

**A Strange Land:**  
Christian Rhetoric and Behavior in Times of Political and Cultural Polarization

By

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in the Divinity School of  
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ABSTRACT

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## ABSTRACT

Serious divisions within the United States currently threaten our social fabric. These divisions are acutely on display across the political arena and permeate many aspects of American society. Alarming, Christian convictions are contributing to this upheaval. Many conservatives and liberals across the ideological spectrum believe they are following not only the Constitution of the United States but also biblical principles when they engage in inflammatory rhetoric against political rivals. Predictably, justifying political positions with biblical principles has caused many Christians to embrace partisan identities and adopt divisive behaviors. Furthermore, the present political divisions are severely harming American churches at the local level. The kind of rhetoric emanating from pulpits, pews, and Christian publications across most denominations pose a direct challenge to how the church has traditionally understood the Christian life and its bearing upon our relationships with one another. The issue of immigration is a particularly acute example. The tearing apart of family structures, the constant threat of deportation, and the frequent use of dehumanizing rhetoric are stances that some Christians have unapologetically supported. It is my attempt to show how in this time of intense partisanship Christians desperately need to practice right speech and embody Jesus' commandment to love one's neighbor. Using the issue of immigration<sup>1</sup> as a case study, I argue that the way we talk about people influences how we treat them.

A careful observer of the current political dynamic in America will understand its precarious position. Following the presidency of Barack Obama, a tide has clearly turned across the country. The sounds of hope, optimism, and progressive change have been replaced by a

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<sup>1</sup> It is my attempt to use the politically charged issue of immigration as a lens through which to think about these issues. It is my expectation that the fruits of this work will be applicable to other instances where Christians are actively involved in shaping governmental policy.

boisterous quest to “Make America Great” again by restricting U.S. borders, re-visiting trade agreements, limiting access to health insurance, retreating from nuclear treaties, as well as dismissing and altogether denying climate change. Where a warm cultural embrace once stood, profound xenophobia now rests; diversity has gone the way of division. Lost in the shuffle of this dynamic however is the human element of communal relationship with one another. For individuals and institutions that claim allegiance to Jesus Christ, the political speech and actions witnessed across the United States challenge the very nature of Christian identity. Among many Christians there is a dichotomy between the Christian ethic portrayed and the one practiced, a disconnect between what is offered in the Holy Scriptures and reality. If the case can be made that the political dynamic in America is on precarious footing because of the role Christians currently play guiding the nation forward, it too means that Christian identity in America is subject to that same dynamic. When political policy in America is dressed up and disguised as proper Christian action, and supported as such by many Christian adherents, then the very nature of the Christian faith as practiced in America is threatened.

This thesis will examine how recent speeches and comments made by political figures on various aspects of immigration law and human rights compel Christians to reflect upon right speech considering the teachings on speech found in the book of Proverbs. For Christians to blindly and unequivocally label immigrants “animals,” “rapists,” and “criminals,” presents a ripe and necessary opportunity to hear the guidance, wisdom and chastisement of the Proverbial writer.

A rediscovery of speech that could be considered “Christian” and a recommitment to embodying such speech, is ultimately incomplete, unless it results in right Christian action.<sup>2</sup> Examining the parable of the Good Samaritan in its wider context (Luke 10:25 – 37), I will display how it might inform our Christian praxis. Early followers of Jesus and the historic church have understood this commandment as a necessary component of the Christian life. Noting key textual observations from theologians and Bible scholars including Joel Green<sup>3</sup>, the project will show how aspects of the text speak to contemporary Christian praxis.

The research of this thesis will be designed to build upon existing theological literature concerning the role of Christian speech and action and placing these distinct roles in conversation with current political affairs. I argue that in an era marked decidedly by extreme political and cultural polarization, Christians, and by extension the Christian church, must rediscover the role of speech and behavior in the workings of everyday life and the shaping of a more just society for all.

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<sup>2</sup> In this work, the phrasing “right” or “right Christian action” refers to just, fair, or moral rhetoric and behavior that could be supported by a close reading and interpretation of the guidance offered by the Holy Scriptures in totality and the themes Jesus Christ taught and embodied.

<sup>3</sup> Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997).

## DEDICATION

To Vivian,  
*Whose song still sings in my heart.*

To Paul & Bettye,  
*Whose inspiration guides me.*

To Hardy & Shirley,  
*Who taught me how to exist.*

To my parents Steven & Marjorie,  
*Who casted a vision my own eyes could not see.*

To Jennifer,  
*My complete love.*

To Saraiya, Jordynn, and Steven III,  
*Who make me deeply proud.*

To Bridgette,  
*Whose spirit keeps me running on.*

To Hardy Jr.,  
*Whose life embodied the experience.*

To Lonnie & Laura,  
*Who welcomed me as a son.*

To Those Ancestors,  
*Who fell willingly into the depths of the Atlantic, never seeing this side of the sun nor knowing  
the soil, who now dwell undisturbed at the very bottom of the sea, rising in memory.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With great trepidation I compose these acknowledgments in fear of not crediting individuals rightfully and comprehensively for their critical role in shaping and forming not only this work but also the person I have thus far become. A work of this magnitude is the byproduct of many things which have come before. I am thankful, first and foremost, to God, the Lord of my life, who through the offering of His Son Jesus Christ has saved me. I testify, my life up to this point has been the work of the Lord, as He has been the potter and I have been the clay. He continues to make me and mold me each day. As I reflect over my journey, I acknowledge that my personal testimony has been remarkable. God alone has brought me, in the words of an old Negro Spiritual, this far by faith. Any valuable contribution that I have made thus far is the result of God's ongoing work in and through my life. Further, throughout this writing process the Holy Spirit has sustained me, nourished me, uplifted me, and given me strength when I felt like I had nothing left to offer. Writing during the coronavirus pandemic has been a spiritual endeavor for sure, and I am eternally grateful for the Lord's strength, anointing, and protection.

