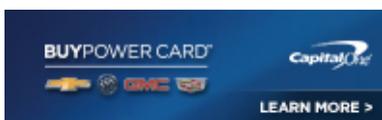




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This is what the legacy of 'white privilege' looks like in Bill O'Reilly's hometown



By **Emily Badger** October 17 [Follow @emilybadger](#)

The [Levittown home of Peg Brennan](#), at 25 Winding Lane, shot in 1958. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Levittown, the Long Island community where Bill O'Reilly grew up, holds a unique place in history for two reasons: It was the original subdivision, a mass-produced town of neatly uniform, affordable Cape Cod homes that would serve as a model for postwar suburbs for decades to come.

And it was available only to whites.

The latter detail — now at the center of [an epic standoff](#)

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[between O'Reilly and Jon Stewart](#) over race, suburbia and the legacy of "white privilege" — wasn't an innovation specific to Levittown. Racial discrimination in housing wasn't merely commonplace in the 1940s and '50s; it was [government policy](#). The Federal Housing Administration helped finance the construction of many suburban places like Levittown on the condition that they exclude blacks. And it underwrote mortgages to white families there with the expectation that their property values would only hold if blacks did not move in.

At first, the requirement that homeowners in Levittown not rent or sell their homes to minorities was included in the deeds to their homes. Yes, homeowners in Bill O'Reilly's hometown were contractually bound to keep out blacks.

But after that explicit discrimination was struck down in court, it lived on in other, important ways. It showed up in the hostility of neighbors and the simple refusal of the Levitt brothers, who built the suburb, to sell the homes they'd designed for World War II veterans to non-whites. In 1957, when Bill O'Reilly was 8 years old, the developer William Levitt explained his logic this way [to the New York Times](#):

The plain fact is that most whites prefer not to live in mixed communities. This attitude may be wrong morally, and some day it may change. I hope it will. But as matters now stand, it is unfair

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to charge an individual with the blame for creating this attitude or saddle him with the sole responsibility for correcting it.

The dual history of this place — as the idyllic town of O'Reilly's telling and the site of [battles fought by black families](#) who tried to live there — has long been an important chapter to urban planners and civil-rights historians. Then, this week, it became the source of this Daily Show exchange:

5 Habits Of People Who Always Get What They Want



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Stewart is determined to use this moment to pin down O'Reilly on whether white privilege still exists in America, an idea the Fox News commentator has dismissed.

O'Reilly is willing to acknowledge past discrimination, but he doesn't see any remnants of it today in a country where people chose where to live and whether to work hard. By his account, slavery and Jim Crow are gone. Barack Obama is president.

In O'Reilly's world, "values" are a big deal (and the absence of them explains many of the country's problems). And it's here that Stewart brings up Levittown, a place from which blacks were systematically excluded during O'Reilly's childhood. "It's a place," Stewart points out to him, "that *built values*."

This jab effectively undercuts O'Reilly's own logic, but it's not actually the most powerful argument about the origins of white privilege in a place like Levittown.

For many people who lived there, that community wasn't just about building values; it was about building wealth.

Levittown was a place where young veterans and blue-collar workers became homeowners for the first time, where they needed no down payment to pick out one of the \$7,990 homes — appliances and manicured yards included. The exclusion of blacks from this community 60 years ago is relevant today not because of some compounding, inter-generational deficit of values, but because Levittown represents the moment and the place where the families of white World War II veterans were given the chance to start building wealth, while the

families of black veterans were not.

Their economic prospects diverged dramatically at that point, in ways that persist today. Now, the wealth gap in America is much wider than the income gap, and homeownership has a lot to do with that. The wealth gap has also been widening dramatically since Bill O'Reilly's childhood:

[Urban Institute](#)

Today, the homeownership rate for blacks (about 44 percent) [remains much lower than for whites](#) (73 percent). And where they owned homes prior to the housing bust — perhaps thanks to family resources built up by an earlier generation — blacks were much more likely to [lose that wealth during the recession](#).

To give a more specific example, researchers at the [Institute on Assets and Social Policy](#) at Brandeis took a closer look at [the widening wealth gap](#) between 1,700 families tracked over time by the Panel Study of Income Dynamics. Over a generation, the wealth gap between these families tripled:

[IASP](#)

And the largest driver of that gap, they found, was the

difference in the number of years of homeownership.

As of the 2010 Census, blacks still made up [less than 1 percent of the population](#) in Levittown. This isn't a reflection of the bias of the people who live there today. But it's easy to imagine if the community had been more open at its origins — if it hadn't become a symbol of discrimination — that it might be more diverse today. The existence of white privilege, though, isn't simply or even primarily visible in the demographics of a cul-de-sac. It exists within the private balance sheets of families, where wealth is accumulated, invested, passed on and leveraged.

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