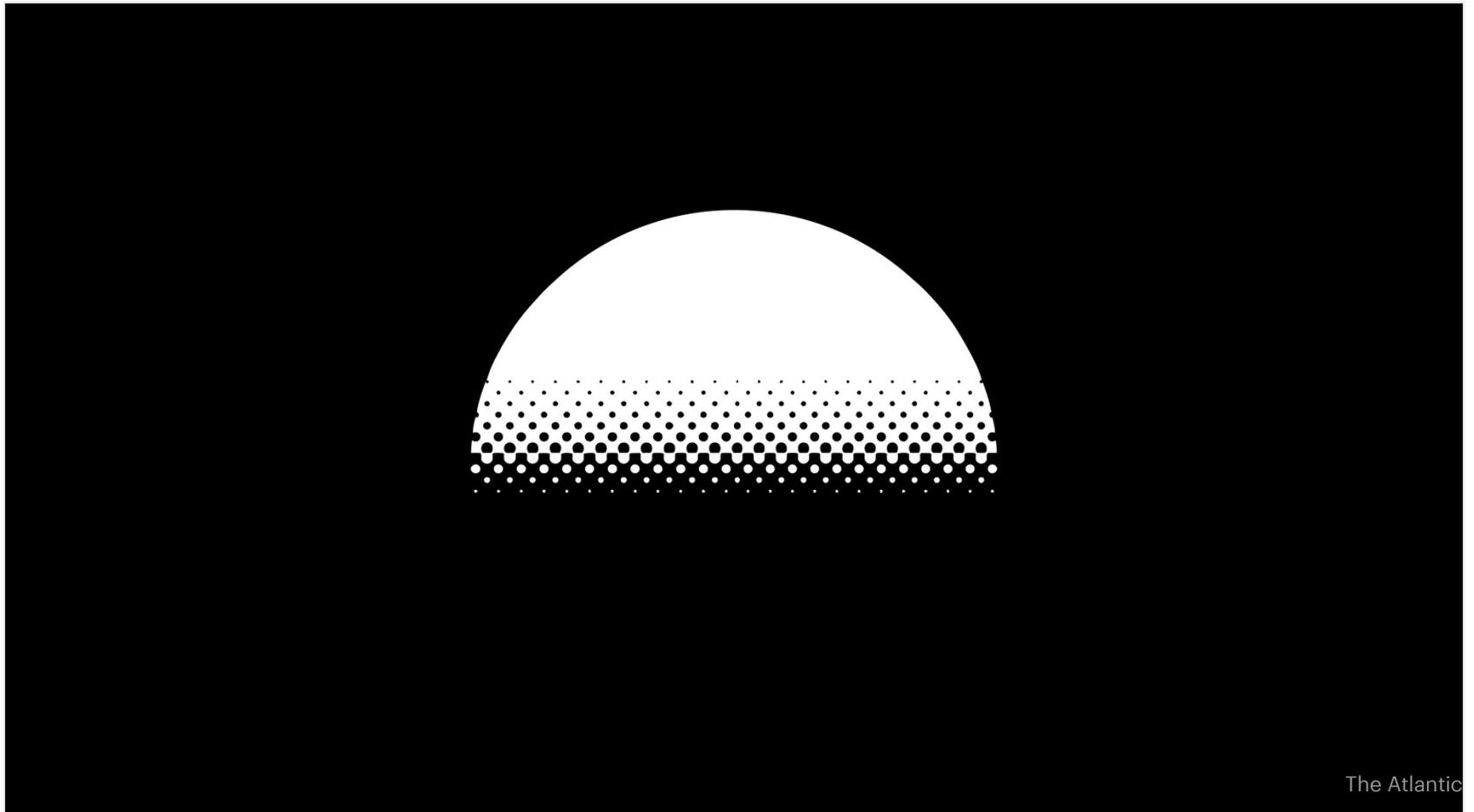




Is This the Beginning of the End of American Racism?

Donald Trump has revealed the depths of the country's prejudice—and has inadvertently forced a reckoning.



Story by Ibram X. Kendi

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I.

MARINE ONE WAITED for the president of the United States on the South Lawn of the White House. It was July 30, 2019, not long past 9 a.m.



TheAtlantic - The End of Denial - The Atlantic - Ibram X. Kendi



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Donald Trump was headed to historic Jamestown to mark the 400th anniversary of the first representative assembly of European settlers in the Americas. But Black Virginia legislators were boycotting the visit. Over the preceding two weeks, the president had been engaged in one of the most racist political assaults on members of Congress in American history.