I will be forever grateful to Duke University and the Divinity School for allowing me to pursue my theological education on these hallowed and sacred grounds. My journey at Duke first began in the fall of 2004 when I enrolled as a Master of Divinity student fresh out of undergraduate school. Although I graduated in 2007, I have been very fortunate to maintain valuable ties to the program, former classmates, and several of my previous professors. These relationships have proven so valuable over the years. I am indebted to professors like Dr. William C. Turner Jr., Dr. Ellen Davis, Dr. Richard Hays, Dr. J. Warren Smith, the late Dr. Grant Wacker, the late Dr. Tammy Williams, and a host of others. I have been touched and inspired by the ongoing work of Dean Gregory Jones and have been proud to have matriculated under his



deanship for both of my theological degrees. Returning to Duke in 2018 in pursuit of the doctoral ministry degree, I have been blessed to rekindle relationships with professors I had studied under previously as well as continue learning from others. I am honored to have studied again under the tutelage of Dr. Ellen Davis, Dr. J. Warren Smith, and Dr. Susan Eastman. Dr. Willimon has truly been remarkable as well, as I appreciate the many contributions he continues to make to the Body of Christ and his students.

In preparing this project, I am grateful beyond measure for advisors, Dr. Sarah Musser, and Dr. Amy Laura Hall. The origins of this work began during several in-depth conversations with Dr. Musser. Her feedback, warmth, guidance, and extraordinary kindness cannot be fully captured or described in words. She has invested so much of her time helping me sharpen arguments, generate new ideas, address grammatical issues, be clearer in my writing, and make what I think is a strong case. Dr. Musser has been remarkable, valuable to me and many other students throughout the Divinity School. I am truly thankful for her efforts in getting this project to the finish line. I am deeply thankful for Dr. Hall, one of my previous professors during my M.Div. work and who remains one of the preeminent academic scholars in her fields of expertise. Her work has helped me think through what it means to be Christian and how one ought to live in contemporary society. I am grateful that she willingly accepted review and approval of this project during an unprecedented time, and I am appreciative of her patience and encouragement.

While writing this work, I was continually inspired by memories of those over the course of my life who have deeply touched me, leaving a lasting imprint on my soul. I begin by acknowledging my aunt Vivian Marshall, who, when I was 13 years old, passed away suddenly at the age of 33 following complications from her second pregnancy. I was blessed to have her in

my life during my childhood, and she became my very best friend. Although she is long gone, her voice continues to sing deep down in my heart.

It is undebatable that I would not be where I am today without the steady support, encouragement, and guidance over the years by both sets of my grandparents, Hardy and Shirley Johnson, and Paul and Bettye Blackburn. Although they have all passed on, I have committed to doing my best to make them proud. They remain etched in my memories and inform the ministry work I do, and they have been instrumental in providing much needed wisdom over the years. I credit them mostly for this work. I think they would be extremely proud.

Writing during the coronavirus pandemic was difficult, made even more so by the loss of several close family members during the last year. Hardy Johnson Jr., one of my dear uncles, passed in the summer of 2020, just as I began research for this project. His untimely passing panged me deeply and I will miss his smile, wisdom, wit, and sense of adventure. One of my aunts, Bridgette Smith, passed away in the Fall of 2020 and her death was another saddening lost. Disabled for the last half of her earthly life, I am so proud of the race she had run. I am thankful for the opportunities to observe her tenacity, her inner glow, her resolve to never stop fighting. I will cherish her memory and her spirit will live on.

During my years as an adolescent, I never imagined that I would one day be called into the ministry as a pastor. While my grandfather and father served ably in ministry, I could not fathom that I wanted the same vocation as my life's work. However, as is always the case, our thoughts are not God's thoughts, and our plans are not God's plans (Isaiah 55:8). The influence of individuals within my social circle undoubtedly played a role in the shaping and forming of my call to ministry. I will forever be thankful, of course, for both my grandfather and father for their ministry example. I am also deeply thankful for Rev. Dr. Cecil L. "Chip" Murray, former

pastor at First A.M.E. Church, Los Angeles. Without a doubt, Pastor Murray's advice, counsel and wisdom over the years has proved invaluable to me. He is one of my exemplars in ministry whose pastoral leadership, civic engagement, preaching ability, and intellectual acumen I have come to deeply admire. As I exercise my pastoral ministry, much of the substantive and efficacious work is partly a tribute to him. Other spiritual leaders have impacted my life as well. I am grateful also for the mentorship, love and tremendous support of Rev. Alfred Dotson and his wife Jettie Dotson. Together, they have offered valuable guidance, insight, and spiritual uplift. They are valuable blessings to me.

Forty years have passed since Steven and Marjorie Johnson gave birth to their first child together, a boy they would eventually name Steven D. Johnson II, aka "ditto." God has blessed me with truly amazing parents, who have themselves been trailblazers, leading productive and meaningful careers, setting high standards for their children, and exemplifying values such as a hard work ethic, self-discipline, integrity, and compassion. Their guiding hands, pep talks, financial support, encouragement, and unwavering love over the years bring great joy to my heart. I am truly blessed.

Jennifer Ilene Johnson, my beautiful wife of eleven years, has made each of my days since meeting her much sweeter, more meaningful, and joyous. There is no limit to my love for her and I celebrate and appreciate the many years, months, days, and hours we have journeyed together. I am thankful for her ardent support of my academic pursuits, her boundless love and enthusiasm, her adventurous spirit, resolve and courage. She has made me a better person and a better man. I second the writer of Proverbs when they declare, "He who finds a wife, finds a good thing, and obtains the favor of the Lord" (Proverbs 18:22). I am a living witness.

When my first child, Saraiya Elise Johnson, was still in her mother's womb, I wrote several personal letters to her that I hoped that she would one day read. I am hoping she does the same with this project. I am deeply proud of her and all that she is becoming. She continues to dazzle me and bring my life great joy. The same is true for my second child, Jordynn Rae Johnson. A wondrous sparkle since birth, she has brought unceasing illumination to our family, a testament to her beautiful spirit and genuine warmth. She is bright, beautiful, and brazen. My son, and my youngest, Steven D. Johnson III, has completed our family unit with a sense of kindness, love and warmth that is rare for even mature adults. His precociousness is admirable, and I know that as his own journey unfolds, he, like his older sisters, will seek to make the world just a little bit better. I am blessed to be the father of these three children.

