

#89 What's So Great about Being White?

375 people have now been arrested, charged and intensively interviewed about their participation in the attack on the US Capitol January 6. A reliable picture is emerging of who they are and what motivated them.

It's no surprise that they were overwhelmingly white and male and strongly influenced by Donald Trump's campaign to overturn the November election

But it came as a bit of a surprise, at least to some, that only about 10% were members of known far right groups like the Proud Boys. And that the attackers as a whole we're not under-educated know-nothings, as assumed by the initial media coverage, but in fact socially, educationally, and economically middle class.

The one unifying motivation, in both the white-collar and blue-collar rioters, was their fury at seeing white people in this country displaced by people of color in so many sectors of daily life.

It's a change they perceive as leaving whites a threatened and beleaguered minority.

According to the interviews, it was this anger and fear of replacement, across social classes, and more than any other factor, that drove them to attack the government they'd been pledging allegiance to since they were children.

White supremacist violence in this country didn't start when Donald Trump realized that inciting this fear of losing white power could help push him into the presidency. Oppressing people of color has been a central theme on these shores since Columbus.

Slave labor was essential to establishing the powerful plantation economy in the southern colonies, an economy that couldn't work without the labor of enslaved people. And that was OK, whites reasoned, because Blacks were inferior and therefore rightly of service to their superiors.

It was an interlocking set of self-serving lies that became embedded in white society and culture.

The Civil War may have formally ended slavery but it certainly didn't end the deeply embedded attitudes of white supremacy that fed lynchings, Jim Crow and now the Trump-fueled racism of the last four years.

It's not only Blacks who have been deemed inferior, of course.

Every wave of immigrants has been exploited by white citizens—the Chinese in the late 19 century, successive waves of poor Europeans—Poles, Italians, Irish, Slavs. Each met with decades of oppression. And brown people from the south—Mexicans derided as gang bangers and rapists, and Central Americans accused of coming here for a free lunch. Trump's references to COVID-19 as “the China virus” and “Kung-Flu” revved up violence against anyone who looks Asian.

White domination of the politics, economics and culture of this country is a vital need for some whites, and white supremacy seems insatiable in its quest for someone to hate and dominate.

What's behind this fervor? Why are so many whites so scared of people of color achieving parity—economically, politically culturally?

Many white supremacists, like those arrested at the Capitol, will sugarcoat their motivation as economic—lost jobs and unjust tax burdens.

That's a red herring.

Where are people of color forcing whites out of jobs (except perhaps in the National Basketball Association)? And those whites who love stoop labor, plucking chickens and cleaning motel toilets seem nowhere to be found.

Immigrant labor is essential to the viability of large parts of American industry, especially agriculture. And while initially immigrants cost tax dollars in social services, it's also true that the turnaround from net tax receiver to net taxpayer for immigrants is remarkably rapid, especially when their children join the workforce.

No—the seemingly insatiable need on the part of many Americans to be at the top of a pecking order is more about salving their personal insecurities and protecting their sense of importance than it is about protecting their jobs and their wallets.

The need to sustain the illusion of superiority is powerful, especially among whites frustrated by underachieving lives and demanding scapegoats for their failures.

And if a white person like that meets a person of color—in person or perhaps just seeing them in the media—who’s clearly smarter and more accomplished than the white person is, he’s going to cling to the idea that, appearances be damned, there’s still some white mojo that makes him better than that the person he’s looking at.

The need to sustain that pecking order becomes existential.

As a former Foreign Service Officer who’s lived in Africa and Asia a good part of my life and worked at the United Nations where my beat was the entire developing world—I have a hard time trying to figure out what’s so innately great about being white. Try walking on a street in Harare or Danang or Kathmandu and convincing yourself that all those people you see are somehow “less-than” you. There they are, competent, intelligent people, doing their work, creating things, taking care of families and their communities, just as people in mainly white nations do.

I think that that most white supremacists can’t imagine “equality.” All they can imagine is the existing power structure inverted; they have no template for collaboration and team work. They’ve demeaned and disenfranchised people of color for so long that it’s inconceivable to them that people of color would not do the same to them, given the opportunity.

It’s imperative for anti-racists, in their words and actions, to reconfirm “equality” as a clear constitutional right for all Americans. The Trump years may have put a few dents in it but, to me that right seems still very much intact, as is the legal system that protects it. Witness the strong defense of voter rights, even by Republican judges and state election officials last winter, in the face of Trump’s efforts to deny the results of the November vote.

Finally, a word about competition. For a lot of Americans it's hard to imagine a world that isn't based on winning every round and every game, no matter what the game might be

It’s one thing if that game is the Super Bowl or designing the best microchip. It’s quite another if it’s a contest for racial dominance.

I can say, from my long experience as a competitor, that competition can be wonderful and positive, but it can also undercut efforts to build compromise, dialogue, mutual respect, collaboration, equality and team work—all essential to building a just society for all citizens.

How do we get there?

As the US inevitably becomes a nation of shared power among people of all colors, I think the wisest course of action is to shrug, “What’s the big deal?” and move on.

White supremacists will find it very hard to do that. I think the way to diminish their anger and fear is to move on—

~to the jobs and business opportunities that will come as we repair and improve our infrastructure,

~to the life improvements that will come from cleanly running operations of government agencies led by people of all colors,

~to the advances this nation will make as the talents, skills and leadership of all our citizens are recognized and utilized.

~to the accomplishments of kids of all colors who get good public schooling from teachers of all colors.

We’ve got a lot of work to do, and we need all hands on deck to do it all.

Let every citizen see and benefit from the results of an increasingly anti-racist nation. Fox News can’t hide the kind of progress that’s right in Americans’ faces, every day, as these changes roll out

More and more Americans will come to welcome such changes. Not all, perhaps. But more.