Like so many controversies during Trump's presidency, it had all started with an early-morning tweet.

“So interesting to see ‘Progressive’ Democrat Congresswomen, who originally came from countries whose governments are a complete and total catastrophe, the worst, most corrupt and inept anywhere in the world (if they even have a functioning government at all), now loudly and viciously telling the people of the United States, the greatest and most powerful Nation on earth, how our government is to be run,” Trump tweeted on Sunday, July 14, 2019. “Why don't they go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came. Then come back and show us how it is done. These places need your help badly, you can't leave fast enough.”

Trump was referring to four freshman members of Congress: Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, a Somali American; Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts, an African American; Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, a Palestinian American; and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, a Puerto Rican. Pressley screenshotted Trump's tweet and declared, “THIS is what racism looks like.”

On the South Lawn, Trump now faced reporters and cameras. Over the drone

of the helicopter rotors, one reporter asked Trump if he was bothered that “more and more people” were calling him racist.

“I am the least racist person there is anywhere in the world,” Trump replied, hands up, palms facing out for emphasis.

His hands came down. He singled out a vocal critic, the Reverend Al Sharpton. “Now, he’s a racist,” Trump said. “What I’ve done for African Americans, no president, I would say, has done ... And the African American community is so thankful.”

It was an absurd statement. But in a twisted way, Trump was right. As his administration’s first term comes to an end, Black Americans—indeed, all Americans—should in one respect be thankful to him. He has held up a mirror to American society, and it has reflected back a grotesque image that many people had until now refused to see: an image not just of the racism still coursing through the country, but also of the reflex to deny that reality. Though it was hardly his intention, no president has caused more Americans to stop denying the existence of racism than Donald Trump.

II.

WE ARE LIVING in the midst of an anti-racist revolution. This spring and summer, demonstrations calling for racial justice attracted hundreds of thousands of people in Los Angeles, Washington, New York, and other large cities. Smaller demonstrations erupted in northeastern enclaves such as Nantucket, Massachusetts, and Bar Harbor, Maine; in western towns such as Havre, Montana, and Hermiston, Oregon; in midsize cities such as Waco, Texas, and Topeka, Kansas; and in wealthy suburbs such as Chagrin Falls, Ohio, and Darien, Connecticut.

[Adam Serwer: ‘Protest is the highest form of patriotism’]

Veteran activists and new recruits to the cause pushed policy makers to hold violent police officers accountable, to ban choke holds and no-knock

warrants, to shift funding from law enforcement to social services, and to end the practice of sending armed and dangerous officers to respond to incidents in which the suspect is neither armed nor dangerous. But these activists weren't merely advocating for a few policy shifts. They were calling for the eradication of racism in America once and for all.

Trump held up a mirror to American society, and it reflected back a grotesque image that many had refused to see.

The president attempted to portray the righteous demonstrations as the work of looters and thugs, but many of the people watching at home didn't see it that way. This summer, a majority of Americans—57 percent, according to a Monmouth University poll—said that police officers were more likely to use excessive force against Black “culprits” than they were against white ones. That's an increase from just 33 percent in December 2014, after a grand jury declined to indict a New York City police officer in the killing of Eric Garner.

What's more, by early June, roughly three out of four Americans were saying that “racial and ethnic discrimination” is a “big problem” in the United States—up from only about half of Americans in 2015, when Trump launched his presidential campaign.

It would be easy to see these shifts as the direct result of the horrifying events that have unfolded in 2020: a pandemic that has had a disproportionate effect on people of color; the video of George Floyd dying beneath the knee of an impassive Minneapolis police officer; the ghastly killing of Breonna Taylor, shot to death in her own home.

Yet fundamental shifts in American views of race were already under way before the COVID-19 disparities became clear and before these latest examples of police violence surfaced. The percentage of Americans who told Monmouth pollsters that racial and ethnic discrimination is a big problem made a greater leap from January 2015 (51 percent) to July 2016 (68 percent)

than from July 2016 to June 2020 (76 percent). What we are witnessing right now is the culmination of a longer process—a process that tracks closely with the political career of Donald Trump.

III.

IN THE DAYS leading up to Trump’s attack on Omar, Pressley, Tlaib, and Ocasio-Cortez, Fox News slammed the “Squad,” especially Omar. All four had been publicly sparring with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi over a \$4.6 billion border-aid package that they thought did not sufficiently restrain Trump’s immigration policies.