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*“But I remain as much a stranger today as I was the first day I arrived...”*

- James Baldwin, *Stranger  
In The Village*

## INTRODUCTION

Rhetoric has a way of shaping identity and influencing individual and social behavior. Viewed through the lens of persuading individuals to think and behavior a certain way, rhetoric, improperly used, has the capacity to cause considerable damage to the human psyche, fostering social divisions by preventing full recognition of another's humanity. As a vital form of communication, rhetoric has played an instrumental role in creating the conditions which have led to the founding and shaping of governments, economies, and public and private institutions. In the religious arena, rhetoric has long been a highly prioritized skill, used at best to frame social behavior by invoking the presence of a deity and creating a spiritual framework to help define the origins of creation, and used at worst to create and justify extremes forms of social division, perpetuating ethnic and tribal hatreds, stoking warring factions, and supporting artificial racial hierarchies. In America, a land which has willed itself to becoming a Christian nation, a so-called "City On A Hill," rhetoric has far too often been used to proliferate fear and incite violence, glorifying some while humiliating others. Often disguising itself in the language of Christianity and Christian principles, divisive rhetoric triggers deep seated animosities and xenophobia, creating an environment where certain people are treated as strangers.

Such a provocative and disturbing dynamic has recently been tragically borne out on matters of immigration policy in the United States. Over the course of the last few years, the Trump Administration's approach to immigration has served as a stark, grim reminder of how unhinged rhetoric can lead to abusive verbal and physical behavior, a dehumanizing and devaluing of another.

In the summer months of 2017, some political leaders took eerie pleasure watching America's so called "immigration crackdown." In the safe and secure corridors and offices of the



U.S. Capitol and government buildings, as migrants were apprehended at the border and hoisted in cages, as their families were separated at whim without due process and adequate documentation, the entire process was being celebrated and encouraged. President Trump had set the tone years before using fiery rhetoric to his political advantage on matters of immigration, denouncing immigrants as “animals,”<sup>4</sup> rapist, murderers, and thieves. Name-calling as a practice is not a novel phenomenon, but what elevates it to a matter of great concern it is when the act of name calling is dutifully embraced by Trump and his supporters, many of whom claim allegiance to the Christian faith. Furthermore, Trump’s words were not only accentuated by other leading Christian political leaders but were also underscored by many local churches and Christian leaders around the country.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, on the opposite end of the immigration debate, other Christian political figures vehemently disagreed with such an anti-immigrant stance, believing that such a position was antithetical to right Christian action and responsibility. On both sides of the political and cultural aisle concerning immigration, debates raged, tempers flared, and anger boiled. Inflamed passions colored the American landscape. While some Christians cheered, other Christians booed; their only commonality being a profession of Jesus Christ.

Distance can often numb the conscience of horror as it unfolds, thus it is helpful as this work commences to describe in detail what was indeed taking place on America’s southern border. At the hands of border patrol agents, migrants from Central America, fleeing war-torn countries and seeking refuge in America from untold horrors and atrocities in their native lands,

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<sup>4</sup> Julie Hirschfeld Davis, “Trump Calls Some Unauthorized Immigrants ‘Animals’ in Rant,” *The New York Times*, May 16, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/16/us/politics/trump-undocumented-immigrants-animals.html>.

<sup>5</sup> A few of the most prominent Christians leaders backing Trump included Pastor Robert Jeffress of First Baptist Church of Dallas, TX. See Jacey Fortin, “Trump Supporters Have a New Anthem, and It Came From Texas,” *The New York Times*, July 11, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/11/us/politics/trump-maga-song-church.html>.

were being brutalized at the border. America, it appeared, did not welcome their arrival. Despite their repeated pleas for assistance, compassion, and understanding, they were handcuffed, placed in transportation vehicles, and taken to holding cells and other makeshift prisons. As a deterrent, the U.S. government decided to take children from migrant parents, hoping that would cause those seeking entry into the U.S. to retreat: infants, toddlers, children, and teens – age did not matter. They were being viewed as animals and treated as such. And, unfortunately like their parents, they would be held indefinitely in U.S. captivity. They would be told nothing, fearing the unknown, their lives hanging in the balance. Thousands upon thousands would watch the coming days pass struggling to stay alive, braving the extraordinary heat of the southern border’s sun, being verbally abused and sometimes physically assaulted.<sup>6</sup> They were given little to drink and even less to eat. Some of these children would die while in the custody of the U.S. government. Some would be deported. Some would be relocated. Meanwhile, their parents were being sentenced too, some to prison for “illegal entry into the United States.” Others were sent back to the where their journey originally began. And for those who would not reunite with their children, they would inevitably die from broken hearts, the result of seeing their children snatched from them, powerless to prevent the atrocity. As has been the case in many human rights violations across the world, the most vulnerable succumbed to the strength and force of the powerful.

Such a painful recollection of events is not something etched in American history in decades past; it is America today – America in its barest, most vicious form. It serves as actual evidence of how behavior follows rhetoric, how what is said is what is done and underscores the deep connection between the two.

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<sup>6</sup> Chapter 4, “Animals,” will discuss the brutal conditions and unjust treatment many migrants faced while in custody on American’s southern border.

This is a project about rhetoric – how it can be used and abused – and its unfortunate close association with contributing to behavior which, I believe, is antithetical to the Christian message. To deal with this subject matter adequately, although not exhaustively, this project includes aspects of American history and social science, and shows how over the course of the last few centuries America has cultivated an extremely polarized political and social climate. While this is clearly a work with theological and biblical foundations and aims, it dares to explore the complex interweaving and entanglement of expressions of Christianity in American life, and its close relationship to political identity and social ethics. Undergirding the analysis is a fundamental exploration of how a country so beautifully diverse and prosperous, admired around the world, could simultaneously be so terrifying, vicious, and unforgiving. I argue in this work that in an era marked decidedly by extreme political and cultural polarization, Christians, and by extension the Christian church, must rediscover the role of speech and behavior in the workings of everyday life and assume a greater, more Christ-like responsibility for the shaping of a just society for all. To make this case, both the wisdom of the sages and one of the core teachings of Jesus Christ will be examined. Exploring the establishment and maintenance of a racial hierarchy, the history of immigration in the U.S., and seeking to unpack recent events that have occurred in American life, I endeavor to explore how words and actions matter in the life of each Christian and call the American Church and its adherents to engage in a practice of biblical and spiritual rediscovery, to recommit themselves to the service of others. Christian responsibility demands right speech and right action, loving discourse, and neighborliness. This argument is outlined chiefly in four sections.

