

Ferguson and white rage

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Two weeks in a row! Two weeks in a row Political EYE – so accustomed to being a lonely voice willing to say “what it is, it ain’t” while most everybody else is trying to act like “what it is, it is” – has found somebody else telling it like it is. Which is, of course, what it ain’t.

Carol Anderson – an associate professor of African American studies and history at Emory University, public voices fellow with the Op-Ed Project and author of “Bourgeois Radicals: The NAACP and the Struggle for Colonial Liberation, 1941-1960” – published a piece in the *Washington Post* arguing that Ferguson only seems to be about black rage against the police. Really, she argues, it’s about white rage against progress. Let’s hear her out.

Carol Anderson writes:

When we look back on what happened in Ferguson, Mo., during the summer of 2014, it will be easy to think of it as yet one more episode of black rage ignited by yet another police killing of an unarmed African-American male. But that has it precisely backward. What we’ve actually seen is the latest outbreak of white rage. Sure, it is cloaked in the niceties of law and order, but it is rage nonetheless.

Protests and looting naturally capture attention. But the real rage smolders in meetings where officials redraw precincts to dilute African-American voting strength or seek to slash the government payrolls that have long served as sources of black employment. It goes virtually unnoticed, however, because white rage doesn’t have to take to the streets and face rubber bullets to be heard. Instead, white rage carries an aura of respectability and has access to the courts, police, legislatures and governors, who cast its efforts as noble, though they are actually driven by the most ignoble motivations.

White rage recurs in American history. It exploded after the Civil War, erupted again to undermine the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and took on its latest incarnation with **Barack Obama**’s ascent to the White House. For every action of African-American advancement, there’s a reaction, a backlash.

The North’s victory in the Civil War did not bring peace. Instead, emancipation brought white resentment that the good ol’ days of black subjugation were over. Legislatures throughout the South scrambled to



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reinscribe white supremacy and restore the aura of legitimacy that the anti-slavery campaign had tarnished. Lawmakers in several states created the Black Codes, which effectively criminalized blackness, sanctioned forced labor and undermined every tenet of democracy. Even the federal authorities' promise of 40 acres — land seized from traitors who had tried to destroy the United States of America — crumbled like dust.

Influential white legislators such as Rep. **Thaddeus Stevens** (R-Pa.) and Sen. **Charles Sumner** (R-Mass.) tried to make this nation live its creed, but they were no match for the swelling resentment that neutralized the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments, and welcomed the Supreme Court's 1876 *United States vs. Cruikshank* decision, which undercut a law aimed at stopping the terror of the Ku Klux Klan.

Nearly 80 years later, *Brown v. Board of Education* seemed like another moment of triumph — with the ruling on the unconstitutionality of separate public schools for black and white students affirming African Americans' rights as citizens. But black children, hungry for quality education, ran headlong into more white rage. Bricks and mobs at school doors were only the most obvious signs. In March 1956, 101 members of Congress issued the Southern Manifesto, declaring war on the *Brown* decision. Governors in Virginia, Arkansas, Alabama, Georgia and elsewhere then launched “massive resistance.”

They created a legal doctrine, interposition, that supposedly nullified any federal law or court decision with which a state disagreed. They passed legislation to withhold public funding from any school that abided by *Brown*. They shut down public school systems and used tax dollars to ensure that whites could continue their education at racially exclusive private academies. Black children were left to rot with no viable option.

A little more than half a century after *Brown*, the election of Obama gave hope to the country and the world that a new racial climate had emerged in America, or that it would. But such audacious hopes would be short-lived. A rash of voter-suppression legislation, a series of unfathomable Supreme Court decisions, the rise of stand-your-ground laws and continuing police brutality make clear that Obama's election and reelection have unleashed yet another wave of fear and anger.

It's more subtle — less overtly racist — than in 1865 or even 1954. It's a remake of the Southern Strategy, crafted in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement to exploit white resentment against African Americans, and deployed with precision by Presidents **Richard Nixon** and **Ronald Reagan**.

As Reagan's key political strategist, **Lee Atwater**, explained in a 1981 interview: “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 ‘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. I'm not saying

that.”

(The interview was originally published anonymously, and only years later did it emerge that Atwater was the subject.)

Now, under the guise of protecting the sanctity of the ballot box, conservatives have devised measures — such as photo ID requirements — to block African Americans’ access to the polls. A joint report by the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund and the NAACP emphasized that the ID requirements would adversely affect more than 6 million African American voters. (Twenty-five percent of black Americans lack a government-issued photo ID, the report noted, compared with only 8 percent of white Americans.)

The Supreme Court sanctioned this discrimination in *Shelby County v. Holder*, which gutted the Voting Rights Act and opened the door to 21st-century versions of 19th-century literacy tests and poll taxes.

The economic devastation of the Great Recession also shows African Americans under siege. The foreclosure crisis hit black Americans harder than any other group in the United States. A 2013 report by researchers at Brandeis University calculated that “half the collective wealth of African-American families was stripped away during the Great Recession,” in large part because of the impact on home equity.

In the process, the wealth gap between blacks and whites grew: Right before the recession, white Americans had four times more wealth than black Americans, on average; by 2010, the gap had increased to six times. This was a targeted hit. Communities of color were far more likely to have riskier, higher-interest-rate loans than white communities, with good credit scores often making no difference.

Add to this the tea party movement’s assault on so-called Big Government, which despite the sanitized language of fiscal responsibility constitutes an attack on African American jobs. Public-sector employment, where there is less discrimination in hiring and pay, has traditionally been an important venue for creating a black middle class.

So when you think of Ferguson, don’t just think of black resentment at a criminal justice system that allows a white police officer to put six bullets into an unarmed black teen. Consider the economic dislocation of black America.

Remember a Florida judge instructing a jury to focus only on the moment when **George Zimmerman** and **Trayvon Martin** interacted, thus transforming a 17-year-old, unarmed kid into a big, scary black guy, while the grown man who stalked him through the neighborhood with a loaded gun becomes a victim.

Remember the assault on the Voting Rights Act.

Look at *Connick v. Thompson*, a partisan 5-4 Supreme Court decision in 2011 that ruled it was legal for a city prosecutor's staff to hide evidence that exonerated a black man who was rotting on death row for 14 years.

And think of a recent study by Stanford University psychology researchers concluding that, when white people were told that black Americans are incarcerated in numbers far beyond their proportion of the population, "they reported being more afraid of crime and more likely to support the kinds of punitive policies that exacerbate the racial disparities," such as three-strikes or stop-and-frisk laws.

Only then does Ferguson make sense. It's about white rage.