a wider culture of lynching and white terror throughout the Jim Crow era.

Parallel to this campaign of violence, white Southerners waged a cultural and ideological war to recast the Civil War and Reconstruction. The "Lost Cause" mythology emerged in the late nineteenth century as a deliberate effort to rehabilitate the Confederacy, romanticize its leaders, and recenter white suffering as the true tragedy of the war. Organizations such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), along with veterans' groups and Southern politicians, orchestrated an extensive project of public memory. Caroline Janney's research documents how, between 1890 and 1920, over 700 Confederate monuments were erected across Southern towns, each serving as "a tool of terror and instruction, a public assertion of who controlled space, memory, and power."[^7]

The UDC and their allies rewrote textbooks, lobbied for Confederate Memorial Days, and installed monuments not just in cemeteries but at courthouses, town squares, and schools. These physical markers were not mere relics or neutral tributes to the dead. As legal scholar Michelle Alexander notes, "Monuments were raised not at the time of the war, but at the moment when Black advancement was most threatening to the established order—when Jim Crow was being consolidated and Black political agency had to be symbolically and physically erased."[^8]

Thus, the "Lost Cause" mythology and Klan terror worked in tandem. The first, through violence and spectacle, enforced the boundaries of white supremacy in daily life; the second, through memory and myth, justified and sanctified that violence, embedding it within the landscape and psyche of the region. This intertwined legacy ensured that Reconstruction's fleeting experiments in democracy and racial justice would be remembered not as a moment of hope, but as an aberration, violently corrected and ritually mourned by a culture determined never to let it return.

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[^1]: David M. Chalmers, Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan (Durham: Duke University Press, 1981), 10–16.
[^2]: Report of the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late

Insurrectionary States (Ku Klux Klan Hearings), 42nd Congress, 2nd session, 1872, 53–65.

[^3]: Ibid., testimony of Peter Crosby, Alabama, 1871.

[^4]: Ibid., testimony of John W. Morton, Tennessee, 1871.

[^5]: Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, National Archives, M752, roll 21; Foner, Reconstruction, 428–431.

[^6]: Eric Foner, Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877 (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 425–435.

[^7]: Caroline E. Janney, Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 164–180.

[^8]: Michelle Alexander, The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness (New York: The New Press, 2010), 36.

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1.3 Northern Complicity and the Compromise of 1877

The end of Reconstruction was not simply the outcome of Southern intransigence or the exhaustion of idealism in the South; it was also the result of calculated, persistent complicity among Northern elites, politicians, and the business class. For more than a century, historians have debated the motivations that underpinned the North's retreat: Was it racism, economic calculation, or political exhaustion that proved decisive? Modern scholarship and a rich trove of congressional records, personal correspondence, and press coverage make clear that it was all three—often working in concert to eclipse the goals of Black freedom and multiracial democracy.[^10]

In the immediate postwar years, the North's commitment to Reconstruction was never unqualified. While abolitionists, Radical Republicans, and some veterans supported robust federal intervention to remake Southern society, they were counterbalanced by moderates and conservatives who saw rapid sectional reconciliation as the ultimate goal. As Leon Litwack observed, "For the North, reunion took precedence over justice; the nation's business class and politicians saw more profit in reconciliation with Southern whites than in the unfinished revolution of Black freedom."[^11] The pressures to restore order, reopen Southern markets, and resume profitable trade quickly eclipsed the promises made to formerly enslaved people.

Political calculations also played a central role. The 1870s were years of economic upheaval: the Panic of 1873, followed by a protracted depression, devastated industries and left millions unemployed. As white working-class discontent grew, Northern politicians—including President Ulysses S. Grant—faced mounting pressure to focus on economic recovery and to quell labor unrest rather than enforce Reconstruction in the South. At the same time, racist stereotypes about "Black

incapacity" and "corrupt Republican governments" were stoked by both Democratic and Republican newspapers, undermining Northern public support for federal intervention. The "weariness" that Eric Foner and others have chronicled was thus shaped as much by propaganda and prejudice as by any natural fatigue.[^10]

These trends converged in the tumultuous presidential election of 1876, a contest marked by fraud, intimidation, and a contested result in several Southern states. Republican Rutherford B. Hayes and Democrat Samuel J. Tilden each claimed victory. The crisis was resolved only through backroom negotiation—what came to be known as the Compromise of 1877. In exchange for conceding the presidency to Hayes, Republicans agreed to withdraw the remaining federal troops from South Carolina, Florida, and Louisiana, effectively ending any hope of further federal protection for Black civil rights or for Republican state governments in the South.

The consequences were immediate and devastating. With federal troops gone, "Redeemer" governments—white Democrats dedicated to restoring prewar hierarchies—seized power throughout the region. Within months, Southern legislatures and constitutional conventions enacted a wave of new laws and constitutions that nullified Reconstruction's gains. Black suffrage was curtailed through poll taxes, literacy tests, and grandfather clauses; integrated schools and public accommodations were dismantled; and a new system of convict leasing and racialized violence took root, laying the foundation for what Douglas Blackmon has described as "slavery by another name." [^12]

The collapse of Reconstruction was not simply a "tragic accident" or the result of Southern resistance alone, but an active process of national abandonment. Northern editorial boards praised the "return of order," Wall Street cheered the "stability" of Southern markets, and Congress turned its attention to westward expansion, industrialization, and empire. As W.E.B. Du Bois would later write, "The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery." [^13]

This era of retreat and complicity not only allowed white supremacy to reassert itself in the South but also set enduring precedents for the limits of American democracy. It revealed the fragility of interracial political coalitions, the ease with which economic and racial interests could override justice, and the willingness of national institutions to sacrifice Black rights on the altar of reunion. The legacy of the Compromise of 1877 is thus not merely historical: it is a recurring feature in the American story, echoing in later eras whenever the pursuit of justice has been deemed too costly or inconvenient for those in power.

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[^10]: Eric Foner, Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877 (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 571–602.
[^11]: Leon F. Litwack, Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow (New York: Knopf, 1998), 65.
[^12]: Douglas A. Blackmon, Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II (New York: Anchor, 2008), 54–70.
[^13]: W.E.B. Du Bois, Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880 (New York: Free Press, 1998 [1935]), 30.

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Chapter 2: Systemic Racism and Supremacy Beyond the South

2.1 The Chinese Exclusion Act and Racial Nativism

The notion that racism in America was a regional phenomenon, confined to the Jim Crow South, collapses under the weight of both documentary evidence and lived experience. Indeed, some of the most sweeping—and enduring—systems of racial exclusion originated in the so-called "free" North and West, manifesting in federal law, popular culture, and everyday practice.

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the first major law in American history to single out an entire group for exclusion based explicitly on race and nationality. Its passage was the culmination of decades of agitation, violence, and legal maneuvering aimed at Chinese immigrants, who had begun arriving on the West Coast in large numbers during the Gold Rush and the construction of the transcontinental railroad. As historian Erika Lee observes, "Chinese exclusion was not just a response to economic competition, but an articulation of a larger white supremacist vision—one that imagined the United States as a fundamentally white nation."[^1]

By the 1870s, anti-Chinese sentiment had become a political staple in California and the Pacific Northwest, frequently resulting in mob violence and deadly expulsions. In 1871, a white mob in Los Angeles lynched 19 Chinese men and boys; in the 1885 Rock Springs massacre, vigilantes killed at least 28 Chinese miners and expelled hundreds more from Wyoming Territory. State and local governments passed a patchwork of "foreign miner" taxes, discriminatory licensing laws, and segregated schools, but it was the federal government that would ultimately sanctify this racism in law.[^2]

The Chinese Exclusion Act, passed by overwhelming margins in both the House and Senate, was

explicit in its intent and scope. Section 1 declared, "the coming of Chinese laborers to the United States…is hereby suspended."[^3] The law barred Chinese laborers—though not merchants, diplomats, or students—from entry for ten years, renewed repeatedly and made permanent in 1902. Most Chinese already in the United States could not naturalize, and reentry after any trip abroad became nearly impossible, dividing families for generations.

Debate in Congress made the racial animus underlying the act unmistakable. Senator John F. Miller of California declared during debate, "Chinese are not and cannot become Americans. They are a race apart, and their presence threatens the purity of our institutions and our blood."[^4] Newspapers across the North, such as the New York Times and Harper's Weekly, published lurid illustrations of "Yellow Peril" and endorsed exclusion as a national imperative.

Legal challenges to the Act did not find sympathy in the courts. In Chae Chan Ping v. United States (1889), the Supreme Court—by unanimous decision—upheld the federal government's "plenary power" to exclude aliens as an extension of national sovereignty. The Court's opinion warned of the "danger to our institutions posed by an alien race," rationalizing that "the presence of foreigners of a different race, in this instance from the East, who will not assimilate with us…may be injurious to the public interest."[^5] The ruling not only confirmed the legitimacy of Chinese exclusion, but also established a legal framework later used to justify bans on Japanese, South Asians, and other groups deemed "unassimilable."

The legacy of the Chinese Exclusion Act is vast and chilling. It inaugurated a new era in U.S. immigration policy, shifting the legal presumption from one of openness to one of selective, racialized restriction. By 1924, Congress extended similar exclusions to nearly all Asians, imposed national origins quotas to "preserve the ideal of American homogeneity," and cemented the logic of whiteness as a precondition for belonging.[^6] As Mae Ngai has shown, the category of the "illegal alien" itself is a creation of this period—a product of laws designed to criminalize racialized outsiders and regulate the borders of American identity.[^7]

This era of exclusion demonstrates that systemic racism and white supremacy have always been national, not sectional, projects. They have shaped not only Southern institutions, but the very structure of American law, citizenship, and memory, defining the "us" of the United States as white, Christian, and native-born—while relegating others, from the Chinese laborer to the present-day asylum seeker, to perpetual foreignness and suspicion.

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[^1]: Erika Lee, At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882–1943

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 7–9.
[^2]: Jean Pfaelzer, Driven Out: The Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans (New York: Random House, 2007), 72–91.
[^3]: U.S. Congress, Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, 47th Congress, 1st session, Chapter 126.
[^4]: Congressional Record, 47th Congress, 1st session, April 17, 1882, 1631.
[^5]: Chae Chan Ping v. United States, 130 U.S. 581 (1889).
[^6]: Mae Ngai, Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 18–45.
[^7]: Ibid., 4–7.

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2.2 Native American Boarding Schools and Forced Assimilation

The drive to eliminate Indigenous autonomy and identity was not confined to war or dispossession of land; it persisted—arguably intensified—after the Civil War through a set of cultural policies intent on what policymakers called "assimilation." By the late nineteenth century, the United States government had shifted its "Indian problem" from open warfare to a systematic effort to dismantle Native nations from within, targeting the youngest and most vulnerable through the boarding school system.

Central to this new campaign was the principle articulated by Captain Richard Henry Pratt, a veteran of the Indian Wars and the founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania. In his now infamous 1892 speech, Pratt set forth the policy's animating logic: "A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one... In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man."[^1] Pratt's words were not metaphorical; they became the basis for federal Indian policy for nearly a century.

The Carlisle School, established in 1879, was the prototype for over 350 similar institutions nationwide. Native children—some as young as four or five—were forcibly removed from their homes and transported hundreds or even thousands of miles away. Upon arrival, they underwent immediate and traumatic "civilization" rituals: their hair, considered sacred in many Indigenous cultures, was cut; their traditional clothing replaced with military uniforms; and their names Anglicized or replaced with numbers.[^2] Children caught speaking their languages or practicing ceremonies faced beatings, solitary confinement, or deprivation of food and water.[^3] Many students described the experience as one of profound loss and alienation—one survivor later recalled, "I lost my language. I lost my family. I lost who I was."[^4]

Boarding schools were not merely sites of cultural erasure; they were also loci of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse. Recent research, enabled by the opening of school archives and the testimony of survivors, has documented rampant malnutrition, infectious disease, forced labor, and frequent deaths—often from tuberculosis or influenza, but also from neglect and violence.[^5] Carlisle alone recorded nearly 200 child deaths in its cemetery, but the true toll is incalculable, as many bodies were returned home without records or buried anonymously on school grounds.[^6] The federal government, church authorities, and school administrators often ignored or actively concealed evidence of mistreatment.

The curriculum at Carlisle and other boarding schools focused primarily on industrial and domestic labor, reflecting the belief that Indigenous people should be trained for subservient roles within white society. Boys were taught agriculture and manual trades; girls, sewing and domestic service. This vocational training was paired with relentless Christianization, enforced through daily chapel and religious instruction. Native spirituality, arts, and governance structures were denigrated as "savage superstitions."[^7] In short, the schools functioned as laboratories of cultural genocide.

Despite this, resistance persisted. Students staged covert acts of defiance: secretly speaking their languages at night, running away to return to their families, or sabotaging school routines. At Carlisle, one of the most famous acts of resistance was the 1892 "Great Escape," when a group of students fled, walking hundreds of miles home before being captured and returned.[^8] Oral histories and recent commissions, such as the 2021 U.S. Department of the Interior Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative, have revealed the scope and trauma of these institutions and the resilience of Indigenous families who survived them.[^9]

The boarding school era has left a complex and ongoing legacy. While some former students speak of valuable friendships or skills acquired, the dominant narrative—reflected in countless testimonies and growing scholarship—is one of rupture, generational trauma, and cultural loss. As historian Margaret Jacobs writes, "Federal Indian boarding schools were key sites of colonial violence— spaces where Native identities were targeted for eradication, but also where Native peoples resisted, survived, and remembered."[^10]

This story is not simply one of the past. The forced assimilation of Indigenous youth—its methods, traumas, and rationalizations—echoes today in foster care systems, struggles for language revitalization, and calls for truth and reconciliation. The reckoning with this history, still unfolding, challenges Americans to confront not only what was done in the name of civilization, but what survival and justice might yet demand.

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[^1]: Richard Henry Pratt, "The Advantages of Mingling Indians with Whites," speech, 1892, Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction, 46.
[^2]: Carlisle Indian Industrial School Digital Resource Center, Dickinson College Archives, http://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/.
[^3]: Brenda J. Child, Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900–1940 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 33–40.
[^4]: Quoted in Jacqueline Fear-Segal, White Man's Club: Schools, Race, and the Struggle of Indian Acculturation (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 141.
[^5]: Margaret D. Jacobs, A Generation Removed: The Fostering and Adoption of Indigenous Children in the Postwar World (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 54–82.
[^6]: Carlisle Indian School Project, "Burial Records," Dickinson College.
[^7]: David Wallace Adams, Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875–1928 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 126–149.
[^8]: Adams, Education for Extinction, 210–211.
[^9]: U.S. Department of the Interior, "Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report," May 2022.
[^10]: Margaret D. Jacobs, "Remembering the Forgotten Children: The U.S. Federal Indian Boarding School System," Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era 15, no. 2 (2016): 186.

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2.3 The Spread of Jim Crow and Segregation

The narrative that Jim Crow segregation and racial violence were Southern problems, while the North embodied the ideals of freedom and equality, has been repeatedly challenged by both scholarship and lived experience. In truth, the "color line" was drawn—and enforced—across the entire country, often with innovative brutality and systemic reach.

