As Mary Dudziak has observed, following World War II, “racial discrimination in the United States received increasing attention from other countries,” as foreign presses “carried stories of discrimination against non-white foreign dignitaries, as well as American blacks” (Dudziak 1988, 62). The Nazis had been so thoroughly identified with racism that the US had no choice but to attend to its own horrific political culture of white supremacy if it at all hoped to nullify Soviet criticism that condemned the US as a racist regime. The purpose of this essay is to briefly consider both the role that “shame” played in the African American struggle for civil rights during the Cold War, and the subsequent role of “shamelessness” in the rise of an openly racist, white nationalist regime in the US in 2016.

At the dawn of the Cold War, the US tradition of public, ritualistic torture and murder known as lynching proved particularly problematic for American propaganda efforts. Indeed, at the same time that the United States attempted to assert its moral authority, articulated in opposition to both Nazi and Soviet authoritarianism, the Russian phrase “А у вас негров линчуют” (“you are lynching negroes”) became a meme, invoked in the face of all American criticism of the Soviet system (Lucas 2012, 307). African American scholar-activist Ida B. Wells had observed in 1900 that the United States’ national crime is lynching. It is not the creature of an hour, the sudden outburst of uncontrolled fury, or the unspeakable brutality of an insane mob. It represents the cool, calculating deliberation of intelligent people who openly avow that there is an “unwritten law” that justifies them in putting human beings to death without complaint under oath, without trial by jury, without opportunity to make defense, and without right of appeal (Wells 1900).

That “unwritten law” that Wells refers to is white supremacy. A journalist who had attended a lynching in the American South interviewed a white man who had joined a lynch mob, and asked whether or not the black victim was actually guilty of the crime for which he had been ritually executed and was told plainly that the question of guilt was “irrelevant,” that “no particular crime was avenged,” and that “the negro population was being warned never to forget that the colored man in the South is still a slave, that between him and the white man there can be no law, no claim to justice” (Quispel 2002, 39; 58). Lynching was the foundation of a culture of extra-judicial racial terror that facilitated the legal regime of “Jim Crow,” the system of segregation and legal white supremacy that had been established in the twentieth century through the United States Supreme Court’s decision in the Plessy vs Ferguson (Harlen 1896) case and which was overturned in 1954 as a result of the Supreme Court’s decision in the case of Brown vs Board of Education of Topeka (Warren 1954).

In the Plessy case, the Supreme Court had decided that racial segregation was Constitutional as long as racially separated facilities were “equal” in utility. In the Brown case, the Supreme Court found that separate facilities “were inherently unequal,” however, and ordered mandatory desegregation of all public schools, dismantling the basis of Jim Crow. That court order did not compel those white Americans to accept the political equality, or the humanity, of their African American compatriots, however, and so any execution of the court’s intent was still doomed to be carried out by people who had been, for generations, nurtured in a political culture, and social reality, of white supremacy. Nor would any Supreme Court decision ever undo the centuries of racist denigration and the normalization of violence against
black and indigenous bodies that informed that political culture and social reality, either (Harlen 1896).

The Eisenhower administration mobilized federal power to facilitate the desegregation struggle in the south in the immediate aftermath of the Brown case. To declare an opposition to Soviet oppression while tolerating white Southern elites’ political heritage of racist terror was a hypocrisy too obvious to ignore, and so Cold War ideological commitments to an explicitly American “liberal democracy” characterized by “freedom” and “opportunity” demanded action. On 24 September 1957, Eisenhower explained his decision to deploy federal troops to Little Rock Arkansas after the rioting that had ensued following a court order to desegregate Central High school:

At a time when we face a grave situation abroad because of the hatred that Communism bears toward a system of government based on human rights, it would be difficult to exaggerate the harm that is being done to the prestige and influence, and indeed to the safety, of our nation and the world. Our enemies are gloating over this incident (emphasis mine) [...] We are portrayed as a violator of those standards of conduct which the peoples of the world united to proclaim in the Charter of the United Nations (Eisenhower 1957).

The “honor” of the United States had been diminished, and so the Commander-in-Chief of the US armed forces deployed paratroopers to Little Rock Arkansas and assumed command of the Arkansas National Guard from governor Orval Faubus. Historian John A. Kirk observed that the extent to which the incident in Little Rock had “brought international pressure to bear on the United States to tackle the problem of racial inequality” should not be underestimated since, prior to this incident, Eisenhower had been “reluctant to voice support for (desegregation) in public” and, in private, was “disparaging” of the Supreme Court decision to order American schools to racially integrate (Kirk 2007, 12).

In 2014, a team of psychologists from the US and Canada investigated the connection between the experience of shame and the motivation to change one’s self as a result of that emotional experience. They observed that, despite the potentially corrective power of shame in addressing aberrant behavior, “shame can simultaneously promote a motivation to change the self and distance oneself from the shame provoking stimulus, thus possibly compromising people’s actual efforts to change the self.” This is to say that at the same time that an individual may be shamed into changing problematic behavior, it is sometimes the case that the individual disassociates themselves from that original behavior so completely that it becomes more difficult to perceive the extent to which the original behavior was rooted in attitudes, perceptions, and motives that endure, unchanged (Lickel et al 2014).