The first section is an effort at what is termed “*Realization.*” The focus of this section will call upon the reader to explore the current political dynamic shaping American society and

the social and cultural divisions in which it resides. This section will reveal that the dynamics currently being played out in America actually have deep roots in the American story, and how many of the views, values, and belief systems long held throughout American history – from race, gender, and social class – are still influential today. A deep dive into the origins of the American experiment serves as a springboard for interpreting key elements of subsequent chapters.

The second section of this work is named “*Remembering*.” From the Puritan’s arrival in this new land, to an overview of the antebellum South, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights era, this section takes up the significant claim that while the American experiment, rooted in a firm sense of rugged idealism, falls breathtakingly short of its professed values, illustrated by its creation of an artificial racial hierarchy. This section also focuses on immigration. It explores at a high-level the shape of immigration history in the U.S. over the course of the last one hundred and forty years. To do this, a chapter in this section relies mostly on the work of author Adam Goodman, who helps us see that the current immigration issues we are seeing in America is part of the long anti-immigration posture of the U.S. government.

The third section of this work invites readers to a process of “*Rediscovery*.” Here the objective is to name and define right Christian speech and its corollary, right Christian action. Relying upon the wisdom found in the book of Proverbs and the parable of the Good Samaritan, this segment of the argument serves to challenge contemporary language and behavior employed by Christian political figures, leaders, and parishioners. The case is made that a failure to follow biblical guidance and embody Christian love threatens one’s Christian identity and places considerable strain on Christ’s work in the local Church.

The fourth and final section of this thesis is called “*Re-Imagining*.” Herein is an attempt to provide thoughts on re-imagining Christian identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by placing renewed efforts of right Christian speech and right Christian action. The section provides a list of recommendations for improving the contemporary practice of ministry. The goal of this final section is to challenge Christians of all political persuasions to lay claim more fully to the call of Christ and their treatment of others. Key to this is a better grasp of a recognition that all are made in the *Imago Dei* and represent the beauty of God’s diverse creation.

When taken together, these four sections make the case that the way we talk about people influences how we treat them. This is true for America in the main and for the Christian church particularly. The argument sought to be made is that rhetoric should be informed with wisdom, and by doing so, the actions which follow may more closely align with the core teachings of Jesus Christ.

**PART ONE**

**REALIZATION**

## Chapter I - Seeing

*Mother, mother, there's too many of you crying. Brother, brother, there's too many of you dying. You know we've got to find a way to bring some lovin' here today. Father, father, we don't need to escalate. You see war is not the answer, For only love can conquer hate. You know we've got to find a way, to bring some loving' here today.*

- Marvin Gaye, "What's Going On"

On October 5, 2020, among a host of video announcements released during the most intense period of the presidential election, former First Lady Michelle Obama gave a forceful endorsement of former Vice President Joe Biden to be the next President of the United States of America by offering a stinging critique and rebuke of President Donald Trump. Dubbed "Closing Argument,"<sup>7</sup> Obama offered, "Our country is in chaos because of a president who is not up to the job....we cannot trust this president to tell us the truth about anything....One thing this president is really, really good at, is using fear and confusion and spreading lies to win." Unrelenting, she continued, describing President Trump as a person "who in the greatest crisis of our lifetimes, doubled down on division and resentment." Joe Biden, Mrs. Obama continued, offered a stark contrast to what has been witnessed and experienced in the United States under the leadership of President Trump. "Joe Biden has lived his life guided by values and principles that mirror ones most Americans can recognize....He will bring people together to get something done even across our differences....A leader who will help heal this nation, and instead of tearing people apart." But, Obama cautioned, "Let us be very real: America is divided right now....They [President Trump and his supporters] are stoking fears about black and brown Americans, lying

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<sup>7</sup> Michelle Obama, "Closing Argument," YouTube video, posted by "Joe Biden," October 6, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=1425&v=5l\\_Xz2MIh4s&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1425&v=5l_Xz2MIh4s&feature=emb_title).

about how minorities will destroy suburbs, whipping up violence and intimidation....it is morally wrong, and yes it is racist, but that does not mean it won't work." America is divided, and President Donald Trump, Michelle Obama suggests, will continue to use his fiery rhetoric to stoke fears, inflame tensions, and drive the social, political, and cultural wedge even deeper throughout the country.

The rise of Donald J. Trump came as a surprise to many. A long shot candidate who previously had not never served in any elected political office, Trump entered the 2016 presidential race during a Hollywood Style introduction on June 16, 2015 at Trump Tower in New York City. The scene was reminiscent of a red-carpet celebration for a reality television star, defying the conventions for a presidential candidates' formal announcement. Surrounded by the sparkling allure of his Trump Tower and its radiating lavishness, Trump seemed to welcome the limelight, scrutiny, and cameras. Introducing the slogan that would define his presidential campaign and his presidency, an effort to "Make America Great Again," Trump offered a sobering and penetratingly dark assessment of the current social, cultural, economic, and geopolitical climate. "Our country is in serious trouble. We don't have victories anymore. We used to have victories, but we don't have them....The U.S. has become a dumping ground for everybody's problems."<sup>8</sup> Trump went on to single out people of Mexican descent migrating into the country, offering,

When Mexico sends its people [into the U.S.], they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're sending people who have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us (sic). They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists....I speak to the border guards and they tell us what we're getting. And it only makes common sense....They're sending us not the right people.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Time Staff, "Here Donald Trump's Presidential Announcement Speech," *Time*, June 16, 2015, <https://time.com/3923128/donald-trump-announcement-speech/>.

<sup>9</sup> Time Staff, "Announcement Speech."



Trump concluded his speech by offering a sobering view of America: “Sadly, the American dream is dead.”

On the basis of his rhetoric alone – the language he employed and the images he so poignantly portrayed – it was clear from the outset that in order to improve the prospects of his long shot presidential campaign and gain some initial credibility within the conservative base, Donald Trump deemed it necessary to incorporate inflammatory language in his speech that was rooted in a deep sense of “us” versus “them” worldview.<sup>10</sup> Whether the topic was President Barack Obama, China, Japan, or Mexico, in Trump’s worldview the future of America would be determined by a battle between what he would term real “patriots” and the “other;” between those with an inherent right of residing in America and the stranger. It seemed to be a battle of creating a white nationalist country, a return to the days of the Antebellum South, or allowing criminals and left-wing extremist to overrun it entirely.