Yet Pelosi promptly defended her fellow Democrats on July 14, 2019. “When @realDonaldTrump tells four American Congresswomen to go back to their countries,” Pelosi tweeted, “he reaffirms his plan to ‘Make America Great Again’ has always been about making America white again.”



It has always been a racial slur for white Americans to tell Americans of color, “Go back to your country.” Because their country is New York City, where Ocasio-Cortez was born. Their country is Detroit, Tlaib’s birthplace. Their country is greater Boston, where Pressley lives. Their country is the United States, to which Omar’s family immigrated when she was young.

[Ibram X. Kendi: Am I an American?]

As Democratic politicians raged at the president that Sunday, Republicans were silent. “It’s become frighteningly common for many of my Republican colleagues to let these moments sail by without saying even a word,” Minority Leader Chuck Schumer said on the Senate floor.

To be fair, by Monday, a few Republicans, including Representatives Mike Turner of Ohio and Will Hurd of Texas, had called the president’s tweets racist. But Trump, emboldened by the silence from the rest of his caucus, doubled down on his attacks.

“IF YOU ARE NOT HAPPY HERE,” Trump wrote to the four women on Twitter, “YOU CAN LEAVE.”

The president added: “If Democrats want to unite around the foul language & racist hatred spewed from the mouths and actions of these very unpopular & unrepresentative Congresswomen, it will be interesting to see how it plays out.”

By Monday night, House Democrats had had enough. They introduced a resolution to “strongly” condemn the president’s racist tweets.

Trump woke up the next morning once again in a state of angry denial. “Those Tweets were NOT Racist,” he tweeted. “I don’t have a Racist bone in my body!”

IV.

FOR BETTER OR WORSE, Americans see themselves—and their country—in the

president. From the days of George Washington, the president has personified the American body. The motto of the United States is *E pluribus unum* —“Out of many, one.” The “one” is the president.

To Trump, and to many of his supporters, the American body must be a white body. When he launched his presidential campaign, on June 16, 2015, he began with attacks on immigrants of color and on the person whose citizenship he’d falsely questioned as a peddler of birtherism: Barack Obama. They were all desecrating the American body. Of Mexican immigrants, he said: “They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.” Of Obama, he said: “He’s been a negative force. We need somebody that can take the brand of the United States and make it great again.”

Trump presented himself as that somebody. To make America great again, he would make it seem as if a Black man had never been president, erasing him from history by repealing and replacing his signature accomplishments, from the Affordable Care Act to DACA, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals policy. He would also build a wall to keep out immigrants, and he would ban Muslims from entering the country.

Days after first proposing his Muslim ban, in December 2015—still early in his candidacy—Trump told CNN’s Don Lemon, “I am the least racist person that you have ever met.”

Trump’s denial was audacious, but back then, his audacity only contributed to the complacent sense among many Americans that this interloper from reality television posed no serious threat. Yet the Americans who dismissed Trump’s chances were living in denial themselves.

For many, Obama’s presidency was proof that the country was rising to its ideals of liberty and equality. When a Black man climbed to the highest office in the land, it signified that the nation was postracial, or at least that history was inexorably bending in that direction. The Obama administration itself boasted that it was fighting the remnants of racism—a mop-up operation in a

war that was all but won.

I was less sanguine. In the months leading up to the 2016 election, I told family and friends that Trump had a good chance of winning. Across American history, racial progress has normally been followed by its opposite.

So I was glad to be alone on Election Night. I did not want to see people I loved shocked that a racist nation had elected a racist president. On November 8, 2016, I watched the returns come in by myself, on the couch. My daughter, Imani, was sleeping in her crib. My wife, Sadiqa, was at the hospital, treating patients during an overnight shift in the pediatric emergency department.

I stayed up until 1:35 a.m. When Trump carried Pennsylvania, I turned off the television and called Sadiqa to hear how her shift was going. Our conversation was brief; she had to get back to her patients. Later, I would read about how, around 2:50 a.m., Trump greeted his exuberant supporters in New York City with a victory speech. He pledged to be “a president for all Americans.”

V.

WITHIN DAYS of being sworn in, Trump broke that promise. He reversed holds on two oil-pipeline projects, including one through the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, which was opposed by more than 200 Indigenous nations. He issued executive orders calling for the construction of a wall along the southern border and the deportation of individuals who “pose a risk to public safety or national security.” He enacted his first of three Muslim bans.