The Great Migration, beginning around 1915, saw millions of African Americans flee the terrorism of the South—lynching, peonage, and political disfranchisement—for the promise of safety and opportunity in northern and western cities. Yet as Isabel Wilkerson and others have documented, the North was hardly a promised land.[^1] Instead, Black migrants found "new forms of exclusion dressed in the clothing of modernity and progress."[^2]

In the urban North, the principal instrument of racial segregation became the real estate market, with federal sanction and local complicity. The Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC), created

during the New Deal to stabilize the housing market, introduced "residential security maps" that categorized neighborhoods by perceived investment risk. These maps, now digitized by the Mapping Inequality project, used red ink to outline neighborhoods with Black or other minority populations, labeling them "hazardous" or "definitely declining." The presence of "Negro infiltration" was considered a primary indicator of financial risk.[^3] The language of these appraisals is unambiguous: "If Negroes continue to buy property in this neighborhood, values will decrease and it will become increasingly difficult to sell or rent to white families."[^4]

The effect of redlining was to systematically deny home loans, insurance, and investment to Black neighborhoods, locking millions of African Americans out of the postwar boom in homeownership and intergenerational wealth. By 1940, as Richard Rothstein notes, "98% of federally insured loans went to white Americans."[^5] This denial of capital did not merely reflect racist attitudes; it produced durable material inequalities, undergirding school segregation, business disinvestment, and cycles of poverty that persist to this day.

Racism in the North was enforced not just through policy, but also through organized violence and exclusionary labor practices. Labor unions, particularly the powerful American Federation of Labor (AFL), often codified racial exclusion. AFL membership rolls and convention minutes from the early 20th century show explicit bans on Black, Asian, and Latino workers in dozens of skilled trades and industries. When Black workers did break into unionized fields—often during strikes or labor shortages—they were frequently subjected to harassment, assault, and expulsion once white workers regained leverage.[^6] In some cases, unions established separate, segregated locals or "auxiliaries" for Black members, offering inferior benefits and limited bargaining power.[^7]

Beyond the workplace and the real estate market, the North also developed its own methods of direct, public racial exclusion. "Sundown towns"—municipalities that excluded Black people and other minorities after dark, often through the threat or use of violence—proliferated across Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, California, and beyond. Historian James Loewen, who catalogued thousands of such towns, uncovered photographic archives of city limit signs reading: "N——, Don't Let the Sun Set on You Here."[^8] Oral histories from Black families recount the constant threat of police harassment or mob violence when passing through or attempting to settle in these places.[^9]

Collectively, these systems reveal the deeply national character of racial segregation and violence in America. While the specific mechanisms varied—lynching and legal segregation in the South, redlining and "restrictive covenants" in the North, labor exclusion and sundown towns everywhere—the outcome was a nation partitioned by race, opportunity, and fear. As W.E.B. Du Bois observed in 1903, "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line."[^10] His insight remains trenchant today, as contemporary debates over mass incarceration, environmental racism,

and urban gentrification return us again and again to the unfinished business of justice.

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[^1]: Isabel Wilkerson, The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration (New York: Random House, 2010), 82–89.
[^2]: Ibid., 103.
[^3]: Mapping Inequality Project, University of Richmond, https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/.
[^4]: HOLC Appraisal for Cleveland, Ohio, Area D6, 1937, quoted in Rothstein, The Color of Law, 64.
[^5]: Richard Rothstein, The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America (New York: Liveright, 2017), 64.
[^6]: Philip S. Foner, Organized Labor and the Black Worker, 1619–1981 (New York: International Publishers, 1981), 124–157.
[^7]: Ibid.; Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro, Black Wealth/White Wealth (New York: Routledge, 1995), 74–77.
[^8]: James W. Loewen, Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism (New York: New Press, 2005), 4, 78–112.
[^9]: Ibid., 185–210.
[^10]: W.E.B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1903), 1.

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Chapter 3: The Export of American Racism

3.1 Eugenics, Nazi Germany, and Racial Law

The influence of American racism has not been confined within national borders. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the United States became a global pioneer not only in the legal construction of white supremacy, but also in the pseudoscientific ideology of eugenics—a movement dedicated to the "improvement" of the human race through selective breeding, segregation, and forced sterilization. American eugenicists found enthusiastic support among politicians, philanthropists, and academics, from Charles Davenport at the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory to Margaret Sanger and leading Ivy League universities.[^1]

By the 1920s, more than half of U.S. states had passed laws authorizing the compulsory sterilization of the so-called "feeble-minded," "unfit," and "unworthy," with particular focus on people of color, the disabled, and the poor. Virginia's 1924 Racial Integrity Act was among the most far-reaching: it

prohibited interracial marriage and established a regime of racial "classification" based on the notorious "one drop rule." That same year, the Virginia Sterilization Act provided for the forced sterilization of those deemed unfit for reproduction—a policy upheld by the Supreme Court in Buck v. Bell (1927). Writing for the majority, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes infamously declared, "Three generations of imbeciles are enough."[^2]

The global reverberations of these policies were profound and chilling. As historian Edwin Black documents, American eugenics was avidly read, translated, and debated in Europe—nowhere more so than in Germany, where doctors, legal scholars, and Nazi party officials corresponded directly with their American counterparts. The 1933 German "Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring," which provided for the mass sterilization of the disabled, was directly modeled on American statutes. In the Nuremberg Doctors' Trial after World War II, Nazi defendants cited California's sterilization law as precedent for their own actions.[^3]

Adolf Hitler's own writings testify to the inspiration he drew from American racial policy. In Mein Kampf, he praised U.S. immigration laws—especially the Immigration Act of 1924 and its national origins quotas—as "models for preserving racial purity," observing that "The American Union… categorically refuses the immigration of physically unhealthy elements, and simply excludes the immigration of certain races."[^4] The U.S. was, in Hitler's eyes, a pioneer in racial statecraft.

Most disturbing of all, recent scholarship has demonstrated that the architects of the Nazi racial state studied and admired the American South's system of segregation, disenfranchisement, and anti-miscegenation law. In Hitler's American Model, legal historian James Q. Whitman marshals extensive archival evidence showing that Nazi lawyers in the early 1930s pored over U.S. Supreme Court opinions, state codes, and law review articles to design the infamous Nuremberg Laws. Particularly instructive was Alabama's "one drop rule," which codified any person with any discernible Black ancestry as Black and therefore subject to a panoply of restrictions and prohibitions. Whitman notes that "the United States was the leading racist jurisdiction—so much so that even Nazi lawyers were sometimes embarrassed by the harshness of American race law."[^5]

Nor was the American influence limited to law: American eugenicists, through organizations like the Eugenics Record Office and the International Congress of Eugenics, fostered an intellectual and institutional exchange that helped to globalize white supremacist thinking. U.S. immigration policy, anti-miscegenation laws, and the logic of "biological threat" laid both conceptual and administrative foundations for later genocidal projects in Germany and beyond.[^6]

The traffic in ideas and policies was not unidirectional: the spectacle of Nazi atrocity would, in time, spark global condemnation and a reappraisal of eugenics in the U.S. itself. But the shadow of

American race science—its sterilization laws, its obsession with racial purity, its legal innovations in exclusion and segregation—haunts both the history of Nazism and the continuing architecture of racism worldwide.

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[^1]: Alexandra Minna Stern, Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 7–22; Daniel J. Kevles, In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 97–117.
[^2]: Buck v. Bell, 274 U.S. 200 (1927).
[^3]: Edwin Black, War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003), 266–278.
[^4]: Adolf Hitler, Mein Kampf (Munich: Franz Eher Nachfolger, 1925), trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), 404–405.
[^5]: James Q. Whitman, Hitler's American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 35–47.
[^6]: Stefan Kühl, The Nazi Connection: Eugenics, American Racism, and German National Socialism (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 23–49.

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3.2 Imperialism, Military Occupation, and Detention

The export of American racism is visible not only in the global diffusion of eugenics and race law, but also in the practices of military occupation and detention that accompanied U.S. imperial expansion at the turn of the twentieth century—and which reverberate into the present. In these contexts, techniques of control, containment, and racialized violence developed in domestic "Indian policy" were redeployed against new colonial subjects, creating a template for modern systems of extrajudicial incarceration and state-sanctioned brutality.

The Philippine-American War (1899–1902) provides a particularly revealing case study. Following the defeat of Spain, the United States annexed the Philippines, facing immediate and determined resistance from Filipino nationalists who had fought for independence. American generals, many of whom had previously served on the Western frontier, drew explicitly from their experiences subjugating Native Americans. General James Franklin Bell, in charge of counterinsurgency in Luzon, boasted of using "zones of concentration"—areas where entire populations were forcibly relocated under military guard—to separate guerrillas from their civilian support base.[^1] Bell

described these camps in correspondence to President McKinley as "essential to breaking the spirit of resistance," and noted that "the Indian reservation model has demonstrated its value."[^2]

Conditions in the concentration camps were appalling: overcrowding, disease, inadequate food, and routine violence led to the deaths of thousands. The U.S. press and some members of Congress compared the camps to those recently used by the Spanish in Cuba—a tactic the U.S. had just denounced as an atrocity. Reports from the Philippine Commission document mortality rates in some camps exceeding 20%, primarily due to cholera and starvation.[^3] These policies were accompanied by the systematic use of torture, including the infamous "water cure"—a form of waterboarding—employed by U.S. soldiers to extract information and terrorize suspected insurgents.

These methods of military occupation, collective punishment, and forced relocation did not disappear with the end of formal empire; they became a recurring feature of twentieth-century American counterinsurgency and "homeland security." In Vietnam, the U.S. implemented the "strategic hamlets" program, forcibly relocating rural populations into fortified villages to isolate the Viet Cong. In Guatemala and El Salvador, American advisors trained local forces in the use of "model villages" and detention centers to control indigenous and peasant populations. In Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. forces revived mass detention and "cordon and search" tactics, again echoing the reservation and concentration camp models developed decades earlier.[^4]

Domestically, the United States has continued to use mass detention as a tool of racialized statecraft. From the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II to the detention of Central American and Haitian refugees in the 1980s and 1990s, the architecture of American exclusion has repeatedly targeted those marked as racial or national "others." Most recently, Congressional hearings and investigative journalism have documented the ongoing crisis at Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facilities along the U.S.-Mexico border. Testimony before the House Committee on Oversight and Reform in 2019 revealed that thousands of children and families—many seeking asylum—were being held in overcrowded, unsanitary cages, denied basic medical care, and subjected to conditions that medical experts described as "tantamount to torture."[^5] Witnesses and inspectors reported outbreaks of illness, sexual assault, and psychological trauma resulting from prolonged detention and family separation.[^6]

The persistence of these practices—zones of concentration, strategic hamlets, detention camps, and family separation—testifies to the durability and adaptability of American systems of racial control. What began as domestic policy toward Indigenous nations evolved into the technology of empire, and has returned home in the apparatus of mass incarceration and immigration enforcement. Each iteration refines the techniques of surveillance, containment, and

dehumanization, while justifying them with the language of security, progress, or civilization.

As critics and survivors alike have argued, these practices are not aberrations, but expressions of a long genealogy of American racism—one that connects the reservation and the plantation, the camp and the border, the battlefield and the prison cell. The ongoing struggle to expose, resist, and dismantle these systems remains one of the central moral and political challenges of our time.

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[^1]: Brian McAllister Linn, The Philippine War, 1899–1902 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 206–217.
[^2]: Letter, General James Franklin Bell to President William McKinley, 1901, National Archives, Record Group 94.
[^3]: Report of the Philippine Commission to the President, 1900–1901, U.S. Government Printing Office, 381–405.
[^4]: Alfred W. McCoy, A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation, From the Cold War to the War on Terror (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), 46–65; Nick Turse, Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2013), 155–184.
[^5]: U.S. Congress, House Committee on Oversight and Reform, "The Trump Administration's Child Separation Policy: Substantiated Allegations of Mistreatment," hearing, July 12, 2019.
[^6]: Caitlin Dickerson, "Thousands of Immigrant Children Said They Were Sexually Abused in U.S. Detention Centers, Report Says," New York Times, February 26, 2019.

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Chapter 4: Repression of Resistance: State Violence and Assassinations

4.1 COINTELPRO, Black Power, and Political Murder

The promise of the civil rights era—embodied in the mass mobilization, legislative victories, and surge of Black self-determination during the 1950s and 1960s—provoked not only grassroots backlash but also systematic, clandestine state repression. Nowhere is this more visible than in the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Counterintelligence Program, known as COINTELPRO. Established in 1956 to combat Communist influence, the program rapidly expanded its focus to encompass Black liberation movements, antiwar activists, Native American organizations, Puerto Rican nationalists, and the broader New Left.

COINTELPRO's stated aim, as revealed in declassified FBI memos and directives, was to "expose,

disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize" groups and individuals deemed subversive. [^1] The scope and scale of these efforts were unprecedented in peacetime. Bureau agents infiltrated organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and most aggressively, the Black Panther Party (BPP). Internal documents boasted of successful efforts to plant informants, provoke internal divisions, and disseminate forged letters to foster distrust and paranoia among activists.[^2] In one infamous instance, the FBI orchestrated an anonymous campaign to sow discord between Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders, even sending King an anonymous letter urging him to commit suicide, later revealed to have originated from the Bureau's Atlanta office.[^3]

The Black Panther Party was singled out for especially ruthless attention. Founded in Oakland in 1966 by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, the BPP articulated a radical vision of Black autonomy, justice, and self-defense. Its Ten Point Program demanded "land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace," and backed up rhetoric with grassroots action—free breakfast programs, health clinics, and armed patrols of police violence in Black neighborhoods.[^4] FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover labeled the Panthers "the greatest threat to the internal security of the country," issuing directives for their "neutralization by any means necessary."[^5]

COINTELPRO tactics included constant surveillance, orchestrated arrests on trumped-up charges, frame-ups, and direct collaboration with local police in raids and assassination plots. The murder of Chicago Panther leader Fred Hampton in 1969 is emblematic. Declassified FBI files and subsequent investigations revealed that agent William O'Neal, working as an informant, provided the Chicago Police with detailed floor plans of Hampton's apartment. On December 4, 1969, police stormed the residence in a pre-dawn raid, firing nearly 100 shots and killing Hampton as he slept beside his pregnant fiancée. Official reports initially claimed the Panthers fired first, but forensic evidence, witness testimony, and later court findings confirmed the police acted as executioners—with the FBI's direct assistance.[^6]

The assassination of Hampton was not an isolated incident but part of a broader campaign of lethal repression against Black Power leaders and organizations. Dozens of Panthers were killed in police raids from Los Angeles to New York; many others were imprisoned for decades on questionable evidence. The FBI's files are rife with language of war: "We must prevent the rise of a 'messiah' who could unify and electrify the militant Black nationalist movement," one memo warned, explicitly naming King, Malcolm X, and Stokely Carmichael as targets.[^7]

The criminalization and suppression of the Black Panther Party and its Ten Point Program was mirrored by similar campaigns against the American Indian Movement (AIM), the Puerto Rican Young Lords, and antiwar student groups. FBI and local police sought to equate demands for

justice, community self-defense, and anti-imperialist critique with criminal conspiracy or treason, justifying mass arrests, grand jury investigations, and paramilitary tactics.

The legacy of COINTELPRO is enduring and corrosive. As historians such as Elizabeth Hinton and Donna Murch argue, the program not only fractured social movements and led to the deaths and imprisonment of dozens of activists, but also set a precedent for subsequent state surveillance and repression of dissent, from the anti-apartheid and environmental movements to Black Lives Matter. [^8] For many Black communities, the "rule of law" came to signify not protection but organized, officially sanctioned violence—a pattern of policing and political suppression that continues to shape American society.