But something else was revealing itself as Donald Trump made his presidential announcement; something much deeper, more telling. And to trace it, one must recall Trump’s ties to the well disproven conspiracy theory of “Birtherism.”<sup>11</sup>

## **BIRTHERISM**

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<sup>10</sup> Although Trump did not use the exact phrasing “us” versus “them” in his announcement speech, it should be clear to his listeners and observers that he was indeed making this argument as he sought to secure national support for his candidacy. For Trump, it was necessary to rekindle notions of American prowess and ingenuity as he made his case for a return to an “America First” worldview. As noted later in this work, the America First worldview was not a novel idea and had its roots based on notions of American superiority and white supremacy.

<sup>11</sup> Adam Serwer, “Birtherism of a Nation: The conspiracy theories surrounding Obama’s birthplace and religion were much more than lies. They were ideology,” *The Atlantic*, May 13, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/birtherism-and-trump/610978/>. Serwer’s riveting articles ventures directly into the heart of the matter, and this thesis interweaves many of his observations throughout to call attention to overarching value systems, namely, white supremacy.

Barack Obama made a grand entrance at the Democratic National Convention in 2004. Having served as state senator in the state of Illinois since 1997, Obama was slowly becoming a rising star among the Democratic Party. Democratic Presidential nominee John Kerry was among those who noticed the charisma and idealism with which Obama spoke and tasked Obama with delivering a keynote speech during the Democratic National Convention in Boston. Keynote speeches during Republican and Democratic National Conventions are significant, for they can potentially mark key turning points in the direction of a campaign and the party. Predictably, much effort is expended to select the right person to address the right issues on the right night of the convention. But the speech State Senator Barack Obama gave at the time was, and remains today, one of the most notable speeches in the history of both Republican and Democratic national conventions.

A quick survey of some of the most memorable moments of his speech that day helps provide a sense as to why this speech was considered historic. Casting a vision of a country that welcomes all, Obama offered, “In a generous America, you don’t have to be rich to achieve your potential.”<sup>12</sup> Referring to the principles of America found in the Declaration of Independence, Obama continued, “We hold these truths evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed with their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That is the true genius of America.”<sup>13</sup> Obama continued, reminding listeners of the inherent ideals of the American Republic, challenging, “People don’t expect government to solve all their problems, but they sense deep in their bones that with a slight change of priorities we can make sure that every child in America has a decent shot at life and

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<sup>12</sup> Barack Obama, “C-Span: Barack Obama Speech at 2004 DNC Convention,” posted by C-Span, August 18, 2008, YouTube video, 18:47, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWynt87PaJ0>.

<sup>13</sup> Barack Obama, “2004 DNC Convention.”

that the doors of opportunity are open to all.”<sup>14</sup> Obama’s speech was of course notable in the sense that he is a gifted orator. But perhaps what was most important was not the stylistic elements of his presentation, nor his crafty use of metaphors and illustrations to underscore his points, but the content and substance of the speech itself. He was speaking of a nation with the capacity to rise above deep divisions; a nation able to learn the many lessons of history and use those lessons to create a better country for all, to embrace more fully the principle of equality for all peoples spelled out in America’s founding documents. This speech helped to propel Obama into the national spotlight, but it would also be the speech that inadvertently laid the groundwork for a deep and dark platform upon which many of Obama’s fellow Americans would seek to publicly humiliate him, the consequences of which are borne out today.

Barack Obama was born in Hawaii, the son of a father from Kenya and a mother from Kansas. These facts would prove insufficient to counter the growing swell of criticism Obama began to face before he could even descend the rostrum following his 2004 speech at the Democratic Convention. As rave reviews of the speech began pouring in after his national debut, a conspiracy theory began to circulate discrediting this rising star. Adam Martin,<sup>15</sup> a former presidential and congressional candidate, suggested that Obama was a sham, that he was using the story of his Kenyan father, American mother, American grandparents, and his unusual and atypical upbringing to embellish his overall narrative. Martin suggested that Obama “spent a lifetime running from his family heritage and religious heritage.”<sup>16</sup> While maintaining that

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<sup>14</sup> Barack Obama, “2004 DNC Convention.”

<sup>15</sup> Tony Schinella, “NH Pol: I Created the Obama Birther Movement,” *Patch*, September 17, 2016, <https://patch.com/new-hampshire/bedford-nh/nh-pol-i-created-obama-birther-movement>.

<sup>16</sup> Adam Serwer, “Birtherism.” As noted by Serwer, Martin relied upon Barack Obama’s personal memoir “Dreams From My Father,” as primary evidence to support his claim of Obama’s narrative embellishment. While it is traditionally understood as academically apt to explore the motivations behind an author’s work, it is equally important to explore the motivation of critics as well. Ensuing sections of this thesis will demonstrate that even the traditionally respected steps and practices of exploring an author’s argument can be co-opted, abused and used to dehumanize as long as it fits within the larger worldview of a racial caste system.

Obama was born in Hawaii, Martin viewed Obama's personal narrative as motivated by a desire to persuade, to place oneself within a vision of grandeur involving a certain idealism designed to attract diverse audiences and potentially enhance his political fortunes. While Martin's criticism was not fundamentally different from what often occurs in attacks on political candidates, his casting of Obama's motivations was enough to erect a tinder box, which would, a few years later, be lit with a match and engulfed in a raging inferno as it grew in popularity.

During the period between 2004 and 2008, the conspiracy theory Martin first introduced was picked up by other prominent conspiracy theorists and began to fully take shape. What was borne during this time period was a movement known as "Birtherism" – a false and widely discredited claim that espouses that not only was Barack Obama not born in the United States, and thus not eligible to become president, but also that he was masquerading around as a secret Muslim desiring to destroy America from within. During the presidential campaign of 2008, frustrated and despondent Hillary Clinton supporters began circulating a chain email suggesting that "Barack Obama's mother was living in Kenya with his Arab-African father late in her pregnancy. She was not allowed to travel by plane then, so Barack Obama was born there and his mother then took him to Hawaii to register his birth."<sup>17</sup> Following Hillary Clinton's defeat in the Democratic Primary, the Birtherism conspiracy theory did not subside, eventually gaining an unprecedented level of attention and support by conservative media outlets and officials belonging to the Republican party. While Obama was in the office as a sitting president, the Birtherism movement only intensified, becoming a hot topic throughout conservative media.

