

FIRST WORDS

The Easiest Way to Get Rid of Racism? Just Redefine It.

By Greg Howard

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On its face, inviting a former grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan onto your radio show is a risky proposition with very little upside. The situation gets even more precarious when you're inviting this ex-wizard to dole out opinions on race. But these are wild times we're living in, which is why David Duke — who has emerged as a top cheerleader for the Republican presidential nominee, Donald J. Trump — appeared on N.P.R.'s "Morning Edition" two weeks ago and defended the candidate from charges of racism.

The surprise was that Duke, now running for a Senate seat, actually had some perceptive things to say. The rising tide of buttoned-up Republicans who have spoken out against Trump's ethnic belligerence, he said, were betraying both "the Republican Party and certainly conservatism." He then managed to dismiss those Republicans and swiftly parse a complex national paradox. "These are just nothing more than epithets and vicious attacks," Duke said. "Donald Trump is not a racist. And the truth is, in this country, if you simply defend the heritage of European-American people, then you're automatically a racist. There's massive racial discrimination against European-Americans, and that's the reality."

In positioning Trump as the victim of a smear campaign, Duke was defending him against claims of deep, personal, cancer-of-the-soul racism. Trump isn't racist, said the ex-Klan boss (who, of course, also isn't racist), because he doesn't harbor hate in his heart for America's racial minorities. But then he pivoted. The real problem, he claimed, is *systemic* racism, directed against European-Americans.

This is how David Duke, who most diverges from the stereotypical Klansman in that he wears suits, revealed an understanding that systems of race are more important than one person's motives, reputation or emotional health — that there is racism, and then there is racism, and the two are not the same.

The first cited use of "racism" in The Oxford English Dictionary comes from 1902, during the well-intentioned Lake Mohonk Conference of Friends of the Indian. There, a white

man, Richard Henry Pratt, criticized government policy toward Native Americans. “Segregating any class or race of people apart from the rest of the people kills the progress of the segregated people or makes their growth very slow,” he said. “Association of races and classes is necessary to destroy racism and classism.” Pratt was what we might call “progressive” for his time; his version of destroying racism involved forcibly assimilating Native Americans into white culture. (As he put it, “Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.”) Both of these options — segregation by force or assimilation by force — had disastrous effects for Native Americans. But for Pratt, racism was a matter of policy, not malice.

“Racism” spent the first half of the 20th century in competition with another word, “racialism,” though neither featured prominently in our national conversation. Then came the civil rights era, when the word took on for many a convenient new meaning, one that had more to do with the human heart than with practices like redlining, gerrymandering or voter intimidation. In 1964, Gov. George Wallace of Alabama — who just a year earlier promised “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever” — explained the clear difference, in his mind, between a racist and a segregationist: “A racist is one who despises someone because of his color, and an Alabama segregationist is one who conscientiously believes that it is in the best interest of the Negro and white to have a separate educational and social order.”

Soon, nearly everyone could agree that racism was the evil work of people with hate in their hearts — bigots. This was a convenient thing for white Americans to believe. Racism, they could say, was the work of *racists*. And wherever you looked, there were no racists: only good men like Wallace, minding the welfare of their black fellow citizens, or the segregationist South Carolina senator Strom Thurmond, defending states’ rights. Racism definitely existed, at some point — no one was out there denying that slavery had happened — but its residue had settled only in the hearts of the most unsavory individuals. Society as a whole didn’t need reform for the sins of a few.

Racism ceased to be a matter of systems and policy and became a referendum on the rot of the individual soul. Calling people racist was no longer a matter of evaluating their opinions; it was an accusation of being irrevocably warped at the very core. We can see how this plays out in news coverage of things that are, in fact, racist. “Racist” is seen as such a deep personal attack that it’s safer and more civil — particularly in the eyes of mainstream media organizations — to refer to things as racially charged, or tinged, or explosive, or divisive, or (when all else fails) just plain *racial*.

In May, Trump made news by railing against Gonzalo Curiel, the Indiana-born Mexican-American federal judge presiding over litigation against Trump University. Trump called

him “very hostile” and suggested that he recuse himself. “This judge is of Mexican heritage,” Trump explained to CNN’s Jake Tapper. “I’m building a wall, O.K.?”

Soon after, the speaker of the House, Paul Ryan, materialized to make a rare sort of public statement, actually agreeing with charges of racism against a candidate he still endorsed. “Claiming a person can’t do their job because of their race is sort of like the textbook definition of a racist comment,” he said.

Ryan then appeared on the “Kilmeade and Friends” radio show. “Are you saying that Donald Trump’s a racist?” Brian Kilmeade asked. “No, I’m not,” Ryan replied. “I’m saying the comment was. I don’t know what’s in his heart.”

Here, in a nutshell, is the public evolution of this word. Sure, Trump appeared to be suggesting a race-based test of judicial fitness. But the House speaker couldn’t speak to the state of Trump’s soul. He’s not God.

Trump, with his years of practice fielding such charges, had a different response. He seems to understand that charges of racism are essentially toothless, because the bar of proof is now so high that it’s impossible to clear. But he also understands that the seriousness of the accusation can have a paralyzing effect upon its target. So he coached his surrogates on how to respond. “The people asking the questions,” Trump told his proxies, “those are the racists. I would go at ’em.”

This is the end result of redefining racism to mean malice in one’s heart. Once whites moved the goal posts, anyone could be the victim of racism, and anyone could be racist. Activists opposing racism could be racist. President Obama casually mentioning that he, like Trayvon Martin, is black — this could be a deeply racist act. Advocates of busing programs or affirmative action could be racist. Minorities resentful over their treatment in America could be the real racists, the ones whose hearts insist on “making everything about race.” Al Sharpton is a racist. Beyoncé Knowles is a racist. Kanye West is definitely a racist.

A recent Justice Department investigation into the Baltimore Police Department unearthed rampant racial discrimination and routine violations of civil rights that specifically targeted the city’s black residents. And yet nonviolent movements like Black Lives Matter, which emerged three years ago to combat these exact issues, have instead been identified as bad actors, thugs and outside agitators — just last month, former Mayor Rudy Giuliani of New York said, “When you say ‘black lives matter,’ that is inherently racist.”

Someone, after all, must be racist: More than half of white Americans now believe that

they're discriminated against as much as minorities. Who, then, is doing the discriminating?

It's not that anyone denies that institutional racism once existed. But the belief now is that systemic racism is a national cancer that was excised long ago, in an operation so successful it didn't even leave lasting effects. All that remains is individual hatred in the souls of the most monstrous among us — or else, depending on whom you ask, in vengeful minorities who want to nurse grievances and see whites suffer for the sins of past generations. Through the willful perversion of shared history, whites have been able to appropriate the victimhood of minorities and, in an audacious reversal, insist that an obvious thing isn't real — otherwise known as gaslighting. And as in any case of sustained abuse, gaslighting is integral to institutional racism.

"Everybody's walking on eggshells," Clint Eastwood said, in a recent interview with *Esquire*. "We see people accusing people of being racist and all kinds of stuff. When I grew up, those things weren't called racist."

Even delivered by an 86-year-old Hollywood tough guy, the absurdity of these words astounds. Here is a white man telling minorities what real racism looks like. He's not alone, either: It's common for white Americans to position themselves as the neutral arbiters of what is or is not racist and what other Americans are allowed to be angered by. Lo and behold, the answer is always the same — *real* institutional racism always ends up being something from the past, something dealt with, not an ongoing system of policy that afflicts minorities and profits white people to this day. Offer any objections, any other experience of the world, and the response you'll get is the same one Eastwood offered in *Esquire*:

"Just [expletive] get over it."