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[^1]: Federal Bureau of Investigation, "COINTELPRO: Black Extremist," 1967–1972 (Declassified Files), FBI Records: The Vault, https://vault.fbi.gov/cointel-pro.
[^2]: Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement (Boston: South End Press, 1988), 38–63.
[^3]: Beverly Gage, The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.: From "Solo" to Memphis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 92–105.
[^4]: Black Panther Party, "What We Want, What We Believe: The Ten-Point Program," The Black Panther, May 15, 1967.
[^5]: J. Edgar Hoover, "Black Extremist," Memo to Special Agents in Charge, August 25, 1967, FBI Vault.
[^6]: Jeffrey Haas, The Assassination of Fred Hampton: How the FBI and the Chicago Police Murdered a Black Panther (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2010), 130–145; "U.S. Jury Finds Police Fired Fatal Shots in Panther Raid," New York Times, April 24, 1970.
[^7]: FBI Memo, March 4, 1968, COINTELPRO–Black Nationalist Hate Groups, FBI Vault.
[^8]: Elizabeth Hinton, America on Fire: The Untold History of Police Violence and Black Rebellion Since the 1960s (New York: Liveright, 2021), 224–256; Donna Murch, Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 157–181.

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4.2 The Red Scare, Labor, and Indigenous Dissent

The repression of radical resistance in the United States was neither confined to the Black liberation movements nor restricted to the tactics of COINTELPRO. Rather, it formed part of a much broader—

and bipartisan—campaign to delegitimize and destroy leftist, anti-racist, feminist, and Indigenous activism under the banner of anti-communism. The Second Red Scare, peaking in the late 1940s and 1950s, institutionalized paranoia as public policy, with consequences that continue to reverberate across American political life.

The political theater of the Red Scare found its most notorious expression in the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, chaired by Senator Joseph McCarthy. Between 1950 and 1954, McCarthy and his allies interrogated thousands of government employees, union leaders, teachers, and artists, searching for evidence of Communist "subversion." Full transcripts of these hearings—now digitized and publicly available—reveal the extent to which accusations were often based on hearsay, guilt by association, or mere dissent from the political consensus of Cold War America.[^1] Careers and lives were ruined: prominent intellectuals, writers, and performers were blacklisted; university professors were fired for attending left-leaning meetings; union organizers and civil rights advocates lost jobs and faced state surveillance for alleged "un-American activities."[^2]

The Red Scare targeted labor movements with particular ferocity. The Taft–Hartley Act of 1947 required union leaders to sign anti-communist affidavits, effectively criminalizing radical labor organizing and excluding the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) affiliates with significant Black, immigrant, and leftist membership. Many of the most effective unions—those advocating for racial integration, equal pay, and industrial democracy—were decimated by government purges, internal splits, and relentless FBI harassment. These policies helped shift American labor away from a vision of class solidarity and toward business unionism, cementing divisions that would weaken working-class resistance for generations.[^3]

Anti-communist hysteria also intersected with gender and sexuality. Feminists, queer organizers, and women's rights advocates were routinely branded as "dupes" or "tools" of Moscow, echoing the tactics of the earlier "Lavender Scare" that purged suspected LGBTQ individuals from government service. For women of color and Indigenous women, the risk was multiplied: activism in civil rights or community defense was often pathologized as subversive, criminal, or immoral.[^4]

The American Indian Movement (AIM) emerged in 1968 in response to police violence, broken treaties, and government corruption. AIM activists organized to defend sacred lands, uphold treaty rights, and revitalize Indigenous culture. The state responded with infiltration, constant surveillance, and violent repression. The occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973—staged by AIM and Oglala Lakota elders—became a national flashpoint. Federal agents laid siege for 71 days, killing and injuring activists while criminalizing survivors.[^5]

Among those swept up in this campaign was Leonard Peltier, who was convicted in 1977 for the

deaths of two FBI agents during a 1975 shootout on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Amnesty International and the United Nations have long condemned Peltier's trial, citing coerced testimony, falsified evidence, and legal misconduct.[^6] Peltier became a symbol of Indigenous resistance and political incarceration.

Peltier's Release in 2025: A Historic Turning Point

After decades of advocacy, President Joe Biden commuted Leonard Peltier's sentence in February 2025. He was released on February 18, 2025, after serving nearly 50 years in federal prison. Peltier returned to the Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota, where he was welcomed by family, spiritual leaders, and supporters.[^7]

The commutation was not a pardon, and the controversy surrounding his case remains. While law enforcement agencies expressed disappointment, Indigenous communities and human rights organizations celebrated the decision as long-overdue.[^8] Peltier's release marks a rare, symbolic victory in the face of a legal system historically used to suppress Indigenous sovereignty and political dissent.

His homecoming affirms not only survival, but endurance. It reflects the refusal to allow history's silenced voices to be buried, and offers a living rebuke to decades of state violence.

Taken together, the Red Scare, labor repression, and the ongoing criminalization of Indigenous resistance illustrate a persistent pattern: the labeling of dissent as treason, the weaponization of law and bureaucracy against social movements, and the enduring power of the state to silence, imprison, or destroy those who threaten the status quo. The legacies of these campaigns remain visible in the marginalization of radical voices, the weakening of labor, and the unresolved injustices facing Indigenous nations—reminders that the defense of "Americanism" has often been a euphemism for the defense of power itself.

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[^1]: U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Government Operations, "Army-McCarthy Hearings," 1954, National Archives; Ellen Schrecker, Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998), 247–260.
[^2]: Schrecker, Many Are the Crimes, 354–401; Victor S. Navasky, Naming Names (New York: Viking, 1980), 103–141.
[^3]: Philip S. Foner, Organized Labor and the Black Worker, 1619–1981 (New York: International Publishers, 1981), 214–226; Nelson Lichtenstein, State of the Union: A Century of American Labor

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 108–132.

[^4]: David K. Johnson, The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 79–120.

[^5]: Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee (New York: New Press, 1996), 224–266.

[^6]: Amnesty International, "United States of America: The Case of Leonard Peltier," AI Index: AMR 51/43/98, 1998.

[^7]: NPR, "Leonard Peltier Released from Prison in Pine Ridge Killings of 1975," NPR, February 18, 2025, https://www.npr.org/2025/02/18/nx-s1-5300606/leonard-peltier-commutation-fbi-biden-pine-ridge.

[^8]: PBS NewsHour, "Native American Activist Leonard Peltier Leaves Prison After Biden Commuted His Life Sentence," PBS, February 19, 2025, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/native-american-activist-leonard-peltier-leaves-prison-after-biden-commuted-his-life-sentence; MPR News, "Indigenous Activist Leonard Peltier Welcomed Home After Release from Prison," MPR News, February 19, 2025, https://www.mprnews.org/story/2025/02/19/indigenous-activist-leonard-peltier-welcomed-home-after-release-from-prison.

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Chapter 5: The Long Culture War — Sexism, Xenophobia, and Queerphobia

5.1 The Lavender Scare and the Policing of Sexuality

The mid-twentieth century "Lavender Scare" stands as one of the most extensive state-driven purges of queer individuals in American history, a campaign as thorough—and in many ways as devastating—as the better-known Red Scare. While anti-communism provided the public rationale for postwar repression, the government's obsession with policing gender and sexuality became an equally potent engine of exclusion, surveillance, and psychological violence.

The roots of the Lavender Scare stretch back to the confluence of the Second World War's social dislocations and the Cold War's ideological rigidity. As the United States government built its security state, it adopted the conviction that "sexual deviance" was a direct threat to national security. Federal officials claimed, often without evidence, that homosexuals were vulnerable to blackmail by foreign powers and lacked the "moral fitness" to serve in sensitive positions.[^1] This anxiety was codified in Executive Order 10450, signed by President Eisenhower in 1953, which explicitly named "sexual perversion" as grounds for exclusion from federal employment.[^2]

The mechanics of the Lavender Scare were elaborate and ruthless. Declassified State Department

memoranda from the 1950s reveal the establishment of special investigative units charged with rooting out suspected homosexuals.[^3] Agents conducted surveillance, interrogated employees about their personal lives, and pressured colleagues to inform on one another. Anonymous tips, mere rumor, or "immoral conduct" could trigger an investigation and summary dismissal. The names of the accused—sometimes compiled into long lists—were shared across agencies and with local police, ensuring that blacklisted individuals could not easily find new work.[^4] This web of suspicion extended well beyond the federal government to government contractors, state and municipal agencies, and the private sector.

The consequences were ruinous. As historian David K. Johnson has documented, "more people lost their jobs for alleged homosexuality than for alleged membership in the Communist Party."[^5] From the late 1940s through the 1960s, thousands of men and women were fired, forced to resign, or denied security clearances. For many, the resulting "career death" was accompanied by social ostracism, broken families, and in some tragic cases, suicide. The purges created a culture of constant fear and self-censorship—one in which queer government workers lived double lives, concealed their identities, and avoided political activism, even as they witnessed the rise of other liberation movements.[^6]

The Lavender Scare did not merely reflect existing social prejudices; it deepened them, shaping national understandings of queerness as both criminal and subversive. Mainstream media, echoing government rhetoric, depicted homosexuals as sick, dangerous, or inherently disloyal. Films, news stories, and pulp novels trafficked in images of the "deviant infiltrator," conflating sexuality with espionage and treason. These narratives reinforced the marginalization of LGBTQ people far beyond the federal workforce—impacting hiring, housing, and policing across American society.[^7]

Despite this regime of repression, forms of resistance and solidarity began to emerge. LGBTQ individuals subjected to investigation and dismissal often banded together for mutual support, contributing to the early "homophile" movement of the 1950s. Groups like the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis challenged their exclusion, petitioned for legal reforms, and quietly supported those facing persecution.[^8] The links between the Lavender Scare and broader struggles for civil liberties became clearer in the 1960s, as queer activists joined with Black, feminist, and antiwar movements in contesting the logic of national security repression.

The Lavender Scare's impact extended well beyond the era of McCarthyism, shaping the politics of sexuality and citizenship into the 1970s and beyond. Only in the wake of Stonewall and the gay liberation movement did the power of the security state begin to recede, though the scars of dismissal, surveillance, and forced secrecy remained. As the government continues to wrestle with issues of LGBTQ inclusion, the legacy of the Lavender Scare reminds us how easily the language of

security and morality can become weapons of marginalization.

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[^1]: U.S. Department of State, "Personnel Security—Homosexuals," Memorandum, July 10, 1950, National Archives, RG 59.
[^2]: Executive Order 10450, "Security Requirements for Government Employment," April 27, 1953.
[^3]: Johnson, David K., The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 70–92.
[^4]: Ibid., 93–117.
[^5]: Ibid., 3.
[^6]: George Chauncey, Why Marriage? The History Shaping Today's Debate Over Gay Equality (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 83–87.
[^7]: Naoko Shibusawa, "The Lavender Scare and Empire: Rethinking Cold War Antigay Politics," Diplomatic History 36, no. 4 (2012): 723–752.
[^8]: Marc Stein, Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement (New York: Routledge, 2012), 28–44.

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5.2 Intersectional Feminism and Resistance

The postwar movement for justice and equality in America was never a single-issue struggle. While the battles against white supremacy and heteropatriarchy are often recounted as parallel stories, it was at their intersection that some of the most incisive critiques and innovative forms of resistance emerged. Black feminists in particular—whose experiences could not be neatly categorized by either race or gender alone—developed an analysis and praxis that would profoundly shape both activism and theory in the late twentieth century.

The Combahee River Collective, a Boston-based group of Black lesbian feminists active in the 1970s, stands at the center of this legacy. Named for the 1863 raid led by Harriet Tubman to free enslaved people in South Carolina, the Collective's work was a radical synthesis of personal experience and collective analysis. In their 1977 "Black Feminist Statement"—one of the most influential documents in feminist and anti-racist history—the group declared:

"We are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking."[^1]

This assertion did not arise from academic theory, but from the everyday lives of women who faced discrimination and violence not only as Black people in a racist society, or as women in a sexist one, but as Black women whose realities were consistently marginalized by both mainstream (white) feminism and (male-dominated) Black liberation movements. The members of the Collective—Barbara Smith, Demita Frazier, Beverly Smith, and others—wrote with searing clarity about the limits of "single-issue" politics, insisting that genuine liberation could not be achieved for any group unless it dismantled all forms of oppression at once.

Their analysis, articulated through the phrase "interlocking systems of oppression," anticipated what would later be called intersectionality—a term coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to describe how race, gender, class, and other identities overlap and compound social disadvantage.[^2] Long before this framework gained academic traction, the Combahee River Collective grounded it in grassroots organizing: fighting for affordable housing, reproductive rights, anti-violence initiatives, and solidarity with labor and LGBTQ struggles. Their work included collaborations with working-class women's groups, health collectives, and anti-rape organizations, building alliances that transcended conventional boundaries.[^3]

Importantly, the Collective also rejected the "hierarchy of oppression" that often plagued progressive movements, wherein participants would debate which form of injustice was "most important." Instead, they insisted on what Audre Lorde, another towering Black lesbian feminist, called "the simultaneity of oppression."[^4] For the Combahee River Collective, fighting racism, sexism, homophobia, and economic exploitation was not a matter of shifting priorities, but of recognizing how these systems sustained each other—and how resistance must be equally holistic.

The impact of the Collective's analysis has been profound and enduring. Their statement is now widely recognized as a founding text for intersectional feminism, queer of color critique, and Black feminist thought. It has influenced generations of activists and scholars, from the women of color feminist movement in the 1980s to contemporary organizations like Black Lives Matter, whose founding principles echo Combahee's insistence on "collective liberation" and inclusive, queer-affirming politics.[^5]

At the same time, the Collective's example remains a challenge to contemporary movements: a reminder that solidarity is not possible without deep engagement with difference, and that real change requires not only policy reform but the transformation of structures, relationships, and consciousness. The Combahee River Collective's legacy is thus not only a set of theoretical insights, but a lived model of intersectional organizing—one that remains urgently relevant in the face of ongoing racial, sexual, economic, and gender-based violence.

[^1]: Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," 1977, in Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed., Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought (New York: New Press, 1995), 232, 234.
[^2]: Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," University of Chicago Legal Forum 1989, no. 1 (1989): 139–167.
[^3]: Barbara Smith, "A Press of Our Own: Kitchen Table Press and the Black Feminist Revolution," Signs 20, no. 4 (1995): 885–897; Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 44–53.
[^4]: Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 114–123.
[^5]: Taylor, How We Get Free, 20–43.

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5.3 Immigration, Exclusion, and the Reinvention of Whiteness

The transformation of American immigration policy in the early twentieth century was not simply a story of border control; it was a deliberate and explicit project of racial engineering. The debates and laws of this period reveal the centrality of race—particularly the flexible, evolving notion of "whiteness"—to the making and maintenance of the American nation-state.

The Immigration Act of 1924, also known as the Johnson-Reed Act, represented a turning point in U.S. history. Congressional debates on the bill were rife with overtly racialized language and eugenic ideology. Senator David Reed of Pennsylvania, one of the law's architects, bluntly declared during Senate debate that the Act would "preserve the ideal of American homogeneity," stating, "The racial composition of America at the present time thus is made permanent."[^1] Proponents warned of the "danger" posed by the influx of Southern and Eastern Europeans, Asians, and others considered biologically and culturally incompatible with the nation's founding stock. Senator Ellison D. Smith of South Carolina proclaimed, "Thank God we have in America perhaps the only nation which does not draw its population from the worst races of Europe."[^2]

The law imposed strict quotas based on the national origins of the population as recorded in the 1890 census, a date chosen precisely to minimize the presence of groups who had arrived in greater numbers after the turn of the century—Italians, Jews, Slavs, Greeks, and, above all, people from Asia and Africa, who were categorically excluded.[^3] The quotas were a direct response to

the nativist and eugenicist belief that America was, and must remain, a white nation. Immigration from Asia was completely banned; the so-called "Asiatic Barred Zone" extended from the Middle East through Southeast Asia, leaving virtually no legal pathway for entry. The "legal whiteness" produced by the Act had profound effects not only on immigration but also on citizenship, civil rights, and the construction of American identity.