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<sup>17</sup> Adam Serwer, "Birtherism." Furthermore, this urge to label another person or group as "other" should not be construed as only a Republican or Trumpian phenomenon. In fact, Democrats and other figures might be tempted to go down this disturbing path. While this project takes a critical stance examining the rhetoric and behavior of several conservatives as embodied in contemporary times, the same dynamics can be equally embraced and practiced across political and social spectrums.

Conservative writer Dinesh D’Souza took the Birtherism conspiracy theory even further, suggesting that then-President Obama was secretly channeling his father’s socialist agenda.

Penning an article for *Forbes* magazine, D’Souza wrote,

Our President is trapped in his father's time machine. Incredibly, the U.S. is being ruled according to the dreams of a Luo tribesman of the 1950s. This philandering, inebriated African socialist, who raged against the world for denying him the realization of his anticolonial ambitions, is now setting the nation's agenda through the reincarnation of his dreams in his son.<sup>18</sup>

Spurred by conspiracy theorists and conservative commentators, the base of the Republican party soon shared these views: “By 2011, about half of Republican voters believed Obama was born abroad.”<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, and not surprisingly, the substance of the Birtherism movement was fueled by racists impulses, going to great extremes to minimize and grossly distort Obama’s career, policies, and family life.<sup>20</sup>

Furnishing his birth certificate was not nearly enough to satiate the desires of those ascribing to the Birtherism movement; even this effort was rendered a coverup by some. Birtherism conspirators sought to draw more blood. The conversations and commentary continued, finding its way into the 2012 presidential election. Mitt Romney’s presidential campaign was its next culprit. One day while on the campaign trail, Romney quipped, “Ann [wife] was born at Henry Ford Hospital; I was born at Harper Hospital. No one's ever asked to

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<sup>18</sup> Dinesh D’Souza, “How Obama Thinks,” *Forbes*, September 9, 2010, <https://www.forbes.com/forbes/2010/0927/politics-socialism-capitalism-private-enterprises-obama-business-problem/?sh=3d3fd2e478e9>. It is also worth nothing D’Souza, committed to unleashing a barrage of criticism and dehumanizing language towards Barack Obama, would himself be immersed in his own scandal, leading to his resignation as president from King’s College in New York, a Christian liberal arts college, and his subsequent downfall and disgrace. See Melissa Steffan, “Dinesh D’Souza Resigns as President of The King’s College,” *Christianity Today*, October 18, 2012, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2012/october/dinesh-dsouza-resigns-as-president-of-kings-college.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Adam Serwer, “Birtherism.”

<sup>20</sup> Michelle Obama was also the victim of all kinds of racist vitriol and epithets as part of the Birtherism movement. Chapter 3 on this project, entitled “Caste,” seeks to trace the origins of racial hierarchy in America which provides a framework for interpreting the Birtherism movement.

see my birth certificate. They know that this is the place that we were born and raised.”<sup>21</sup> The Birtherism movement – and its direct and implied illusions to America being a place of white power versus a place where power is shared – was alive and well, and President Obama won re-election in the 2012 Presidential General Election not because it dissipated, but despite of it.

Over the course of its rise to prominence in the hearts and minds of many avid Republican conservatives, the Birtherism movement gained one important follower, Donald J. Trump. In March 2011, during an interview on Fox News, Trump said of Obama, “He doesn’t have a birth certificate. He may have one, but there is something on that birth certificate – maybe religion, maybe it says he’s a Muslim; I don’t know. I have people that have been studying it and they cannot believe what they are finding.”<sup>22</sup> Following Trump’s promotion of Birtherism through widespread media attention along with his popular social media postings on Twitter, there was a growing support system for Trump to run for president in the 2012 presidential campaign. After seemingly toying with the idea, Trump decided against running during this election cycle and instead endorsed Mitt Romney for President.<sup>23</sup> What Trump learned during this time – whether from the money he raised or the media attention it brought – was that if he engaged in a full-throated support of the Birtherism movement – leveraging his political fortune on it – and became a significant contributor to its cause, he could lay the groundwork for entry

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<sup>21</sup> Aaron Blake, “Romney Wanders into Slippery Slope of Birtherism,” *Washington Post*, August 24, 2012, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2012/08/24/romney-wanders-into-the-slippery-slope-of-birtherism/>.

<sup>22</sup> Adam Serwer, “Birtherism.”

<sup>23</sup> At the time, Mitt Romney valued the endorsement of Donald J. Trump for his candidacy as president. Since that time, it appears that their affinity for each other has subsided, evidenced by Romney’s March 2016 Anti-Trump speech. Mitt Romney, “Transcript of Mitt Romney’s Speech on Donald Trump” *The New York Times*, March 3, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/04/us/politics/mitt-romney-speech.html>. Romney also reverses his earlier welcome of Donald Trump’s endorsement. See Mitt Romney (@mittromney), Twitter, March 3, 2016, <https://twitter.com/MittRomney/status/705471184935190532?s=20>. Finally, for purposes here, see Aljazeera, “Hate-filled: Mitt Romney Slams Trump, US Election Rhetoric,” *Aljazeera*, October 13, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/13/hate-filled-republican-senator-slams-trump-election-rhetoric>.

into a presidential race at some point in the near future. His unabashed and boastful ties to the Birtherism movement would be his key, his trump card, and he would use it as an entry platform upon which to speak divisive rhetoric, driving a wedge between communities, further widening the divides across the United States. It was another, jagged battle between who belongs in America and who does not. Politically, it would prove calculating. Civilly, it would prove devastating.

## **THE RISE OF DONALD TRUMP**

During a competitive Republican primary, Donald Trump ran on a unique platform. Such a platform required preying on the deep fears harbored by many Americans, stoking long hidden divisions, resurrecting aged predispositions of civil strife and antagonism towards others. To do this effectively, Trump deployed fiery rhetoric in the hopes that it would influence the conscience and behavior of his list of supporters, which was increasing considerably daily. Speaking of his fellow competitors for the Republican presidential nomination, Trump periodically referred to Senator Ted Cruz as “Lyin’ Ted,” which was eventually comingled with a vitriolic threat to “spill the beans on his wife.”<sup>24</sup> Trump referred to Jeb Bush as “Low Energy Jeb,” and later called him “poor” and “pathetic” during a campaign event.<sup>25</sup> Marco Rubio, a senator from Florida, Trump sought to downplay as “Little Marco,”<sup>26</sup> a name laced with many implications and images. Strikingly, Trump used such rhetoric to criticize and undermine the candidacy of those within his own political party, ultimately leading to the withdrawal of

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<sup>24</sup> Donald Trump (@realdonaldtrump), Twitter, account suspended January 8, 2021, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/712457104515317764?s=20>.