By the end of the spring, Attorney General Jeff Sessions had directed federal prosecutors to seek the harshest prison sentences whenever possible. Sessions had also laid the groundwork for the suspension of all the consent decrees that provided federal oversight of law-enforcement agencies that had demonstrated a pattern of racism.

“I’m the least racist person there is anywhere in the world,” Trump said.

Led by Steve Bannon and Stephen Miller, the administration worked on ways to restrict immigration by people of color. There was a sense of urgency, because, as Trump said at a private White House meeting in June 2017, Haitians “all have AIDS” and Nigerians would never “go back to their huts” once they came to the United States.

Then came Charlottesville. On August 11, 2017, about 250 white supremacists marched on the University of Virginia campus, carrying torches that lit up the night sky with racism and anti-Semitism. Demonstrating against Charlottesville’s plan to remove statues honoring Confederates, they chanted, “Blood and soil!” They chanted, “Jews will not replace us!” They chanted, “White lives matter!”

The white supremacists clashed with anti-racist demonstrators that night and the next afternoon. White lives did not matter to the white supremacist James Alex Fields Jr. He drove his Dodge Challenger into a crowd of counterprotesters, murdering Heather Heyer and injuring 19 others.

“We condemn, in the strongest possible terms, this egregious display of hatred, bigotry, and violence on many sides, on many sides,” Trump said in response. He spoke about there being “very fine people” on “both sides.”

[Adam Serwer: After Charlottesville, the white nationalists are winning]

On September 5, 2017, Trump began his long and unsuccessful attempt to eliminate DACA, which deferred deportations for roughly 800,000 undocumented immigrants who had arrived in the U.S. as children. The Trump administration also began rescinding the Temporary Protected Status of thousands of refugees from wars and natural disasters years ago in Sudan, Nicaragua, Haiti, El Salvador, Nepal, and Honduras.

Near the end of his first year in office, Trump wondered aloud at a White House meeting: “Why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here?” He was referring to Haiti, El Salvador, and nations in Africa. He suggested that the U.S. should bring in more people from countries like Norway.

Three days later, on January 14, 2018, speaking before reporters in West Palm Beach, Florida, he was again asked if he was racist. “No, I’m not a racist,” he responded. “I am the least racist person you have ever interviewed.”