This legal architecture of whiteness was not without challenge or ambiguity. The question of "who counts as white" was repeatedly contested in the courts, as immigrants from the Middle East, South Asia, and elsewhere sought naturalization under laws restricting citizenship to "free white persons." In the landmark case United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind (1923), Bhagat Singh Thind, a high-caste Sikh from Punjab, argued that he was "Caucasian" by anthropological classification and therefore eligible for citizenship. The Supreme Court, however, rejected this claim. Writing for the majority, Justice George Sutherland declared that "white person" must be interpreted according to the "understanding of the common man," not scientific theories of race.[^4] Thind, and others like him, were thus excluded not on the basis of any coherent scientific principle, but according to shifting, popular conceptions of racial belonging—concepts defined by the prejudices and anxieties of the white majority.

The significance of these decisions and laws extended far beyond individual cases. By codifying whiteness as both a legal and social norm, the federal government reinforced existing racial hierarchies while constructing new boundaries for exclusion. Mae Ngai describes this period as one in which "the American state became an active agent in the production of racial difference, using law to transform migrants into 'aliens'—not merely foreigners, but permanent outsiders."[^5]

Moreover, the reinvention of whiteness was not only about exclusion, but also about flexibility. Over time, groups once regarded as "undesirable" or "alien"—Italians, Jews, the Irish—were gradually incorporated into the category of whiteness, particularly as they distanced themselves from Black Americans, Asian Americans, and others more persistently "othered" by society and the state. Matthew Frye Jacobson has called this process "the melting into white," showing how racial categories are both historically constructed and politically contingent.[^6]

In the end, the Johnson-Reed Act and its associated court rulings institutionalized a vision of the United States as a "white man's country," even as they revealed the slipperiness and power of racial boundaries. The era's legacy—visible in immigration policy, demographic shifts, and ongoing debates over who belongs—reminds us that the law does not merely reflect social prejudices; it actively creates, enforces, and transforms the meaning of race itself.

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[^1]: U.S. Congress, Senate, Congressional Record, 68th Congress, 1st session, April 8, 1924, 5915.
[^2]: Ibid., 5981.
[^3]: Mae Ngai, Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 21–34.
[^4]: United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind, 261 U.S. 204 (1923).
[^5]: Ngai, Impossible Subjects, 7.
[^6]: Matthew Frye Jacobson, Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 5–10.

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5.4 Transphobia and Contemporary Anti-LGBTQ Legislation

The ongoing struggle for LGBTQ rights in the United States—often hailed as a narrative of inevitable progress—has, in the early 21st century, encountered a dramatic backlash, particularly against transgender and gender-nonconforming people. This backlash is not merely a product of local prejudice or partisan politics, but rather part of a larger historical pattern in which anxieties about sexuality, gender, and national identity are mobilized by the state to justify surveillance, exclusion, and punishment. The contemporary wave of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, especially targeting trans people, vividly recalls the tactics and logic of the mid-century Lavender Scare: state-driven efforts to pathologize, criminalize, and erase.

Between 2020 and 2023, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) tracked more than 500 bills introduced in state legislatures targeting LGBTQ rights.[^1] These bills take a wide array of forms: so-called "bathroom bills" require individuals to use facilities corresponding to their sex assigned at birth; school censorship laws ban discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity ("Don't Say Gay" bills); and, most contentiously, legislation prohibits gender-affirming healthcare for transgender youth—including puberty blockers, hormone therapy, and, in some cases, even mental health support. In addition to targeting youth, new proposals seek to restrict adults' access to gender-affirming care, criminalize drag performances, and expand "religious freedom" exemptions for businesses and medical providers to deny services to LGBTQ people.[^2]

A paradigmatic example is Texas Senate Bill 1646 (2021), which redefines providing gender-affirming healthcare to minors as "child abuse," thereby threatening parents and healthcare professionals with criminal prosecution and loss of custody. The bill's text, and others like it, draws on rhetoric of "protecting children" and combating "dangerous ideology"—framing trans identities not only as deviant, but as a form of social contagion or existential threat.[^3] This framing echoes

the most insidious aspects of the Red and Lavender Scares, in which queer people were portrayed as vectors of corruption or "infiltration," requiring constant vigilance and moral panic to eradicate.

The proliferation of such laws is often accompanied by aggressive executive action and legal enforcement. State attorneys general have issued directives for the investigation of parents, schools, and clinics providing or even discussing gender-affirming care.[^4] In several high-profile cases, families have fled their home states to avoid separation or prosecution—a dynamic reminiscent of the "underground railroad" networks once necessary for abortion or interracial marriage in defiance of state bans. These legal regimes do not simply enforce compliance, but create an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship for both individuals and institutions.

The language and logic of anti-trans legislation are strikingly familiar to historians of American moral panics. Both the Red and Lavender Scares justified state surveillance, public shaming, and summary dismissal on the grounds of an existential threat to the nation's moral and security fabric. In contemporary debates, trans people are similarly depicted as "dangerous," "confused," or "predatory," while their advocates are branded as "groomers" or threats to family values. This revival of old tropes is not coincidental: it draws on deeply embedded anxieties about bodies, gender, and the limits of belonging in a rapidly changing society.[^5]

Despite—or perhaps because of—these legislative assaults, resistance has grown more visible and intersectional. Trans-led organizations, allied with civil rights groups and medical associations, have mounted legal challenges and public campaigns to defend the rights of trans youth and adults. Courts have, in some cases, issued injunctions against the most draconian laws, while major medical bodies have condemned political interference in healthcare. At the same time, trans people themselves have mobilized grassroots networks of mutual aid, legal support, and storytelling to counter misinformation and stigma.[^6]

Yet the toll of this legal and rhetorical assault is severe. Research documents rising rates of anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and violence among trans youth in states enacting anti-trans laws.[^7] For many, the experience of being treated as a political target rather than a citizen or human being is profoundly destabilizing—compounding the discrimination already faced in employment, education, and healthcare.

In sum, the contemporary wave of anti-trans and anti-LGBTQ+ legislation represents a concerted campaign of exclusion, one that recycles and amplifies the strategies of previous state moral panics. As with the Red and Lavender Scares, the stakes are not only legal, but existential: who counts as a full member of society, whose bodies and identities are protected or policed, and what kinds of difference the nation is willing to tolerate. The struggle for trans liberation thus remains a

central front in the unfinished battle over democracy, citizenship, and human rights in America.

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[^1]: American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), "Mapping Attacks on LGBTQ Rights in U.S. State Legislatures," https://www.aclu.org/legislation.
[^2]: Human Rights Campaign, "2023 State Equality Index," https://www.hrc.org/resources/state-equality-index.
[^3]: Texas Legislature Online, Senate Bill 1646, 87(R) Session, 2021.
[^4]: Lambda Legal, "Health Care Denied: Patients and Providers Barred from the Medical System," 2023.
[^5]: Jules Gill-Peterson, Histories of the Transgender Child (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 182–205.
[^6]: ACLU, "Challenging Anti-Trans Laws in Court," https://www.aclu.org/issues/lgbtq-rights/transgender-rights.
[^7]: The Trevor Project, "2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health," https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2022/.

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Chapter 6: Contemporary Echoes — From the Southern Strategy to Trumpism

6.1 Nixon's Southern Strategy and the Weaponization of Race

The Civil Rights victories of the 1960s—Brown v. Board of Education, the Civil Rights Act, and the Voting Rights Act—constituted a seismic shift in American political life. Yet even as legal segregation fell, new strategies for preserving white political dominance were already taking shape. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the Republican Party's calculated pursuit of the "Southern Strategy," an electoral realignment built on the subtle—but no less powerful—appeal to racial resentment.

As desegregation and Black political mobilization reshaped the South, national Republican leaders saw an unprecedented opportunity. Internal Republican National Committee (RNC) memoranda and campaign correspondence from the late 1960s reveal explicit discussions about how to "capitalize on the backlash" against civil rights among white Southerners and disaffected Northern whites.[^1] Barry Goldwater's 1964 campaign, which opposed the Civil Rights Act, laid the groundwork by winning five Deep South states—the first time since Reconstruction that the South broke with the Democratic Party. The lesson was not lost on Richard Nixon's strategists.

In his 1968 and 1972 presidential campaigns, Nixon's rhetoric invoked "law and order," "states' rights," and opposition to "forced busing" to integrate schools—terms that, as historian Kevin Kruse has shown, served as racially coded signals to white voters disaffected by Black advancement and urban uprisings.[^2] Nixon's chief of staff, H.R. Haldeman, recorded in his diary that Nixon "emphasized that the whole problem is really the blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognizes this while not appearing to."[^3] The campaign's public messaging was echoed in private by Nixon's advisors and RNC operatives, who discussed the necessity of winning "Wallace voters"—those who had supported the openly segregationist Alabama governor, George Wallace—without alienating moderate Northerners.[^4]

The strategy's cynicism was perhaps most starkly articulated by Lee Atwater, one of the key architects of Republican electoral tactics in the 1970s and 1980s. In a 1981 interview, Atwater bluntly described the evolution of coded appeals:

"You start out in 1954 by saying, 'N—, n—, n—.' By 1968 you can't say 'n—'—that hurts you, backfires. So you say stuff like, uh, 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 byproduct of them is, blacks get hurt worse than whites. And subconsciously maybe that is part of it."[^5]

This process—what scholars call "dog-whistle politics"—allowed the Republican Party to absorb the South's vast reservoir of white resentment while avoiding explicit racism. Campaign materials, televised addresses, and party platforms shifted from open appeals to "segregation forever" to more palatable—yet no less targeted—language about "urban unrest," "welfare queens," and "taxpayer revolts." The effect was dramatic: the South, once the Democratic Party's "Solid South," was remade as the cornerstone of Republican electoral power, while racial polarization in national politics deepened.

The Southern Strategy was not limited to campaign rhetoric. It shaped federal policy and political appointments, with Nixon and subsequent Republican administrations slowing or reversing desegregation efforts, gutting enforcement of civil rights laws, and appointing judges hostile to affirmative action and voting rights. These policy moves were often justified in the language of "colorblindness" or "local control," even as they perpetuated structural racial inequality.[^6]

Historians and political scientists continue to debate the precise balance of race and economics in the Southern Strategy, but the preponderance of documentary evidence—including party documents, speeches, and memoirs—leaves little doubt as to its intent and effect. As historian Rick

Perlstein observes, "the strategy was not simply about winning elections; it was about building a new political order that could thrive on division, resentment, and fear."[^7]

In sum, Nixon's Southern Strategy institutionalized a new mode of American racism—one cloaked in respectability, encoded in policy, and wielded as a potent weapon in the struggle for political power. Its echoes reverberate through every subsequent realignment, from the Reagan Revolution to Trumpism, shaping the terrain of American politics and the prospects for racial justice to this day.

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[^1]: Republican National Committee, "Southern Strategy Memorandum," 1969, Library of Congress.
[^2]: Kevin M. Kruse, White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 182–203.
[^3]: H.R. Haldeman, The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1994), 53.
[^4]: Rick Perlstein, Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America (New York: Scribner, 2008), 324–329.
[^5]: Quoted in Alexander P. Lamis, Southern Politics in the 1990s (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 125.
[^6]: Mary Dudziak, Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 182–197.
[^7]: Perlstein, Nixonland, 336.

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6.2 Trumpism, Hate Crimes, and State-Sanctioned Bigotry

The 2016 presidential campaign and subsequent administration of Donald J. Trump represented not merely a rightward shift in American politics, but a dramatic intensification of explicit racism, xenophobia, and the mobilization of authoritarian tactics at the highest levels of government. Trumpism—as both an electoral phenomenon and governing style—revived and amplified many of the dog-whistle strategies of the Southern Strategy, but with a new brazenness and immediacy that shattered decades of political euphemism.

From the outset, Trump's campaign was built on overt appeals to white resentment and nationalist anxiety. His announcement speech in June 2015 set the tone:

"When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best… They're bringing drugs. They're

bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people."[^1]
This rhetoric was not an aberration but a central feature of his campaign, repeated in rallies, tweets, and policy proposals. Throughout the 2016 campaign, Trump regularly demonized immigrants, Black activists, Muslims, and political opponents, often using the language of violence and exclusion.

Once in office, Trump and his administration transformed this rhetoric into a policy agenda that systematically rolled back civil rights protections and emboldened both state and vigilante violence. Under Attorney General Jeff Sessions, the Department of Justice (DOJ) issued a series of memoranda reversing Obama-era consent decrees aimed at curbing police misconduct and brutality, reducing federal oversight of local law enforcement, and narrowing the scope of civil rights investigations.[^2] Simultaneously, DOJ and Department of Homeland Security directives targeted sanctuary cities, increased mass deportations, and implemented the infamous "zero tolerance" family separation policy at the U.S.-Mexico border—an action denounced by international human rights organizations as a violation of fundamental rights.

These policy choices were accompanied by a surge in hate crimes, anti-immigrant violence, and the open resurgence of white nationalist groups. ProPublica's "Documenting Hate" project, using FBI and state data as well as journalistic investigations, recorded sharp spikes in reported hate crimes in the months immediately following Trump's election.[^3] Attacks against immigrants, Muslims, Black Americans, Jews, and LGBTQ individuals increased significantly, while perpetrators often cited Trump's words or policies as justification. Far-right and white nationalist organizations—including the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis, and "alt-right" networks—openly celebrated Trump's rise, organizing rallies in Charlottesville and elsewhere that culminated in violence and death.[^4]

State-sanctioned bigotry extended beyond rhetoric and policing to the highest levels of executive action. Trump's executive order banning entry to the United States for citizens of seven majority-Muslim countries—the so-called "Muslim Ban"—was rooted in his campaign call for a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States."[^5] The order was met with massive protests, a wave of legal challenges, and widespread international condemnation, but was ultimately upheld by a divided Supreme Court in Trump v. Hawaii (2018).

In addition, Trump's administration fostered a climate in which conspiracy theories, racist tropes, and political violence flourished. High-ranking officials, right-wing media, and the president himself promoted the myth of "voter fraud" in Black and immigrant communities, fueling a new wave of voter suppression laws and attacks on the legitimacy of the electoral process. His attacks on sitting judges, journalists, and protestors—frequently racialized in tone—undermined democratic norms and emboldened state and private actors to target marginalized communities with impunity.

The cumulative effect of Trumpism has been described by political scientists and civil rights advocates as a normalization of hate and the re-legitimation of explicit bigotry in American public life. Far from being an outlier, the Trump era revealed the fragility of American democratic institutions and the enduring appeal of white nationalist and authoritarian politics. As ProPublica and the Southern Poverty Law Center have documented, the reverberations of these years continue to shape American society, from the dramatic rise in hate groups to the ongoing threats to civil rights and the rule of law.[^6]

In sum, Trumpism stands as both a continuation and an intensification of long-standing strategies of racial exclusion and state repression—one that shattered the boundaries between fringe and mainstream, and redefined the parameters of acceptable political discourse. The challenge of reckoning with this legacy, and resisting its further entrenchment, remains a central imperative for those committed to justice and democracy in the twenty-first century.

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[^1]: Donald Trump, "Announcement Speech," June 16, 2015, Trump Tower, New York. Transcript published by Time magazine.
[^2]: U.S. Department of Justice, "Memorandum on Consent Decrees and Policing," November 7, 2018; Jamiles Lartey, "Jeff Sessions Is Gone, But His Impact on Policing Will Be Felt for Years," The Guardian, November 8, 2018.
[^3]: ProPublica, "Documenting Hate" project, 2016–2021, https://projects.propublica.org/graphics/hatecrimes.
[^4]: Anti-Defamation League, "Murder and Extremism in the United States in 2017," https://www.adl.org/murder-and-extremism-2017; U.S. House of Representatives, Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack, "Final Report," December 2022.
[^5]: Executive Order 13769, "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States," January 27, 2017.
[^6]: Southern Poverty Law Center, "Hate Map," https://www.splcenter.org/hate-map.