<sup>25</sup> Donald Trump, “Trump: Bush is ‘poor, pathetic, low-energy guy,’” *The Washington Post*, January 16, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/trump-bush-is-poor-pathetic-low-energy-guy/2016/01/21/efd1347c-c090-11e5-98c8-7fab78677d51\\_video.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/trump-bush-is-poor-pathetic-low-energy-guy/2016/01/21/efd1347c-c090-11e5-98c8-7fab78677d51_video.html).

<sup>26</sup> Donald Trump, “Donald Trump Mocks ‘Little Marco’ Rubio at Fox News Debate,” posted by TPM TV, accessed September 1, 2020, YouTube video, 0:39, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7p\\_ltuXcOH4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7p_ltuXcOH4).

Republican opponents who, could not mount a substantial defense against Trump’s rhetorical strategy. Trump would again see further evidence that his rhetoric of division and fear proved efficacious.

The rhetoric Trump employed would go well beyond serving to unsettle and attack his opponents for the Republican nomination. Along the way, Trump attacked members of the United States military. Senator John McCain was the most notable. A former Navy aviator who had served admirably in the Vietnam War, enduring a nearly six-year stint as a prisoner of war before being released in 1973,<sup>27</sup> John McCain’s military career was held in high esteem, by Republicans and Democrats alike. Seeking to continue serving the country he loved, John McCain began his political career wholeheartedly in 1983, when he was elected a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Arizona, and eventually a member of the U.S. Senate from Arizona in 1987.<sup>28</sup> Over the course of the ensuing thirty years, John McCain became a fixture of the Republican establishment, and it could very well be argued that his presence, influence, values, legislative work, and political ideology was critically paramount in shaping and forming Republican politics, priorities, and broader political views during this time. Hence, criticism of John McCain’s life and service, especially his military career, could be perceived not only as offensive, but almost blasphemous, especially within Republican circles. Unless, of course, the criticism came from Donald Trump. “He’s not a war hero. He’s a war hero because he was captured. I like people that weren’t captured,” said Trump when asked about John McCain at an Iowa Family Leadership Summit in 2016.<sup>29</sup> This comment also arrived on the heels of Trump

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<sup>27</sup> “The Story of John Sidney McCain III,” John McCain, accessed September 5, 2020, <https://www.johnmccain.com/story/>.

<sup>28</sup> “Biographical Directory of United States Congress,” United States Congress, accessed September 5, 2020, <https://bioguideretro.congress.gov/Home/MemberDetails?memIndex=M000303>.

<sup>29</sup> Eric Ortiz, “He’s Not a War Hero: Donald Trump Mocks John McCain’s Service,” NBC News, July 18, 2015, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/hes-not-war-hero-donald-trump-mocks-john-mccains-service-n394391>.



referring to John McCain as a “dummy.”<sup>30</sup> To his credit, McCain ignored many of the insults and slander coming his way, exemplifying the dignity and honor for which he had been well known.

McCain’s higher road approach though did nothing to convince Trump to adjust his penchant for using rhetoric to undermine military families and stoke division. After Khizr Khan, the father of a fallen Muslim U.S. soldier denounced Trump’s candidacy for president during the Democratic National Convention in July 2016, Trump responded by attacking Mr. Khan’s wife, suggesting that the reason Khan’s wife was silent during her husband’s speech was because Muslim women are prevented from talking. “If you look at his wife,” Trump said, “she was standing there, she had nothing to say, she probably (sic) – maybe was not allowed to have anything to say, you tell me.”<sup>31</sup> One could argue that Trump was just stating an observation here, an observation rooted in a familiarity with practices and traditions within the Muslim culture. However, such a defense cannot be waged here. Undoubtedly, Trump’s response was more about stoking a phobia towards Muslims in general and painting them as un-American. implying that American Muslims sympathize with domestic and foreign terrorists.<sup>32</sup> Notably, these remarks about the Khan family were widely condemned by members across the political spectrum and by military vets.<sup>33</sup> However, this served as a glaring omen that rhetoric in America was becoming more brazen, less filtered, more harmful, and less politically correct. But something more was at stake: if Trump’s rhetoric could be used to attack Gold Star families, those whom this nation

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<sup>30</sup> Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump), Twitter, account suspended January 8, 2021, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/621781334592241665?s=20>.

<sup>31</sup> Maggie Haberman and Richard A. Opiel Jr., “Donald Trump Criticizes Muslim Family of Slain U.S. Soldier, Drawing Ire,” *The New York Times*, July 30, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/31/us/politics/donald-trump-khizr-khan-wife-ghazala.html?smid=tw-nytimes&smtyp=cur>.

<sup>32</sup> Maggie Haberman and Richard A. Opiel Jr., “Drawing Ire.”

<sup>33</sup> “VoteVets releases Gold Star Family Members letter to Trump, demand apology for all Gold Star Families,” VoteVets.org, accessed September 15, 2020, <https://www.votevets.org/press/gold-star-letter>.

adored and treated with the utmost respect, then no person, no matter their interest, service, or profession, was spared.

Donald Trump, recognizing this rhetorical power, was masterful at using it to cast a certain caricature of his opponent for the presidency, Hillary Clinton. Across hundreds of rallies and campaign events, in campaign correspondences and media interviews, Trump would offer a stinging and unfounded name for Hillary, referring to her as “Crooked Hillary,”<sup>34</sup> the implication being that Hillary either had, or was at the time, participating in illegal activity of some nature, a warrantless and non-sensical claim debunked multiple times.<sup>35</sup> In addition to the nickname, Trump had also encouraged his supporters to chant the phrase “Lock her up” during his presidential campaign rallies, a kind of mantra not historically embraced or espoused by a presidential candidate, at least in modern presidential politics. It seemed as if all social, civil, and political norms were being re-written during this heated presidential election, as the Republican party grappled with the real possibility of an unlikely party representative. They would eventually coalesce around him, in lock step fashion, many speaking with the same fiery tongue.