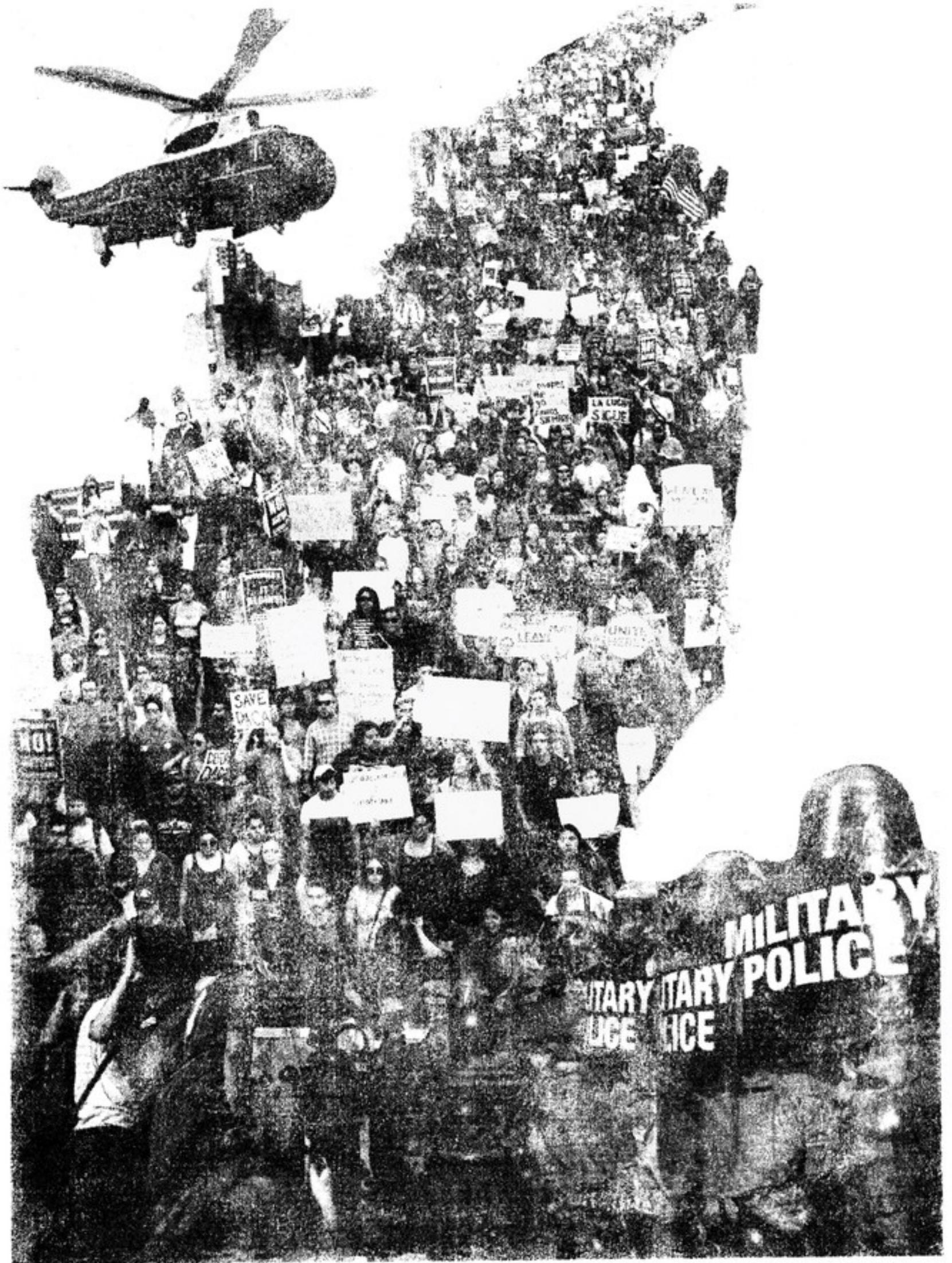


Illustration by Jon Key; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum; Molly Adams; Rosa Pineda

VI.

THE AMERICA THAT denied its racism through the Obama years has struggled to deny its racism through the Trump years. From 1977 to 2018, the General Social Survey asked whether Black Americans “have worse jobs, income, and housing than white people ... mainly due to discrimination.” There are only two answers to this question. The racist answer is “no”—it presumes that racist discrimination no longer exists and that racial inequities are the result of something being wrong with Black people. The anti-racist answer is “yes”—it presumes that nothing is wrong or right, inferior or superior, about any racial group, so the explanation for racial disparities must be discrimination.

[Ibram X. Kendi: The hopefulness and hopelessness of 1619]

In 2008, as Obama was headed for the White House, only 34.5 percent of respondents answered “yes,” a number I’ll call the anti-racist rate. This was the second-lowest anti-racist rate of the 41-year polling period. The rate rose to 37.7 percent in 2010, perhaps because the emergence of the Tea Party forced a reckoning for some white Americans, but it fell back down to 34.9 percent in 2012 and 34.6 percent in 2014.

In 2016, as Trump loomed over American politics, the anti-racist rate rose to 42.6 percent. It went up to 46.2 percent in 2018, a double-digit increase from the start of the Obama administration. In large part, shifts in white public opinion explain the jump. The white anti-racist rate was barely 29.8 percent in 2008. It jumped to 37.7 percent in 2016 and to 40.5 percent two years into Trump’s presidency.

Trump’s presidency has paved the way for a revolution against racism.

The deniers of racism, those who blame people of color for racial inequity and

injustice, have mostly been white, but not exclusively so. Between 1977 and 2018, the lowest anti-racist rate among Black respondents—47.2 percent—came in 2012, the midpoint of Obama’s presidency. That rate climbed to 61.1 percent in 2016 and 66 percent in 2018, a nearly 20-point swing from the Obama years.

It has become harder, in the Trump years, to blame Black people for racial inequity and injustice. It has also become harder to tell Black people that the fault lies with them, and to urge them to improve their station by behaving in an upstanding or respectable manner. In the Trump years, the problem is obvious, and it isn’t Black people’s behavior.

VII.

THE UNITED STATES has often been called a land of contradictions, and to be sure, its failings sit alongside some notable achievements—a New Deal for many Americans in the 1930s, the defeat of fascism abroad in the 1940s. But on racial matters, the U.S. could just as accurately be described as a land in denial. It has been a massacring nation that said it cherished life, a slaveholding nation that claimed it valued liberty, a hierarchal nation that declared it valued equality, a disenfranchising nation that branded itself a democracy, a segregated nation that styled itself separate but equal, an excluding nation that boasted of opportunity for all. A nation is what it does, not what it originally claimed it would be. Often, a nation is precisely what it denies itself to be.