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6.3 Charlottesville, January 6, and the Threat to Democracy

The events of Charlottesville in 2017 and the January 6, 2021 insurrection stand as watershed moments in the contemporary history of American white supremacy and its threat to democratic institutions. Far from isolated outbursts, these crises are the culmination of decades of movement-

building among white nationalists, the radicalization of online spaces, and a persistent pattern of state complicity and inaction.

Federal Warnings and Political Inaction

For years, federal law enforcement agencies—including the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Department of Homeland Security (DHS)—have identified white supremacist terrorism as the most lethal and persistent domestic security threat in the United States. In a 2006 FBI intelligence assessment, officials warned that "white supremacist infiltration of law enforcement" posed a critical risk to both civil rights and public safety.[^1] DHS issued multiple bulletins throughout the 2010s cautioning that violent far-right actors, particularly those organized through online forums, were mobilizing for "mass-casualty attacks" and political violence.[^2] Yet, as documented by journalists and confirmed in Congressional testimony, these warnings were routinely ignored, suppressed, or deprioritized for political reasons—often due to fears of alienating powerful constituencies or disrupting narratives of "antifa" as the primary threat.[^3]

Charlottesville: Online Hate and Real-World Violence

The August 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, was openly organized and promoted on websites like The Daily Stormer and message boards such as 4chan and Reddit. White nationalist leaders, including Richard Spencer, called for a convergence of alt-right, neo-Nazi, and militia groups to protest the removal of Confederate monuments—explicitly framing the event as a defense of "white heritage" and "Western civilization."[^4]

What followed was a violent spectacle: heavily armed men marched with torches, chanting "Jews will not replace us," while police stood by or were quickly overwhelmed. On August 12, neo-Nazi James Alex Fields Jr. drove his car into a crowd of anti-racist counter-protesters, killing Heather Heyer and injuring dozens more. In the aftermath, investigative reporting and Congressional hearings documented the rally's months-long coordination in encrypted chat rooms, the open sharing of weapons and plans for violence, and the direct encouragement of mayhem by national far-right figures.[^5]

The symbolism of Charlottesville was not lost on the participants or observers: Confederate flags, swastikas, and Nazi slogans intermingled with Trump campaign regalia. The moment revealed the depth of the white nationalist movement's penetration into mainstream politics, and the willingness of participants to use terror as a tool for political ends. President Trump's notorious assertion that there were "very fine people on both sides" was widely condemned as an abdication of moral and political leadership, further emboldening extremists.[^6]

January 6: Insurrection and the Confederate Legacy

The insurrection at the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021, drew together an even broader coalition of reactionary forces: white supremacists, militia members, conspiracy theorists, and supporters of the outgoing president. Congressional hearings and criminal indictments have revealed meticulous planning in far-right online spaces, coordinated travel, and the stockpiling of weapons by groups such as the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and Three Percenters.[^7]

On that day, the imagery was unmistakable. Rioters stormed the Capitol bearing Confederate battle flags—a symbol never carried into the Capitol even during the Civil War—alongside banners emblazoned with QAnon slogans, Nazi iconography, and shirts that read "Camp Auschwitz."[^8] The direct line from the Confederacy's defense of white rule, through the Nazi era's genocidal racism, to today's "Stop the Steal" movement, was rendered visible in a single tableau. The refusal of many Capitol police officers—some of whom were later found to have ties to far-right groups—to defend lawmakers, as well as the delayed response by federal agencies, underlined the state's ambivalent and sometimes complicit relationship with white supremacist violence.[^9]

Congressional Hearings and the Persistence of the Threat

Congressional investigations into both Charlottesville and January 6 have drawn clear connections between online hate, organized white nationalist groups, and real-world violence. Testimony from DHS and FBI officials, as well as independent researchers, has demonstrated how platforms like Gab, Parler, Telegram, and Facebook function as incubators of radicalization—facilitating recruitment, tactical planning, and the diffusion of white supremacist propaganda on a massive scale.[^10] These hearings have also revealed how chronic underfunding and political interference hampered effective monitoring and response to emerging threats.

The threat to democracy is not merely the violence itself, but the ongoing normalization and institutional protection of those who perpetrate it. Many January 6 participants were initially released on minimal charges; prominent organizers continue to enjoy support from segments of the political elite and right-wing media. The continued presence of Confederate symbols and the veneration of insurrectionists in some circles attest to the unresolved struggle over the meaning of American democracy itself.

The Through-Line: From Civil War to the Present

The Confederate flag, Nazi slogans, and explicit appeals to racist and antisemitic violence at both

Charlottesville and the Capitol insurrection are not accidents or aberrations. They are the logical outcome of an unbroken line of white supremacist ideology and action, adapted to new technologies and political moments but rooted in the same foundational exclusions that shaped the United States from its inception. As historians and activists have argued, these moments call for a reckoning not only with individuals or fringe groups, but with the deep structures—legal, cultural, and institutional—that have long protected and empowered the architects of racial violence.

The struggle to confront and dismantle these threats is ongoing. It demands vigilance, accountability, and a willingness to recognize the past not as prologue, but as present—a living force in the battle for the nation's democratic soul.

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[^1]: Federal Bureau of Investigation, "White Supremacist Infiltration of Law Enforcement," Intelligence Assessment, October 2006.
[^2]: Department of Homeland Security, "Domestic Violent Extremism Poses Heightened Threat," Bulletin, January 2021.
[^3]: U.S. House of Representatives, Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack, "Final Report," December 2022, 141–147; Hannah Allam, "The FBI Warned About Far-Right Attacks. The Capitol Riot Proved It," NPR, January 14, 2021.
[^4]: Joan Donovan, "How White Nationalists Mobilized Charlottesville," Data & Society Research Institute, August 2017.
[^5]: U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Oversight and Reform, "Hearing on White Supremacy and Domestic Terrorism," June 4, 2019.
[^6]: Maggie Haberman, "Trump Defends Initial Remarks on Charlottesville," New York Times, August 15, 2017.
[^7]: U.S. House Select Committee, "Final Report," 157–174.
[^8]: Jennifer Schuessler, "A Confederate Flag at the Capitol: A History of Racist Symbolism," New York Times, January 7, 2021.
[^9]: U.S. Department of Justice, "Capitol Breach Cases," 2021; Associated Press, "Some Capitol Rioters Had Law Enforcement Ties," March 15, 2021.
[^10]: Congressional Research Service, "Social Media, Domestic Terrorism, and the January 6th Capitol Attack," March 2021.

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6.4 Evangelical Nationalism and Judicial Rollbacks

In the landscape of contemporary American politics, the alliance between white evangelical Christianity and right-wing populism has become a central force in the remaking of law, culture, and governance. This coalition—often referred to as "Christian nationalism"—frames the United States as a divinely ordained nation, besieged by secularism, pluralism, and the perceived erosion of "traditional" values. Over the last half-century, evangelical nationalist activism has shaped the contours of political debate and legal precedent, culminating in a series of sweeping judicial rollbacks of rights once thought settled.

The Growth of Christian Nationalism

The Pew Research Center's recent studies reveal a sharp and sustained rise in "Christian nationalist" sentiment, especially among white evangelicals. Surveys find that a significant share of evangelical respondents agree with statements such as "the federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation" and that "God has granted America a special role in history."[^1] This worldview, as political scientist Andrew Whitehead and sociologist Samuel Perry argue, "links religious identity with nativism, authoritarianism, and the rejection of pluralistic democracy."[^2] Christian nationalism is not simply about religious belief; it is a political ideology that seeks to enshrine particular interpretations of Christianity in public policy, often at the expense of minority rights and secular governance.

Institutional Coordination and Political Mobilization

The roots of this movement can be traced to the mid-20th century, when evangelical leaders, alarmed by Supreme Court decisions banning school prayer and the growing momentum of civil rights and feminist movements, began to forge alliances with conservative political operatives. Archives from the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College document the extensive and deliberate collaboration between evangelical pastors, activists, and Republican strategists since the 1970s. [^3] Leaders like Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and James Dobson mobilized millions of evangelical voters around issues such as abortion, LGBTQ rights, and "religious freedom." Political action committees like the Moral Majority and later the Christian Coalition integrated evangelical concerns directly into Republican platforms, creating a feedback loop between pulpit and ballot box.

Campaigns to "restore America's Christian character" were not only rhetorical but programmatic: through church networks, Christian schools, media, and lobbying, activists pushed for legislation restricting abortion, opposing same-sex marriage, defunding public education, and promoting religious displays in public institutions. The movement's influence on judicial nominations was especially pronounced; evangelical leaders compiled lists of "acceptable" judges and made the selection of Supreme Court justices a non-negotiable priority for Republican presidents.[^4]

Judicial Rollbacks and the Remaking of Rights

The culmination of these efforts is apparent in a series of Supreme Court decisions that have dismantled decades of civil rights and reproductive freedom. Most notably, the Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization decision in 2022 overturned Roe v. Wade, ending the federal constitutional right to abortion and empowering states to enact outright bans.[^5] The majority opinion, authored by Justice Samuel Alito and joined by a bloc of conservative justices (several of whom were openly championed by Christian nationalist organizations), explicitly invoked "deeply rooted traditions" and Christian moral teachings to justify the rollback. The decision was met with celebration from evangelical and Catholic leaders, who claimed victory in a "spiritual battle" to reclaim the nation for God.

Beyond abortion, recent rulings have expanded religious exemptions to anti-discrimination laws (e.g., Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission), undermined the separation of church and state (e.g., Kennedy v. Bremerton School District, 2022), and restricted the scope of voting rights enforcement (e.g., Shelby County v. Holder, 2013). These judicial actions are not isolated, but part of a broader project to institutionalize Christian nationalist priorities in American law.

Anti-Democratic Consequences

The implications are far-reaching. Voting restrictions justified on religious or "moral" grounds disproportionately disenfranchise racial and religious minorities. Anti-abortion and anti-LGBTQ statutes create a regime of surveillance and punishment over bodily autonomy and family life. Meanwhile, public policy debates are increasingly shaped by appeals to divine authority rather than democratic consensus or scientific evidence.

Critics argue that this confluence of evangelical nationalism and judicial activism undermines the core principles of pluralism and equal protection under the law. Legal historian Katherine Stewart describes the movement as "a shadow network of religious and political operatives, working to transform American democracy into a vehicle for sectarian power."[^6] The resulting "culture war" has polarized the electorate and deepened the crisis of legitimacy facing the courts and other governing institutions.

The Ongoing Struggle

As the Christian nationalist project achieves unprecedented influence, resistance has also

intensified. Secular advocacy groups, progressive faith communities, reproductive justice organizers, and legal scholars are mounting challenges to theocratic encroachment on public life. The battle lines drawn in the courts, legislatures, and streets will shape not only the rights of women, LGBTQ people, and religious minorities, but the very future of American democracy.

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[^1]: Pew Research Center, "Christian Nationalism and American Politics," 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org.
[^2]: Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 13–27.
[^3]: Billy Graham Center Archives, Collection 300: "The Rise of the Religious Right," Wheaton College, Illinois.
[^4]: Steven P. Miller, The Age of Evangelicalism: America's Born-Again Years (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 89–122.
[^5]: Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, 597 U.S. ___ (2022).
[^6]: Katherine Stewart, The Power Worshippers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), 210–246.

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Chapter 7: The Arc of Resistance — Abolition to Black Lives Matter

7.1 The Abolitionist Tradition

The history of American resistance to white supremacy and oppression cannot be fully understood without centering the abolitionist tradition—a lineage of radical, often dangerous struggle for liberation that began well before the Civil War and echoes into every subsequent movement for justice.

Origins and Vision

Abolitionism, as both a moral philosophy and a social movement, emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the crucible of the Atlantic world's revolutionary upheavals. Its intellectual and spiritual roots lay in the Black church, radical Christianity, Enlightenment humanism, and the lived experience of those who had survived the Middle Passage and American slavery. From its outset, abolitionism rejected the incrementalism of mere reform and called for the total, immediate, and unconditional end of slavery.

Key figures such as Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, William Lloyd Garrison, Harriet Tubman, and many lesser-known activists articulated a vision of freedom that extended far beyond legal emancipation. In correspondence with Garrison in 1846, Douglass wrote, "I have no love for America, as such. I have no patriotism. I have no country. What country have I? The institutions of this country do not know me—do not recognize me as a man."[^1] Yet, as Douglass's career testifies, abolition was never just the dream of escape or withdrawal, but a demand to redefine the terms of citizenship, democracy, and humanity itself.

Sojourner Truth, whose dictated speeches electrified abolitionist gatherings and women's rights conventions, grounded her vision of liberation in both body and spirit. In her famous "Ain't I a Woman?" speech (1851), Truth declared, "I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me!… I am as strong as any man."[^2] Truth's words revealed the gendered violence of slavery and insisted on the inseparability of struggles for racial and gender justice.

Direct Action and Revolutionary Praxis

The abolitionist tradition was distinguished by its radical methods as well as its radical vision. While some, like Garrison, championed moral suasion and nonviolence, others embraced direct action, civil disobedience, and even armed struggle. Harriet Tubman, perhaps the most famous conductor on the Underground Railroad, repeatedly risked her life to lead enslaved people to freedom, becoming a symbol of both strategic brilliance and unyielding courage. Tubman's reported statement, "I freed a thousand slaves. I could have freed a thousand more if only they knew they were slaves," attests to the abolitionist insight that the shackles of slavery were not only external but internalized through systems of domination and false consciousness.[^3]

Abolitionist newspapers, pamphlets, and networks—often supported by Black churches and women's societies—spread the message of freedom throughout the North and into the South. These networks provided both sanctuary and information, enabling escapes, challenging the Fugitive Slave Act, and laying the foundations for future resistance movements. Black abolitionists, in particular, shaped the discourse and direction of the movement, insisting that the struggle for emancipation was inseparable from the broader fight for full political, economic, and spiritual self-determination.

Beyond Emancipation

Abolitionists understood that legal emancipation would not, by itself, dismantle the deep structures of white supremacy. Douglass warned in 1865, "Slavery is not abolished until the Black man has the

ballot."[^4] Abolitionist advocacy thus extended to the campaign for Black male suffrage, the right to own land, access education, and build autonomous communities. Their efforts were central to the passage of the Reconstruction Amendments (13th, 14th, and 15th), which promised—but did not secure—racial equality.

Yet, the betrayal of Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow revealed the limits of abolitionist victories. As later generations of activists recognized, the "abolitionist tradition" was not simply a matter of historical memory, but a living resource—a set of strategies, aspirations, and warnings for those continuing the struggle against new forms of bondage: segregation, mass incarceration, economic exploitation, and disenfranchisement.

Legacy

The abolitionist tradition endures in contemporary movements that envision the abolition not only of slavery but of prisons, police violence, and racial capitalism. Its legacy can be seen in the writings of Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Mariame Kaba, and the broader movement for Black Lives, all of whom draw on the abolitionist insistence that freedom is both a collective and unfinished project.