It was not compassion for African Americans’ struggle for equality that had compelled Eisenhower to action. Eisenhower had been shamed into action. The drama of his decisiveness became a metaphor for the US’ commitment to a “a system of government based on human rights,” but it was a metaphor of dubious substance (Eisenhower 1957). Certainly, the images of patriotic, armed, US Army paratroopers staring down “othered,” southern, racists allowed white Americans from the north and west of the country to distance themselves from Jim Crow racist discrimination even as many of those same Americans remained personally committed to white racial supremacy and sympathetic, even if only passively, to racial segregation. Displays of racism (even if not racism itself) had been rendered “un-American.”

In 1981, Richard Nixon’s notorious, and infamous, campaign consultant Lee Atwater recounted to political scientist Alexander Lamis the basis of the American Republican Party’s “Southern Strategy” of covert racism and “racially coded” political rhetoric. This “Southern Strategy” was meant to appeal to right-wing, white American racists without openly employing appeals to racist hatred. Atwater’s comments are illuminating:

You start out in 1954 by saying, “Nigger, nigger, nigger.” By 1968 you can’t say “nigger” – that hurts you, backfires. So you say stuff like, uh, forced busing, states’ rights, and all that stuff, and 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. [...] “We want to cut this,” is much more abstract than even the busing thing, uh, and a hell of a lot more abstract than “Nigger, nigger” (Perlstein 2012).

It is unclear to what extent the status quo in Republican Party politics is still represented by this preference for “abstract,” “racially coded,” politics given the openly racist bigotry (not to mention misogyny) of Republican President Donald Trump (Leonhardt et al, 2018, and Cohen 2017, and Graves and Morris 2017). On the campaign trail in 2016, Democratic Candidate Hillary Clinton remarked, half-jokingly, that:

[Y]ou could put half of Trump’s supporters into what I call the basket of deplorables... They’re racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic – Islamophobic – you name it. And unfortunately, there are people like that. And he has lifted them up. He has given voice to their websites that used to only have 11,000 people – now have 11 million. He tweets and retweets their offensive hateful mean-spirited rhetoric (Reilly 2018).

Clinton later apologized for her comments. Nevertheless, a group of Trump supporters proceeded to dub themselves “The Deplorables,” while condemning Clinton as being out of touch. Lee Atwater’s “Southern Strategy” turned the former confederacy into a solidly Republican voting bloc, after a century of Democratic Party control, by making veiled appeals to the racism of white people in the South after de jure racist discrimination had become untenable given the US’ global posture in relation to the Soviets, and the international pressure on the US to address the concerns of the Civil Rights movement. In the context of contemporary right-wing American electoral politics, however, it is not clear whether electoral success requires politicians to veil their appeals to their constituents’ racism in abstract, coded, language (Washington Post 2017).

There is no Soviet rival for international hearts and minds, intent on shaming the US for its racism. In his famous essay, “The Unipolar Moment,” right wing American political commentator, and former physician, Charles Krauthammer observed that it had “been assumed that the old bipolar world would beget a multipolar world” but that “these assumptions are mistaken. The immediate post-Cold War world is not multipolar. It is unipolar. The center of world power is the unchallenged superpower, the United States, attended by its Western allies” (Krauthammer 1990).

One apparent consequence of the American perception of itself as a unipolar hyperpower (a perception that endures, to this day, whether real or not) is that where once the “Third World” was understood as an ideological battlefield for “hearts and minds,” today, the President of the United States is now free to dismiss developing nations as “shithole countries” and migrant workers from Latin America in the US as “animals.” Moreover, he is free to do this while still enjoying an 89% approval rating from Americans who identify themselves with the Republican Party (Dawsey 2018, and Davis 2018, and Gallup 2018).

Shame only works in relationship to a shared moral belief system and so the absence of any shame in one who has committed wrong-doing would seem to indicate the absence of a counterpart that is capable of inspiring shame in the offender. Certainly, there is no clear geo-political counterpart to the United States to match the Cold War-era rivalry that the US had with the Soviet Union, and with the rise of racist, nationalist, politics throughout the EU it is unclear to what extent Europeans still possess the capacity (or the political will) to shame the United States for its racism and excesses. Indeed, with no clear rival, and with little sincere indication of discomfort from its “allies,” there is nothing to inspire shame in the American hyperpower, and this, in part, is why Donald Trump is the President of the United States.
References


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Biography

Darryl Barthé

Originally from New Orleans, Dr. Barthe relocated to New York City last year from the Netherlands where he was, most recently, a lecturer in history at the University of Amsterdam and the University of Leiden.

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