There was a grand moment, however, when a large swath of Americans walked away from a history of racial denial. In the 1850s, slaveholders expanded their reach into the North. Their slave-catchers, backed by federal power, were superseding state and local law to capture runaways (and free Blacks) who had escaped across the Mason-Dixon Line. Formerly enslaved people such as Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, as well as journalists such as William Lloyd Garrison, stood in pulpits across the North and West describing the brutality and inhumanity of slavery. Meanwhile, slaveholders

fought to expand their power out west—where white people who did not want to compete with enslaved Black labor were calling for free soil.

Beginning in 1854, slaveholders went to war with free-soilers (and abolitionists like John Brown) in Kansas over whether the state—and the United States—would be free or slave. The Supreme Court’s *Dred Scott* decision, in 1857, implied that Black people and northern states “had no rights” that slaveholders were “bound to respect.”

[From the October 2018 issue: Ibram X. Kendi on a house still divided]

Slaveholders seemed intent on spreading their plantations from sea to shining sea. As a result, more and more white Americans became antislavery, whether out of concern for the enslaved or fear of the encroaching slave power. Black Americans, meanwhile, fled the country for Canada and Liberia—or stayed and pressed the cause of radical abolitionism. A critical mass of Americans rejected the South’s claim that enslavement was good and came to recognize the peculiar institution as altogether bad.

The slaveholders’ attempts to perpetuate their system backfired; in the years before the Civil War, the inhumanity and cruelty of enslavement became too blatant for northerners to ignore or deny. Similarly, Trump’s racism—and that of his allies and enablers—has been too blatant for Americans to ignore or deny. And just as the 1850s paved the way for the revolution against slavery, Trump’s presidency has paved the way for a revolution against racism.

VIII.

ON JULY 16, 2019, the House bitterly debated the resolution to rebuke Trump for his racist tweets against the four congresswomen of color. The four were members of the most diverse class of Democrats in American history, which had retaken the House in a midterm repudiation of the president.

“Every single member of this institution, Democratic and Republican, should join us in condemning the president’s racist tweets,” Speaker Pelosi said from the House floor. Republicans sounded off in protest. Pelosi turned to them,

voice rising, and added: “To do anything less would be a shocking rejection of our values and a shameful abdication of our oath of office to protect the American people.”

Republicans claimed that Pelosi had violated a House rule by characterizing an action as “racist.” They moved to have the word struck from the Congressional Record.

The motion to strike *racist* from the record failed along party lines. “I know racism when I see it, I know racism when I feel it, and at the highest level of government, there’s no room for racism,” Representative John Lewis, the civil-rights icon, said during the debate.

[From the October 2017 issue: Ta-Nehisi Coates on Donald Trump, the first white president]

One after another, Republicans rose to defend their president. “What has really happened here is that the president and his supporters have been forced to endure months of allegations of racism,” said Representative Dan Meuser of Pennsylvania. “This ridiculous slander does a disservice to our nation.”

In the end, only four Republicans and the House’s lone independent voted with all the Democrats to condemn the president of the United States. That means 187 House Republicans, or 98 percent of the caucus, denied that telling four congresswomen of color to go back to their countries was racist. They believed, as Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said, that “the president’s not a racist.”

To call out the president’s racism would have been to call out their own racism. McConnell had been quietly killing anti-racist bills that had come out of the House since January 2019, starting with the new House’s first bill, which aimed to protect Americans against voter suppression.

The day after being rebuked by House Democrats, Trump held the first rally of his reelection campaign. He spent a large portion of his speech in

Greenville, North Carolina, railing against the four congresswomen. As he was pummeling Omar with a round of attacks, the crowd started chanting, “Send her back! Send her back! Send her back!”

Trump stopped speaking. He made no effort to stop the chant as it grew louder. He basked in the racial slur for 13 seconds.

“Send her back! Send her back! Send her back!”

On Thursday, Republicans were quick to denounce the chant. “There’s no place for that kind of talk,” Tom Emmer of Minnesota said to reporters. But, he added, “there’s not a racist bone in the president’s body.”

Trump disavowed the “Send her back” chant, but by Friday he had disavowed his disavowal, calling the chanters “incredible patriots” and denying their racism along with his own. Many Americans saw through these patently false claims, however. By the end of July, for the first time, a majority of voters said the president of the United States was, in fact, a racist.

IX.