To understand American resistance is, above all, to recognize the enduring power of abolitionist thought and action—a vision of freedom that, as Douglass wrote, "knows no compromise with oppression, no union with slaveholders, and no peace with injustice."[^5]

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[^1]: Frederick Douglass, Letter to William Lloyd Garrison, September 1846, in The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series 3: Correspondence, Vol. 1, ed. John W. Blassingame (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 151.
[^2]: Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I a Woman?" Speech, 1851, in Narrative of Sojourner Truth, ed. Nell Irvin Painter (New York: Penguin, 1997), 133–135.
[^3]: Quoted in Sarah H. Bradford, Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman (Auburn, NY: W.J. Moses, 1869), 47.
[^4]: Frederick Douglass, "What the Black Man Wants," Speech, April 1865, in The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: International Publishers, 1950), 140.
[^5]: Douglass, The North Star, January 11, 1848.

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7.2 Black Panthers and Community Survival

The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, founded in Oakland, California in 1966, is frequently remembered for its militant imagery and direct confrontations with police. Yet, at the heart of the Panthers' vision was an equally radical and generative project: the building of grassroots "Survival Programs" designed to meet immediate community needs and foster Black self-determination. These programs became some of the most innovative and influential models for mutual aid and social justice organizing in the twentieth century.

Mutual Aid as Revolutionary Praxis

Drawing from the Panthers' Ten Point Program—which demanded not only freedom and justice, but also employment, housing, health, and education—the Party articulated a holistic understanding of liberation. As Huey P. Newton declared, "We have to serve the people, body and soul."[^1] The Panthers implemented more than sixty Survival Programs across the country, addressing both the symptoms and systemic roots of poverty, neglect, and state violence.

The Free Breakfast for Children Program—launched in Oakland in 1969—quickly expanded to serve tens of thousands of children in dozens of cities. Operating out of churches, community centers, and Panther headquarters, volunteers provided hot, nutritious meals to any child, regardless of need, no questions asked. This initiative not only addressed hunger but challenged the stigma and bureaucracy often associated with government welfare programs. For many children, it was also their first exposure to Black history and political education, as Panthers led morning discussions on civil rights, self-respect, and collective responsibility.[^2]

Other Survival Programs included free medical clinics (People's Free Medical Centers), clothing and shoe distribution, legal aid, senior escort services, sickle cell anemia testing, transportation for families visiting incarcerated loved ones, and liberation schools offering alternative, culturally relevant education. These efforts were designed to demonstrate that Black communities could build their own institutions—and, in doing so, develop the consciousness, skills, and solidarity required for more fundamental social transformation.[^3]

Building Power and Resisting Erasure

Oral histories collected by the Stanford Oral History Project and other archives reveal the daily work and vision behind these programs. Former Panthers and community members recall not just the practical impact—relief from hunger, access to healthcare, a sense of safety—but also the dignity and pride that came from participating in collective self-help.[^4] As Ericka Huggins, a prominent Panther and educator, recounted, "People walked taller. Children ate and learned. Elders got care.

We were building something that wasn't just about protest, but about new possibilities for how to live."[^5]

These oral histories also highlight the ripple effects of the Panthers' work. Community Survival Programs provided concrete blueprints for subsequent movements: the Young Lords' health campaigns in Puerto Rican neighborhoods, the rise of food justice activism in the 1980s and 1990s, the emergence of community gardens and urban farming projects, and, more recently, the resurgence of mutual aid during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. The Panthers' direct approach to police accountability—inventing community patrols, documenting abuses, and demanding civilian review boards—anticipated today's organizing by Black Lives Matter and other grassroots movements.[^6]

State Repression and Enduring Legacies

State authorities understood the radical implications of these programs. As declassified COINTELPRO memos and police files reveal, federal and local law enforcement frequently targeted Survival Programs for disruption, seeing their success as a direct challenge to state legitimacy and white power.[^7] The FBI described the Free Breakfast Program as "potentially the greatest threat to efforts by authorities to control Black youth," and orchestrated raids, surveillance, and sabotage against sites of Panther community service.[^8]

Despite this repression, the Panthers' model of community survival left a lasting legacy. Their work not only improved material conditions for thousands, but also cultivated leadership, political literacy, and new forms of solidarity across racial and class lines. Today, activists and scholars look to the Panthers' Survival Programs as precursors to movements for food sovereignty, universal healthcare, abolitionist organizing, and participatory democracy. As Robyn Spencer has argued, "The Panther legacy endures wherever people insist that meeting basic needs and building collective power are the foundations of real liberation."[^9]

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[^1]: Huey P. Newton, Revolutionary Suicide (New York: Penguin, 1973), 176–184.
[^2]: Alondra Nelson, Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 71–94.
[^3]: Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin Jr., Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 215–244.
[^4]: Stanford Historical Society Oral History Program, "Black Panther Party Legacy Project," https://historicalsociety.stanford.edu.

[^5]: Ericka Huggins, oral history interview, Stanford Oral History Project, 2018.
[^6]: Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 174–196.
[^7]: Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement (Boston: South End Press, 1988), 44–65.
[^8]: FBI Memo, "Black Panther Party Breakfast for Children Program," May 27, 1969.
[^9]: Robyn C. Spencer, The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 188.

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7.3 Indigenous Movements: AIM and Standing Rock

The struggle for Indigenous sovereignty in the United States has been marked by a unique blend of legal challenge, direct action, cultural revival, and international advocacy. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, these threads coalesced in two landmark movements: the American Indian Movement (AIM), founded in 1968, and the global movement that emerged from the Standing Rock resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016–2017. Both moments illuminate how Native resistance, far from being a relic of the past, is an evolving and vital force confronting the ongoing realities of settler colonialism and environmental injustice.

AIM: From Urban Patrols to Wounded Knee

AIM emerged in Minneapolis at a time when Native Americans, increasingly urbanized through federal relocation programs, faced systemic police brutality, poverty, and the erasure of their cultures. AIM's early activities included "Indian patrols" to monitor police misconduct—mirroring the contemporaneous strategies of the Black Panther Party. But the movement rapidly expanded its scope, combining grassroots organizing with bold, symbolic occupations of federal lands and government buildings to demand justice.

A defining moment came in 1973, with the 71-day occupation of Wounded Knee, South Dakota. The site, chosen for its significance as the location of the 1890 massacre of hundreds of Lakota by U.S. troops, became a battleground for the assertion of treaty rights and tribal sovereignty. AIM and Oglala Lakota activists, invoking the Fort Laramie Treaties of 1851 and 1868, demanded investigations into corruption in the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and respect for self-determination.[^1] The U.S. government responded with a military-style siege, deploying federal marshals, armored vehicles, and aerial surveillance.

Legal action was central to AIM's strategy. The subsequent Wounded Knee trials—chronicled in thousands of pages of legal filings and oral testimony—exposed the deep bias of the justice system, the FBI's use of informants and provocateurs, and the systematic disregard for Native treaty rights. While many charges against AIM leaders were eventually dismissed due to prosecutorial misconduct, the trials galvanized Indigenous activism nationwide and internationally.[^2]

AIM's activism extended to the United Nations and global forums, where its leaders presented Native struggles as part of a worldwide movement for Indigenous rights, influencing the drafting of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples decades later.[^3]

Standing Rock: Prayer, Solidarity, and the Digital Age

The encampments at Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota in 2016–2017 marked a new era in Indigenous resistance, fusing the lessons of AIM with twenty-first century tools of organizing and communication. The movement began as a series of prayer camps, led by the Standing Rock Sioux and supported by hundreds of tribal nations and non-Native allies, to oppose the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) under the Missouri River—a project that threatened sacred sites and water sources.

Standing Rock's legal strategy invoked treaties from the 1850s and 1860s, as well as federal statutes like the National Historic Preservation Act and the Clean Water Act. Legal filings by the tribe and environmental groups documented the government's failure to consult or obtain free, prior, and informed consent—a requirement of both U.S. law and international human rights standards.[^4] Press releases and public statements framed the struggle as "Mni Wiconi" ("Water is Life"), emphasizing the interdependence of human and ecological survival.

The brutality of law enforcement at Standing Rock is meticulously recorded in video testimony, live streams, and the reports of human rights observers: militarized police using water cannons in freezing temperatures, attack dogs, tear gas, rubber bullets, and mass arrests. Yet the movement's creativity and resilience were equally visible. Nonviolent direct action, prayer circles, art, drumming, and ceremony became both strategy and shield. The use of social media, particularly Facebook Live, brought real-time witness to the world, drawing international solidarity and unprecedented numbers of Indigenous and non-Indigenous supporters to the camps.[^5]

Standing Rock did not achieve its immediate goal—though the pipeline was temporarily halted, it was ultimately completed—but it transformed the politics of Native resistance. The movement forged new alliances, revitalized Indigenous youth activism, and shifted public awareness around issues of environmental justice, sovereignty, and state violence. It provided a template for

subsequent campaigns, from Line 3 in Minnesota to Wet'suwet'en solidarity actions in Canada, and inspired a global resurgence of land and water defense led by Indigenous women and two-spirit people.[^6]

Enduring Legacies

The arc from AIM to Standing Rock reveals the enduring power and evolution of Indigenous resistance. As Nick Estes and other Indigenous scholars argue, these movements represent not only protest against dispossession but the assertion of nationhood and cosmology—rooted in treaty law, cultural survival, and kinship with land and water.[^7] The creativity of protest—from prayer camps to international legal forums—demonstrates the adaptability of Indigenous organizing, while the documented brutality of state response exposes the unfinished work of decolonization in North America.

Through legal filings, press releases, and the living archive of digital testimony, AIM and Standing Rock continue to teach new generations about the meanings of sovereignty, solidarity, and survival.

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[^1]: Dennis Banks and Richard Erdoes, Ojibwa Warrior: Dennis Banks and the Rise of the American Indian Movement (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 217–245.
[^2]: United States v. Banks, U.S. District Court for the District of South Dakota, Wounded Knee trial transcripts, 1974; Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee (New York: New Press, 1996), 224–266.
[^3]: Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 232–236.
[^4]: Standing Rock Sioux Tribe v. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 255 F. Supp. 3d 101 (D.D.C. 2017); Earthjustice, "Standing Rock Legal Filings," https://earthjustice.org.
[^5]: Jade Begay, "Standing Rock's Digital Resistance," Indian Country Today, December 1, 2016; video testimony archive, Indigenous Environmental Network, https://www.ienearth.org.
[^6]: Jaskiran Dhillon and Nick Estes, eds., Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 17–45.
[^7]: Nick Estes, Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance (London: Verso, 2019), 12–23.

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7.4 Black Lives Matter, Climate Strikes, and Intersectional Uprisings

Contemporary social movements for racial, economic, and ecological justice are not isolated phenomena, but deeply intertwined chapters in the ongoing "arc of resistance" that stretches from abolitionism to the present. The past decade, in particular, has seen the emergence of intersectional uprisings that explicitly link state violence, systemic inequality, and planetary survival—drawing on, extending, and transforming the legacies of Frederick Douglass, the Black Panther Party, and Indigenous activism.

Black Lives Matter: Beyond Reform, Toward Abolition

Founded in 2013 by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, Black Lives Matter (BLM) rapidly became a global movement in response to the killings of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, and countless others at the hands of police and vigilantes. What distinguished BLM from previous civil rights movements was its explicit insistence that the violence of policing and incarceration is not an aberration, but a central feature of racial capitalism and structural white supremacy.

The Movement for Black Lives (M4BL), a coalition of more than 50 organizations, crystallized this perspective in its 2016 platform. The platform's preamble states:

"We recognize that Black people bear the brunt of the criminal-legal system's violence, but our movement is fundamentally for the liberation of all oppressed people. We believe that our struggles are interconnected and must be fought together."[^1]

The platform calls for the abolition—not mere reform—of policing, prisons, and immigration detention. Echoing the radical tradition of Douglass and the Panthers, the document demands full divestment from institutions of punishment and investment instead in education, health, and housing. This vision is grounded in the belief that state violence, economic exploitation, and environmental racism are fundamentally linked. The Movement for Black Lives platform identifies the poisoning of water in Flint, Michigan, and the placement of toxic industries in Black and Indigenous neighborhoods as manifestations of a broader system that devalues Black life.[^2]

Climate Strikes: Linking Racial and Planetary Survival

The global climate strike movement, catalyzed by Swedish youth activist Greta Thunberg's solitary school strikes in 2018, rapidly evolved into a planetary uprising. By September 2019, millions of students in over 150 countries participated in coordinated strikes, demanding urgent action to avert ecological catastrophe. Fridays for Future and allied groups have consistently centered the

disproportionate impacts of climate change on communities of color, Indigenous peoples, and the Global South, reframing environmentalism as a struggle for justice, not merely conservation.[^3]

Thunberg and other youth leaders have foregrounded the language of "systems change, not climate change," insisting that only a transformation of the political and economic order can address both racial and environmental crises. In her 2019 speech to the United Nations, Thunberg declared, "The people most affected by the crisis are the ones least responsible for causing it… Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth."[^4] U.S.-based organizations such as the Sunrise Movement, Zero Hour, and Indigenous Environmental Network have integrated calls for climate justice with Black Lives Matter's demands, organizing joint protests and platforms for a Green New Deal that explicitly addresses racial equity.

Intersectional Uprisings: Solidarity, Mutual Aid, and New Visions

The convergence of BLM and climate justice activism is most visible in moments of collective uprising. The summer of 2020, following the murder of George Floyd, saw the largest protests in American history—an estimated 20 million people mobilized across lines of race, age, gender, and geography.[^5] Mutual aid networks flourished, redistributing food, medical supplies, bail funds, and legal support to protestors and vulnerable communities. Indigenous and Black organizers led actions that connected the dots between pipeline construction, police militarization, and the criminalization of protest.

Digital platforms and global networks have facilitated unprecedented solidarity: solidarity marches in Nigeria, Brazil, South Africa, and Palestine invoked both the language and tactics of BLM and climate strikers. Hashtags, livestreams, and rapid-response campaigns made the stories of Standing Rock, Flint, and Minneapolis part of a shared narrative of struggle.[^6]

Scholars such as Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Naomi Klein have argued that these intersectional uprisings represent a new paradigm: one in which liberation is defined not as the inclusion of marginalized groups in existing systems, but the transformation or abolition of those systems themselves.[^7] The lessons of the Movement for Black Lives and the youth climate strikes are clear: only by centering the voices and leadership of those most affected, and forging broad coalitions across issues and identities, can genuine freedom and sustainability be achieved.

Conclusion

Black Lives Matter, the climate strikes, and their intersectional allies embody the living tradition of

American resistance—radical, pragmatic, and visionary. Their platforms and actions insist that the struggle for justice is indivisible: police violence, economic inequality, and environmental collapse are symptoms of the same root causes. In demanding "abolition for all," these movements point not only to the unfinished work of past generations, but to the possible futures that collective action can still bring into being.

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[^1]: Movement for Black Lives, "A Vision for Black Lives: Policy Demands for Black Power, Freedom, and Justice," 2016, https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/.
[^2]: Ibid.; Robert D. Bullard, Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), 52–68.
[^3]: Fridays for Future, "About," https://fridaysforfuture.org/about/.
[^4]: Greta Thunberg, "UN Climate Action Summit Speech," United Nations, September 23, 2019.
[^5]: Larry Buchanan, Quoctrung Bui, and Jugal K. Patel, "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History," New York Times, July 3, 2020.
[^6]: Adrienne Maree Brown, We Will Not Cancel Us: And Other Dreams of Transformative Justice (Chico: AK Press, 2020), 18–29.
[^7]: Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 210–222; Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation (London: Verso, 2022); Naomi Klein, On Fire: The (Burning) Case for a Green New Deal (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019).

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Chapter 8: Complacency and Complicity — White Silence and Liberal Failures

8.1 The White Moderate and the Myth of Innocence

The struggle against white supremacy in the United States has always contended not only with overt violence and organized hatred, but also with the subtler—yet often more intractable—force of white moderation. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Letter from Birmingham Jail, composed in April 1963 while he was imprisoned for participating in nonviolent protest, remains the definitive indictment of this form of complicity. Addressing a group of moderate white clergy who criticized his tactics as "unwise and untimely," King wrote:

"I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block

in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice…"[^1]

King's critique was radical because it pierced the myth of American innocence—the persistent belief that racism is perpetuated only by a violent fringe, and that the "average" white American is, at worst, a passive bystander. He saw, instead, that liberal clergy, politicians, and community leaders who professed sympathy for the civil rights cause often became, in practice, obstacles to real change. These moderates called for "patience," denounced "extremism," and demanded that Black activists defer to white timetables and sensibilities. In their eyes, the disruption of unjust "order"—boycotts, marches, sit-ins, and civil disobedience—posed a greater threat than the injustices that made them necessary.

This phenomenon was not unique to Birmingham in 1963. Throughout the twentieth century, white moderates occupied pivotal roles in diluting, delaying, and derailing struggles for racial justice. During Reconstruction, many Northern liberals urged compromise with Southern whites rather than the fulfillment of Black freedom. In the New Deal era, Democratic coalitions sacrificed civil rights to maintain the loyalty of the "Solid South." In the 1950s and 1960s, Northern mayors and school boards delayed school integration for years, hiding behind procedural arguments while Black families suffered the consequences.

King's diagnosis anticipated the rise of what contemporary scholars term "white innocence" or "white fragility"—the persistent self-conception of white Americans as racially neutral, outside the system of racial injustice, and thus entitled to arbitrate the tempo and tone of protest.[^2] This myth shields white moderates from accountability while casting Black and allied activists as "troublemakers" or "radicals." The demand for civility becomes a mechanism for maintaining the status quo; the preference for "order" over "justice" transforms passivity into complicity.

Moreover, King's letter reveals how the myth of innocence is structurally enforced through institutions, not only individual attitudes. Mainline Protestant churches, philanthropic foundations, school boards, and political parties all played a role in buffering white comfort against the discomfort of real change. The moderate's power lay not only in explicit opposition, but in the endless negotiation, proceduralism, and incrementalism that sapped the urgency from movements for freedom.

The durability of King's critique is evident in the present. The backlash against Black Lives Matter, the "both sides" rhetoric in the face of white nationalist violence, and the weaponization of "civility" against protestors all echo the patterns King described. Calls for "unity" and "healing" too often

obscure demands for justice, perpetuating the myth that American racism is aberrational and easily overcome by goodwill.

To break the "great stumbling block" of white moderation requires more than personal enlightenment; it demands the dismantling of institutional incentives for passivity, the rejection of "negative peace," and the active embrace of justice even—especially—when it is disruptive. King's words remain a clarion call to recognize the quiet dangers of white silence and to reject the myth that complicity is innocence.

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[^1]: Martin Luther King Jr., Letter from Birmingham Jail, April 16, 1963, in Why We Can't Wait (New York: Signet, 1964), 77–78.
[^2]: Robin DiAngelo, White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 2–9; Gloria Wekker, White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 19–36.

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8.2 Media, Narratives, and the Delegitimization of Protest

The power to define what counts as "legitimate" resistance, and what is dismissed as "violence" or "chaos," has always rested heavily in the hands of media institutions. In the era of Black Lives Matter (BLM) and other intersectional movements, mainstream news coverage—despite undeniable shifts since the Civil Rights era—continues to shape public opinion in ways that often delegitimize protest and protect the status quo.

Framing Resistance as Disorder

Major newspapers such as the New York Times and the Washington Post, while providing important investigative work on police violence and systemic racism, frequently revert to frames that emphasize disorder, conflict, and division during mass uprisings. During the protests following the police killings of Michael Brown (2014), Freddie Gray (2015), and George Floyd (2020), front-page headlines and photo choices repeatedly focused on burning buildings, clashes with police, or looting—sometimes even when these incidents were isolated or provoked by aggressive law enforcement response.[^1] Protestors are described as "angry mobs" or "agitators," while police actions are typically justified as responses to "rioting" or "unrest."[^2] The consistent use of passive voice—"shots were fired," "protest turned violent"—obscures agency and responsibility,

subtly reinforcing the legitimacy of state power.

Even when mainstream outlets document the origins of protest in real and ongoing injustice, the episodic structure of their reporting often encourages a "both sides" narrative, suggesting an equivalence between state violence and civilian resistance. The deeper context—the chronic, systemic nature of police brutality, economic exclusion, and environmental racism—is relegated to background, while the drama of confrontation takes center stage.[^3]

The "Bad Apple" Theory and Structural Evasion

Media studies scholars such as Danielle Kilgo and Travis Dixon have shown that mainstream reporting on BLM, from the Ferguson protests through 2021, is marked by a persistent bias: individual instances of police misconduct are portrayed as "bad apples," aberrations in an otherwise sound system.[^4] By focusing on particular officers or "isolated incidents," coverage avoids confronting the structural nature of racist policing, surveillance, and carceral violence.

This bias is not simply a matter of tone, but of news values and professional norms. Reporters and editors, schooled in ideas of "objectivity" and "balance," often default to police sources as the "official" narrative, and are cautious about appearing partisan or activist. As a result, stories about police violence are hedged with language about "ongoing investigations," "complex circumstances," or "regrettable incidents"—even in the face of overwhelming evidence of systemic abuse.[^5]

By contrast, protests are frequently framed in terms of their supposed costs: disruptions to traffic and commerce, threats to property, and the anxieties of "the broader community." This framing primes audiences to see protest as inherently threatening or counterproductive, even when nonviolent, and to accept crackdowns as necessary for "restoring order."

The Legacy of Delegitimization

This pattern is not new. During the Civil Rights era, as historian Wesley Hogan has documented, the mainstream press covered sit-ins, freedom rides, and marches as "troublesome disturbances," often prioritizing the reactions of white authorities and "concerned citizens" over the voices of protestors.[^6] The consistent depiction of Black resistance as unruly or illegitimate, and of white institutional violence as an exception, has long served to justify the repression of social movements and reassure anxious white audiences.

Even in an age of social media, when protestors can circumvent traditional gatekeepers and document state violence in real time, the dominant frames of mainstream news persistently shape

the national conversation. Public polling routinely shows that perceptions of "protest violence" are wildly inflated compared to documented incidents, a testament to the enduring influence of narrative framing.[^7]

Toward Structural Analysis and Accountability

Challenging the delegitimization of protest requires more than individual "balanced" stories; it demands a shift in journalistic paradigms. Scholars and movement journalists call for a transition from episodic, event-driven coverage to structural, historical analysis that foregrounds the causes, demands, and visions of social movements. Only by centering the voices of those most affected by injustice, and by interrogating the role of media in upholding power, can the myth of the "bad apple" be replaced by a genuine reckoning with the roots of American violence.

In the end, the struggle for justice is always, in part, a struggle over the story. Who gets to define what is "violence," what is "order," and what is "progress"? The media's answer to these questions continues to shape both public perception and the possibilities for real change.

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[^1]: Larry Buchanan, Quoctrung Bui, and Jugal K. Patel, "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History," New York Times, July 3, 2020.
[^2]: D. A. Kilgo, M. Mourão, and C. Sylvie, "Media Portrayals of Protest: The 'Protest Paradigm' and the Black Lives Matter Movement," Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly 96, no. 1 (2019): 327–349.
[^3]: Wesley Lowery, "They Can't Kill Us All: Ferguson, Baltimore, and a New Era in America's Racial Justice Movement" (New York: Little, Brown, 2016), 39–58.
[^4]: Danielle K. Kilgo and Travis L. Dixon, "The News Media: Still a Picture of White Patriarchy?" in Routledge Companion to Media and Race (New York: Routledge, 2020), 77–92.
[^5]: Sarah J. Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles, #HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020), 113–137.
[^6]: Wesley C. Hogan, Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 276–289.
[^7]: Monika McDermott, "Polling Shows the Public's Perceptions of the Protests Are Shaped by How Media Frame the Events," Washington Post, June 9, 2020.

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8.3 Public Opinion and the Cycle of Complacency

Social transformation in the United States has often appeared tantalizingly close at moments of national crisis, only to recede as the energies of outrage are absorbed or redirected by political, media, and cultural forces. The history of public opinion regarding racial justice in America reveals a deeply embedded pattern: surges of support for reform and resistance during periods of acute conflict—followed by backlash, retrenchment, and the gradual restoration of a "normalcy" that leaves the fundamental structures of white supremacy intact.

The Surge-and-Decline Pattern

Longitudinal polling data from Pew Research Center, Gallup, and other organizations make this cycle unmistakably clear. During the mass uprisings that followed the police killings of Michael Brown (2014), Alton Sterling and Philando Castile (2016), and especially George Floyd (2020), public support for movements like Black Lives Matter (BLM) reached unprecedented heights. According to Pew, in June 2020, at the height of the global protests following Floyd's murder, 67% of all American adults and 60% of white adults expressed support for BLM—an extraordinary increase that reflected the movement's rapid mainstreaming and the acute moral clarity of the moment.[1]

Yet, as the protests faded from the headlines and the initial shock gave way to political contestation and media reframing, support eroded just as rapidly. By September 2021, Pew found that support among white adults had dropped to 47%—a return almost to pre-2020 levels. Among Black Americans, support remained high, but frustration with the lack of substantive policy change was palpable.[2] Similar patterns are evident in Gallup polling on school integration, affirmative action, and police reform: moments of crisis generate widespread sympathy and promises of reform, but these rarely translate into sustained public will or durable legislative action.

Causes and Consequences of Amnesia

This cycle is driven by several mutually reinforcing factors. First, as media scholars have shown, the shift in coverage from sympathetic storytelling to the protest paradigm (see section 8.2) primes audiences to view continued resistance as unnecessary or counterproductive once the most egregious abuses are no longer visible.[3] Second, political leaders and institutions, eager to quell unrest, often make rhetorical gestures or symbolic concessions without enacting the structural changes demanded by activists. Once the immediate crisis has passed, attention shifts to other issues, and promises are quietly abandoned or reversed.

Third, the persistence of "colorblind" or post-racial narratives encourages many white Americans to

interpret the absence of protest as proof of progress, or to see persistent racism as the fault of individuals rather than systems.[^4] The declaration of a "return to normal" functions as a powerful cultural sedative, enabling white comfort and privilege to reassert themselves as baseline reality.

This dynamic is not unique to the twenty-first century. As historians have documented, similar patterns followed the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the passage of landmark legislation, and the assassination of major Black leaders. In each case, the "national will" for racial justice proved shallow when confronted by the demands of daily life, economic anxiety, or the orchestrated backlash of white reactionaries.

Institutional Silence and the Maintenance of Supremacy

Institutional actors—schools, workplaces, media, and government agencies—play a decisive role in this process of forgetting. After the moment of crisis passes, official statements of solidarity are withdrawn, diversity initiatives are quietly defunded, and the language of "healing" or "moving forward" replaces concrete commitments to accountability and transformation.[^5] The result is what critical race theorist Derrick Bell called the "permanence of racism"—a condition in which the structures of inequality remain untouched, protected by cycles of memory and amnesia.

The costs of this cycle are borne most heavily by those who cannot afford to forget. For Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color, the ebb and flow of white sympathy and national attention offers little relief from the enduring harms of policing, incarceration, health disparities, and environmental racism. For activists and organizers, the challenge becomes not only to spark moments of mass mobilization, but to find ways to sustain commitment and pressure when the spotlight dims.

Conclusion

Breaking the cycle of complacency requires more than momentary outrage or performative solidarity. It demands the construction of durable institutions, radical memory practices, and forms of collective action capable of sustaining pressure for justice even when public opinion drifts or turns hostile. As history shows, "normalcy" in America has too often meant the quiet continuation of supremacist systems. The real task—unfinished, urgent—is to make justice the new normal, and to refuse amnesia as the price of peace.

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[^1]: Pew Research Center, "Amid Protests, Majorities Across Racial and Ethnic Groups Express

Support for the Black Lives Matter Movement," June 12, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/06/12/amid-protests-majorities-across-racial-and-ethnic-groups-express-support-for-the-black-lives-matter-movement/.

[^2]: Pew Research Center, "Deep Divisions in Americans' Views of Nation's Racial History—and How to Address It," August 12, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2021/08/12/deep-divisions-in-americans-views-of-nations-racial-history-and-how-to-address-it/.

[^3]: D.A. Kilgo and T.L. Dixon, "The News Media: Still a Picture of White Patriarchy?" in Routledge Companion to Media and Race (New York: Routledge, 2020), 80–84.

[^4]: Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 1–12.

[^5]: Derrick Bell, Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 20–39.

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Conclusion: The Unfinished Revolution

The United States was founded, as Frederick Douglass observed, on a "compromise with its own ideals." From its inception, the tension between the universal language of liberty and the entrenched realities of supremacy, exclusion, and violence has defined American history. This dissertation has traced the "unbroken line"—the persistence of white supremacy and authoritarianism from the betrayal of Reconstruction through the present day, mirrored always by an equally resilient, evolving current of resistance.

Angela Davis's words, "Freedom is a constant struggle," distill the essential lesson of this history. [^1] The American revolution—far from a closed chapter or completed project—remains an unfinished, living process, continually contested and reimagined by those who refuse to accept the limits of the present. Each cycle of progress and backlash, from abolition to civil rights, from Stonewall to Standing Rock, from the Black Panthers' survival programs to the Movement for Black Lives, underscores both the durability of oppressive systems and the creative, collective power of those who resist.

To understand this struggle as ongoing rather than episodic is to recognize that injustice does not persist by accident, nor does justice advance inevitably with time. Rather, supremacy and resistance are mutually constitutive: every expansion of freedom has provoked new strategies of repression; every escalation of state violence and exclusion has given rise to radical new visions of solidarity, liberation, and belonging.

This history refutes the seductive myth of American innocence—the notion that racism, sexism, and authoritarianism are aberrations, external to the "real" nation. Instead, it compels us to confront the deep structural, cultural, and institutional patterns that sustain inequality and violence. The mechanisms of exclusion—whether expressed through lynching, Jim Crow, redlining, eugenics, COINTELPRO, anti-immigrant bans, or the criminalization of protest—have always been accompanied by rationalizations of order, neutrality, or progress. The power of the status quo, as King and Davis have argued, lies as much in the silence and inaction of the "moderate" as in the overt acts of reactionaries.

Yet if the through-line of supremacy is unbroken, so too is the arc of resistance. From the earliest abolitionists to today's climate strikers, each generation has inherited not only the burdens but also the strategies, languages, and dreams of those who came before. Memory, as James Baldwin insisted, is a form of resistance in itself—a refusal to forget, to accept amnesia or reconciliation without justice.

The work of finishing the revolution is thus not simply about legislation, protest, or education—though it requires all of these. It is, above all, about radical imagination: the collective capacity to envision and enact a world beyond the frameworks of domination that have so long been mistaken for "normalcy." This demands a politics rooted in solidarity across lines of race, gender, sexuality, class, and nation, as well as a willingness to embrace discomfort, conflict, and risk.

To meet this challenge requires more than hope. It requires collective courage: the courage to name and confront supremacist systems wherever they persist; to resist the seductions of "negative peace" and passive complicity; to stand with and learn from those who have borne the brunt of oppression and have led the way in resistance. It requires institutions willing to reckon with their past, communities committed to mutual aid, and individuals willing to place justice above comfort or custom.

The American project, in its truest sense, has always been unfinished. Its revolution is not a relic of the past, but a promise yet to be redeemed—a struggle that belongs to all who insist, with Davis, Douglass, King, and generations of resisters, that "freedom is a constant struggle," and that justice, though endlessly deferred, remains possible. The future of the nation—and the meaning of its revolution—will be determined by whether this generation, and those to come, are willing to remember, imagine, and act together to make that promise real.