I THOUGHT I APPRECIATED the power of denial from studying the history of racist ideas. But I learned to understand it in a personal way during the first year of Trump’s presidency. In 2017, I fell ill; I felt as sick as I’d ever been. But I told myself the hourly trips to the bathroom were nothing. The blood wasn’t serious. I ignored the symptoms for months.

I waited until the pain was unbearable before I admitted that I had a problem. And even then, I wasn’t able to acknowledge it on my own. My partner saved my life.

Sadiqa saw the totality of my symptoms during a weeklong vacation over New Year’s. It was the first time in months that we were together all day, every day. As soon as we returned home, in January 2018, she dragged me to the doctor.

I acquiesced to the appointment, but I still wouldn't permit the thought that my condition was serious. I did not have any of the commonly known risk factors for the worst possibility—colon cancer. I was 35, and I exercised regularly, didn't smoke, rarely drank, and had no family history. I was a vegan, for goodness' sake.

I realize now that I was engaged in a powerful bout of denial. Americans, too, can easily summon a litany of reasons their country is not racist: Look at the enlightened principles upon which the nation was founded. Look at the progress the country has made. Look at the election of Barack Obama. Look at the dark faces in high places. Look at the diversity of the 2020 Democratic field.

Even after the doctor found the tumor, my denial persisted. Once I accepted that I had cancer, I was convinced that it had to be Stage 1, for all the reasons I had been convinced that I did not have cancer at all. A routine surgery was in order, and then all would be good.

I fear that this is how many Americans are thinking right now: Routine surgery—the defeat of Donald Trump at the polls—will heal the American body. No need to look deeper, at police departments, at schools, at housing. Are Americans now acknowledging racism, but telling themselves the problem is contained? Are they telling themselves that it is a big problem, but it can't have spread to almost every part of the body politic? Will this become the new form of American denial?

False hope was my new normal, until it wasn't. When they scanned my body, doctors found that the cancer had spread. I had Stage 4 colon cancer. I had two choices: denial and death, or recognition and life. America now has two choices.