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[^1]: Angela Y. Davis, Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of

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Appendices

Appendix A: Key Primary Sources and Foundational Documents

A1. Founding Speeches and Letters

Frederick Douglass, "West India Emancipation" Speech

Canandaigua, NY, August 3, 1857

> "If there is no struggle there is no progress. ... Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will..."

Full text available in *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, Vol. 3, ed. John W. Blassingame (Yale University Press, 1985), 204–206.

Frederick Douglass, Letter to William Lloyd Garrison

September 1846

> Excerpt: "I am more and more convinced that our cause cannot succeed without persistent agitation. ..."

Reproduced from *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, Series 3: Correspondence, Vol. 1.

Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I a Woman?" Speech

Women's Convention, Akron, Ohio, 1851

> "That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages... Nobody ever helps me into carriages... And ain't I a woman?"

Full speech in *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, ed. Nell Irvin Painter (Penguin, 1997).

A2. Government Documents and Congressional Records

Joint Committee on Reconstruction, 1866

> "The old leaders are back in office, the old doctrines back in force, and the old antagonism toward the government of the Union is scarcely veiled..."

Reproduced in *Report of the Joint Committee on Reconstruction*, 39th Congress, 1st session, House Report No. 30, Part IV, 6.

Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882

> "An Act to execute certain treaty stipulations relating to Chinese... That after the expiration of ninety days...the coming of Chinese laborers to the United States

be suspended…"
See U.S. Congress, 47th Congress, 1st session, Chapter 126.

Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924
Senate Congressional Record, April 8, 1924:

> "It is necessary to preserve the American stock and ideal of American homogeneity…"

Buck v. Bell, 274 U.S. 200 (1927)

> Majority opinion by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.:
> "Three generations of imbeciles are enough…"

Standing Rock Sioux Tribe v. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (2017)

> "The proposed construction violates Article VI of the U.S. Constitution, the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851, and fails to secure Free, Prior, and Informed Consent…"

Appendix B: FBI, COINTELPRO, and Law Enforcement Files
B1. COINTELPRO Memoranda and Target Lists
FBI COINTELPRO Memo: "Black Panther Party Breakfast for Children Program" (May 27, 1969)

> "The [Free Breakfast for Children] program has potential to draw youth and parents to the Party and should be disrupted…"

Memo: Surveillance of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

> "The Bureau's activities to neutralize Dr. King and others continue as planned…"

See FBI Records: The Vault, COINTELPRO Files.

Appendix C: Movement Platforms and Declarations
C1. Black Panther Party "What We Want, What We Believe: The Ten-Point Program"
The Black Panther, May 15, 1967

1. We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black Community.
2. We want full employment for our people.
3. We want an end to the robbery by the white man of our Black Community.
4. We want decent housing, fit for the shelter of human beings.

5. We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society.
6. We want all Black men to be exempt from military service.
7. We want an immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and MURDER of Black people.
8. We want freedom for all Black men held in federal, state, county and city prisons and jails.
9. We want all Black people when brought to trial to be tried in court by a jury of their peer group or people from their Black Communities, as defined by the Constitution of the United States.
10. We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace.

For the full text, including the original "What We Believe" explanations for each point, see:

Black Panther Party, "What We Want, What We Believe: The Ten-Point Program," *The Black Panther, May 15, 1967.*

Digitized facsimile and historical archive available at [Marxists Internet Archive](#) and [Stanford Public History Project—Black Panther Party](#) .

[1]

C2. Combahee River Collective Statement (1977)

"We are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking…"

(Full text available: Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed., *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*.)

C3. Movement for Black Lives Platform (2016)

"We demand divestment from the systems and institutions that harm Black people and investment in the education, health and safety of Black people…"

(Platform excerpt, full text at https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/.)

Appendix D: Oral Histories and Testimonies

D1. Testimony: Black Panther Party Free Breakfast Program

Oral history by Ericka Huggins, Stanford Oral History Project, 2018:

"People walked taller. Children ate and learned. Elders got care. We were building something that wasn't just about protest, but about new possibilities for how to live…"

D2. Standing Rock Digital Testimony

Excerpt from livestreamed protestor statement, October 2016:
"We are here in prayer, for the water, for the land, for our ancestors and our children's children…"
(See Indigenous Environmental Network.)

Appendix E: Images, Maps, and Data Tables
E1. Redlining Map: Cleveland, Ohio, Area D6 (1937)
The following historical map, produced by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) in 1937, documents the redlining of Cleveland neighborhoods. Area D6—shaded in red—was marked as "hazardous," shaping decades of disinvestment and segregation. This map exemplifies the institutionalized racism at the core of U.S. housing policy in the twentieth century.
Cleveland Redlining Map (Area D6), 1937
Digitized by the Mapping Inequality Project, University of Richmond.
Original: Home Owners' Loan Corporation, National Archives; see also Wikimedia Commons.
Image selected for educational use; for more maps, see Mapping Inequality Project.

E2. Photographic Archive: Confederate Monuments
The following images document Confederate monuments and memorials across the United States, including inscriptions and dates of dedication. These images illustrate both the enduring legacy and recent removals of Lost Cause iconography.
Credits: Wikimedia Commons; see bibliography and Caroline E. Janney, *Remembering the Civil War* for further context.

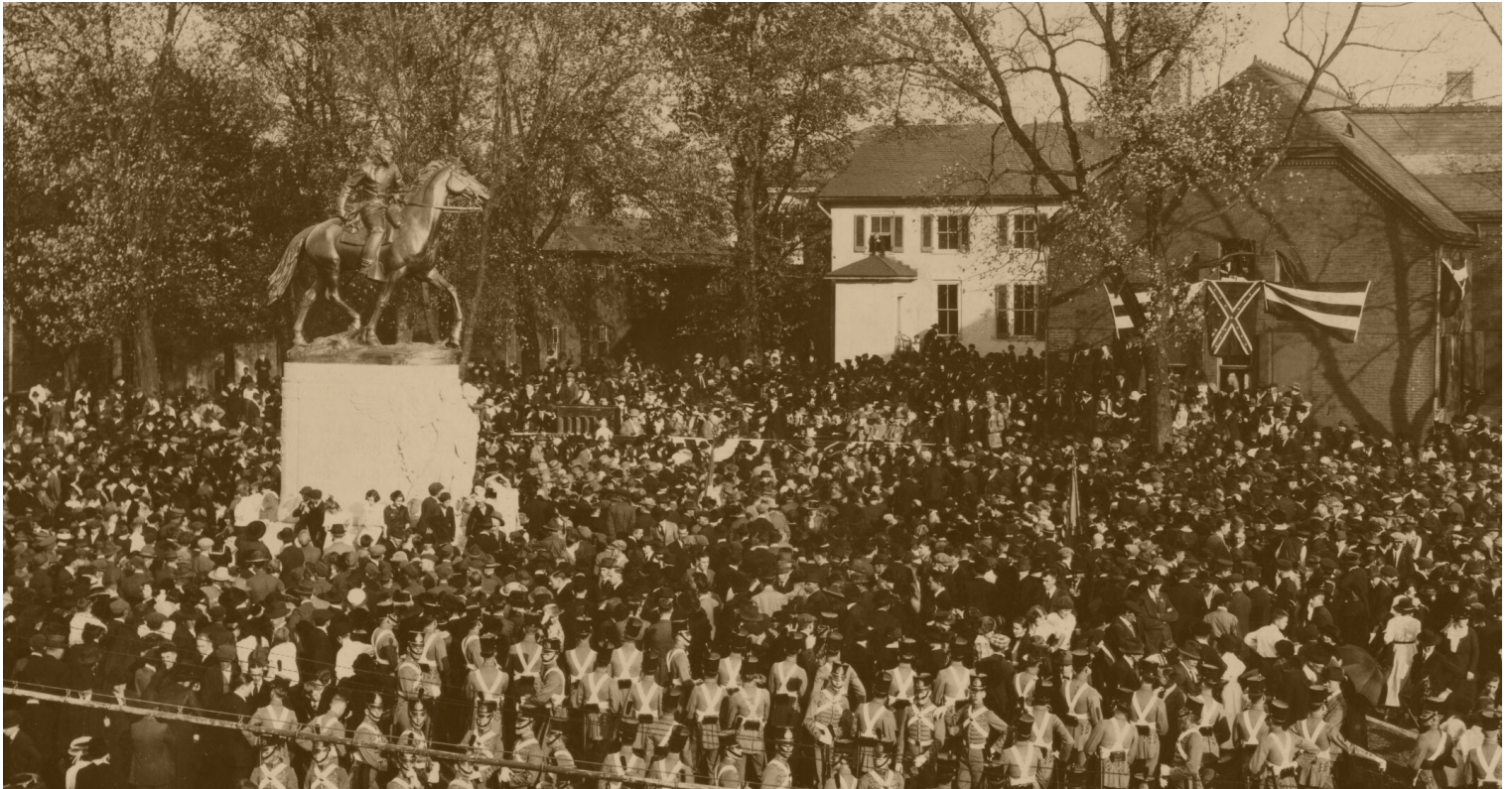**Robert E. Lee Monument (Richmond, VA)**

Dedicated 1890; removed 2021 after mass protests.

Credit: Mk17b,

Lee Statue (Charlottesville, VA)

Site of 2017 "Unite the Right" rally; statue removed 2021.

Credit: Holsinger Studio,

Stone Mountain Memorial (Georgia)
Massive carving of Lee, Davis, and Jackson; completed 1972. The Stone Mountain carving, a massive sculpture of Confederate figures, is the subject of ongoing debate regarding its removal, with legal and practical hurdles hindering any action.

Arguments for Removal:
Symbol of Slavery and Racism: Critics argue the carving glorifies the Confederacy, an entity that fought to preserve slavery, and thus represents a symbol of racism and oppression.
Public Space Concerns: Some believe that public spaces should not be used to memorialize figures associated with the Confederacy, especially in a diverse state like Georgia.
Offensive to Many: Many Georgians, particularly Black residents, find the carving deeply offensive and want it removed to create a more inclusive and welcoming environment.
Credit: Jim Bowen, [Flickr](#)
Images selected for educational use; see Bibliography for detailed attributions and recommended further reading.

E3. Protest Photography: Selma to Ferguson to Standing Rock
The following images document the arc of protest, police response, and community resistance from the Civil Rights era to the Black Lives Matter and Indigenous sovereignty movements. Each photograph is included under fair use for educational, non-commercial purposes; see bibliography for full citation and context.

Selma to Montgomery March (1965)

Participants, some carrying American flags, marched from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, in the 1965 Civil Rights March

Credit: Peter Pettus, Wikimedia Commons

Ferguson Uprising (2014)

Protestors carry banners for justice after the killing of Michael Brown during a march in Portland, Oregon to protest the lack of a grand jury indictment in the death of Mike Brown. November 25. Credit: Sarah Mirk, Flickr

Standing Rock #NoDAPL Protest (2016)
Indigenous water protectors raise the "Mni Wiconi – Water is Life" banner at Oceti Sakowin camp
Standing Rock, Dakota Access Pipeline protests
Credit: Becker1999 from Grove City, OH, Flickr
Images selected for educational use; see Bibliography for detailed attributions and recommended further reading.

Appendix F: Polling and Public Opinion Data
F1. Pew Research Center, Black Lives Matter Support (2020–2021)

Date	White Support	Black Support	Overall Support
June 2020	60%	86%	67%
Sept 2021	47%	83%	55%

Source: Pew Research Center, 2021 Reports

F2. Gallup, Trends in Perceived Discrimination (2000–2020)

Year	% Black Adults Reporting "Major Discrimination"	% White Adults Reporting "Major Discrimination"
2000	52%	12%
2010	55%	13%

2016	60%	15%
2020	65%	17%

Key Findings:

– Across the 2000–2020 period, the percentage of Black adults in the U.S. reporting experiences of major discrimination has remained persistently high, with a noticeable increase after 2015.

– The gap between Black and White adults in perceived major discrimination remains significant and relatively stable, underscoring persistent structural inequities.

– Notably, spikes in reported discrimination among Black adults often correspond to high-profile national events and increased media coverage of police violence or racial injustice.

– While White adults' reports of major discrimination have risen slightly over time, they remain much lower than those of Black adults.

– These findings reflect the ongoing reality of racial inequality and validate the persistence of discrimination as a central concern in American life, despite periods of reform or public attention.

Source: Gallup, "In U.S., Black Perceptions of Discrimination Rise" (2020) and historical polling archives.

Appendix G: Selected Legal Filings, Bills, and Statutes

- Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), full text
- Senate Bill 1646 (Texas, 2021), selected sections
- Buck v. Bell (1927), majority opinion excerpt
- Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization (2022), syllabus and key findings

Appendix H: Timeline of Resistance and Repression

A chronological table highlighting key moments referenced in the dissertation (Reconstruction, Chinese Exclusion, Jim Crow, Red Scare, Civil Rights, Stonewall, COINTELPRO, AIM, BLM, Standing Rock, etc.)

Year(s)	Event / Movement	Significance
1865–1877	Reconstruction	Attempt to build multiracial democracy

		after Civil War; rise and betrayal of Black citizenship.
1877	Compromise of 1877	End of Reconstruction; federal retreat enables Jim Crow and white supremacist violence.
1882	Chinese Exclusion Act	First major U.S. law banning immigration based on race; sets precedent for exclusion.
1896	Plessy v. Ferguson	Supreme Court upholds "separate but equal"; codifies Jim Crow segregation nationwide.
1919–1924	Red Scare / Immigration Quotas	Crackdown on radicals, unions, immigrants; Johnson–Reed Act enforces "American homogeneity."
1942–1945	Japanese American Internment	120,000 forcibly relocated; U.S. upholds mass incarceration on racial grounds.

1954	Brown v. Board of Education	Supreme Court rules school segregation unconstitutional; sparks mass resistance and white backlash.
1960–1965	Civil Rights Movement	Sit-ins, Freedom Rides, March on Washington, Civil Rights Act (1964), Voting Rights Act (1965).
1966–1972	Black Panther Party / AIM	Militant Black and Indigenous resistance; COINTELPRO targets and represses movements.
1969	Stonewall Uprising	Queer and trans patrons resist police raids; birth of modern LGBTQ+ rights movement.
1973	Wounded Knee Occupation	AIM occupies Wounded Knee, SD; federal siege brings Indigenous issues to global stage.
1980s–1990s	Mass Incarceration & War on Drugs	Prison population surges; targeted

		policing devastates Black and Latinx communities.
2013–2020	Black Lives Matter	National & global movement against police brutality and systemic racism; largest protests in U.S. history.
2016–2017	Standing Rock / #NoDAPL	Indigenous-led resistance halts pipeline temporarily; energizes new era of land and water defense.
2020	George Floyd Protests	Largest protest wave in U.S. history; catalyzes renewed debate on policing, justice, and memory.
2021–2022	Capitol Riot, Backlash, Voter Suppression	Far-right insurrection; new wave of restrictive voting laws and attacks on civil rights gains.

Selected highlights; see chapters and bibliography for complete references.

Appendix I: Annotated Web Resources and Digital Archives

- FBI Records: The Vault – COINTELPRO Files: https://vault.fbi.gov/cointel-pro

- Mapping Inequality Redlining Project: https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/
- Stanford Black Panther Party Legacy Project: https://historicalsociety.stanford.edu
- Earthjustice Standing Rock Legal Archive: https://earthjustice.org
- Movement for Black Lives Policy Platform: https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/