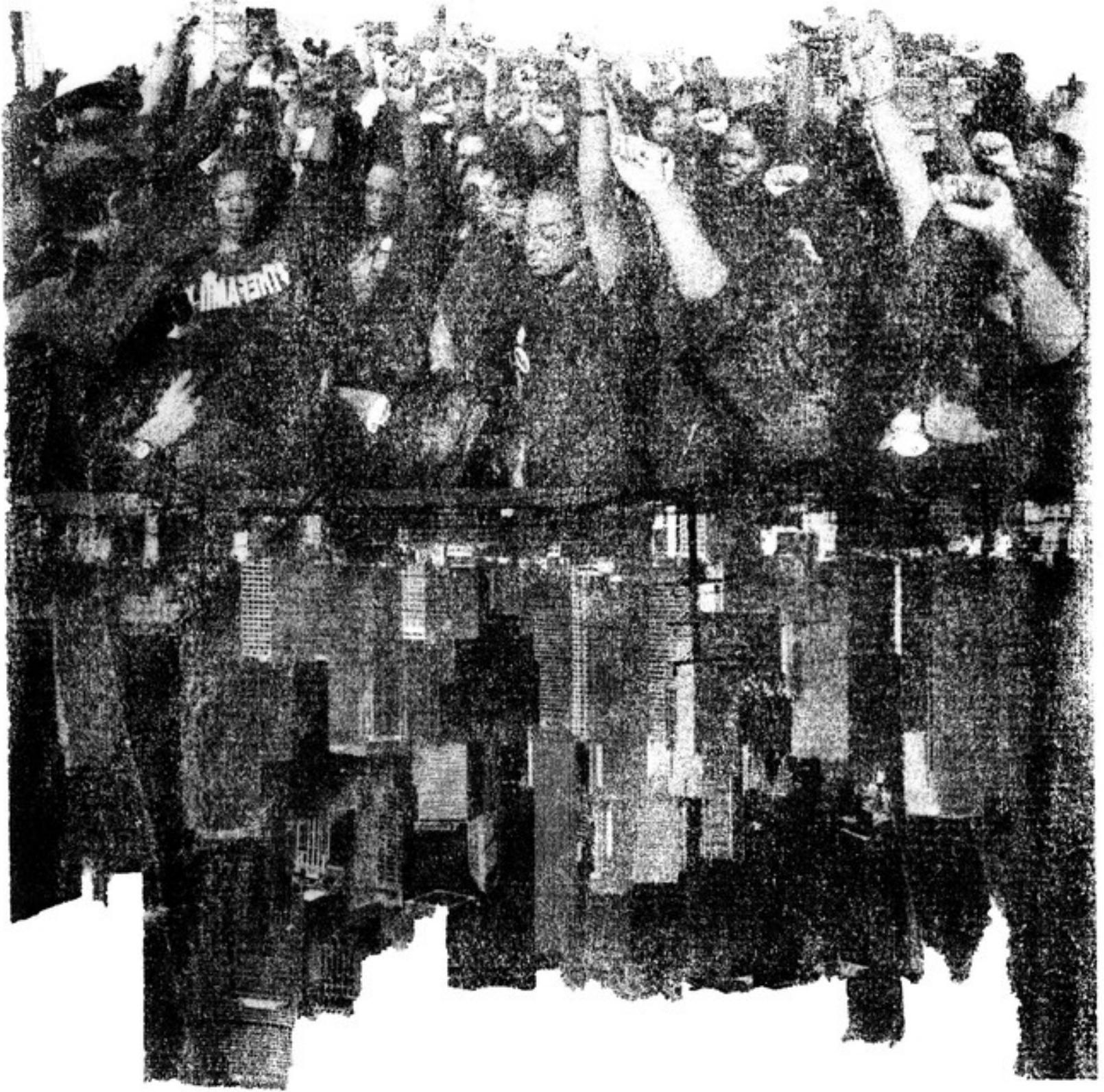


Illustration by Jon Key; Brian Allen; Diego Delso; Pag293

X.

TRUMP'S DENIALS OF HIS RACISM will never stop. He will continue to claim that he loves people of color, the very people his policies harm. He will continue to call himself “not racist,” and turn the descriptive term *racist* back on anyone who has the temerity to call out his own prejudice. Trump clearly hopes that racist ideas—paired with policies designed to suppress the vote—will lead to his reelection. But now that Trump has pushed a critical mass of Americans to a point where they can no longer explain away the nation's sins,

the question is what those Americans will do about it.

Just as the abolitionists of the 1850s demanded the immediate eradication of slavery, immediate equality must be the demand today.

One path forward leads to a mere restoration. Barack Obama's vice president unseats Trump, removing the bad apple from the barrel. With Trump dispatched, the nation believes it is again headed in the right direction. On this path, Americans consider racism to be a significant problem. But they deny the true gravity of the problem and the need for drastic action. On this path, monuments to racism are dismantled, but Americans shrink from the awesome task of reshaping the country with anti-racist policies. With Trump gone, Americans decide they don't need to be actively anti-racist anymore.

Or Americans can realize that they are at a point of no return. No returning to the bad old habit of denial. No returning to cynicism. No returning to normal—the normal in which racist policies, defended by racist ideas, lead to racial inequities.

On this path, Trump's denialism has permanently changed the way Americans view themselves. The Trump effect is real, and lasting. The reckoning we have witnessed this spring and summer at public demonstrations transforms into a reckoning in legislatures, C-suites, university-admissions offices.

On this path, the American people demand equitable results, not speeches that make them feel good about themselves and their country. The American people give policy makers an ultimatum: Use your power to radically reduce inequity and injustice, or be voted out.

The abolition of slavery seemed as impossible in the 1850s as equality seems today. But just as the abolitionists of the 1850s demanded the immediate eradication of slavery, immediate equality must be the demand today. Abolish

police violence. Abolish mass incarceration. Abolish the racial wealth gap and the gap in school funding. Abolish barriers to citizenship. Abolish voter suppression. Abolish health disparities. Not in 20 years. Not in 10 years. Now.

This article appears in the September 2020 print edition with the headline “The End of Denial.”



IBRAM X. KENDI *is a contributing writer at The Atlantic and the Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities and the director of the Boston University Center for Antiracist Research. He is the author of several books, including the National Book Award–winning Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America and How to Be an Antiracist.*

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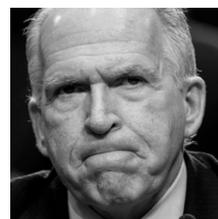
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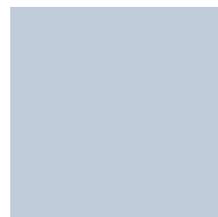
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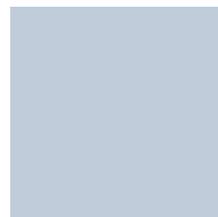
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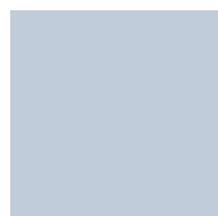
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