By the time of the election on November 8, 2016, as the final votes were tallied and an anxious nation awaited the results, Donald Trump had firmly established an efficacious model for using the power of rhetoric – throughout his speeches, debates, interviews, social media and campaign communications – to influence the consciences and behavior of his most ardent supporters. Apparently, he recognized that not only would they listen to what he said, but they

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<sup>34</sup> Amber Jamieson, “Trump calls Clinton ‘Crooked Hillary’ – Should She Ignore it or Fight Back,” *The Guardian*, May 25, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/may/25/donald-trump-crooked-hillary-clinton-nickname-ignore-fight>.

<sup>35</sup> Doyle Mcmanus, “Column: Trump’s ‘Crooked Hillary’ Label May Stick,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 2016, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-0511-mcmanus-crooked-hillary-20160511-column.html>.

also would do what he said. His supporters, he likely knew, found deep agency to create a reality – no matter how heinous or far-fetched or unjustified – of which he spoke.

The seeds of fiery rhetoric had been sown. A wedge would widen an already divided republic.

## **CHARLOTTESVILLE**

Charlottesville is a small, quiet college town nestled in the heart of Virginia. A quaint place, it is home to nearly 50,000 residents who reside within a land area of 10.24 miles.<sup>36</sup> Attractions in the city range from its Charlottesville Ale Trail, designed to promote its growing brewery industry; it's thriving business district, called "The Corner," serving as an exhilarating hub for students, local residents and tourists; as well as IV Art Park, a park celebrating the City's distinct culture and art. As is often the case, looks can be deceiving, as Charlottesville also has a deep history of inflicting pain, legalizing oppression, and ignoring subjugation.<sup>37</sup> Each of these aspects of Charlottesville's painful history were illuminated during the weekend of August 11-12, 2017.

A bit of historical context helps to understand the events which unfolded that weekend. In March 2016, Charlottesville vice mayor and a city council member, Wes Bellamy, supported removing the confederate monuments of Robert E. Lee and Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson.

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<sup>36</sup> "About Charlottesville," City of Charlottesville, accessed September 15, 2020, <https://www.charlottesville.gov/694/About-Charlottesville>.

<sup>37</sup> Charlottesville Virginia has a long and storied history to the American South, namely its slavery and Jim Crow laws. The attention here is not to narrate in detail this history. Still, it must be noted that Charlottesville has made significant strides over the last few decades, becoming more progressive and working to create a more communal environment in which all races and cultures are celebrated. In the 2016 presidential election, nearly 80 percent of voters in this city cast their vote for Hillary Clinton. "2016 November General Official Results," Virginia Department of Elections, accessed September 15, 2020, <https://results.elections.virginia.gov/vaelections/2016%20November%20General/Site/Locality/CHARLOTTESVILLE%20CITY/Index.html>.

Bellamy's effort was taken up by Zyahna Bryant, a high school freshman, who, like many residents, recognized the fear and intimidation that such monuments symbolized in the city. Bryant led a petition demanding the removal of the Robert E. Lee monument in Lee Park, and the petition ultimately went to the city council. By a three to two vote, the council voted to remove the statue. While advocates for the removal of this statue recognized the significance of this moment and cheered the progress being made, the blood of white nationalists began to boil.

Eddie S. Glaude Jr., the James S. McDonnell Distinguished Professor of African American Studies at Princeton University, in his work *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America And It's Urgent Lessons For Our Own*,<sup>38</sup> chronicled what happened next as white nationalists fumed following the council's vote:

White nationalists saw an opportunity to exploit the removal of the statue for their own purposes. Since Donald Trump's election they had been emboldened by his overt appeals to white identity. In fact, social scientists found a direct correlation between Trump's election and a surge in hate crimes across the country. But the violence was only one disturbing consequence of Trump's rhetoric; in Charlottesville, in the early days of the monuments controversy, these white nationalists reasserted themselves in the country's national politics. For them, the actions of the Charlottesville city council amounted to an all-out assault on white people. The so-called soldiers of political correctness had disfigured southern history in particular and American history in general.<sup>39</sup>

White nationalists were outraged, feeling a sense of displacement and uncertainty regarding views that they had held so dear, for so long. They contemplated ways by which they could affirm their views of white superiority and white nationalism. They decided that a rally was needed, bringing together Neo-Nazis and other white nationalist groups designed to oppose the

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<sup>38</sup> Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and its Urgent Lessons For Our Own* (New York: Crown, 2020).

<sup>39</sup> Eddie S. Glaude Jr. "Begin Again," 69-70.

removal of the statue of Robert E. Lee, the general of the confederate army during the Civil War.<sup>40</sup> The Unite The Right rally was planned.

On the grounds of the University of Virginia the scene was more reminiscent of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries than modern times. Carrying torches, wearing Neo-Nazi and white supremacy garbs and paraphernalia, and wielding signs supporting Donald Trump, men and women marched their way forth shouting in fiery rhetoric, “You will not replace us,” and “Jew will not replace us.” In what had become a central issue – the removal of the Robert E. Lee statue – had been seen as a sign to these white nationalists that their perceived racial superiority was ending, and, feeling newly empowered and reenergized by President Trump’s election, they felt the need to voice their convictions.

However, their protest was met with stern resistance. From the outset, there was strong condemnation of white nationalists by local and state officials. The mayor of Charlottesville, Mike Signer, offered the following in a Facebook post, calling the march “a cowardly parade of hatred, bigotry, racism and intolerance,” and concluding, “I am beyond disgusted by this unsanctioned and despicable display of visual intimidation on a college campus.”<sup>41</sup> Local religious leaders also offered stinging rebukes, timely prayers, and engaged social activism. Prominent intellectual Cornel West, an esteemed professor at Harvard University, led a prayer service. Paul Ryan, then speaker of the House of Representatives, strongly condemned the protestors on social media, writing “The views fueling the spectacle in Charlottesville are

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<sup>40</sup> Hawes Spencer and Sheryl Gay Stolberg, “White Nationalists March on University of Virginia,” *The New York Times*, August 11, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/11/us/white-nationalists-rally-charlottesville-virginia.html>. One of the topics covered in Chapter 4 of this thesis is the exploration of the place and role of white supremacy within various levels and functions of the Federal, State and Local governments in America. Chapter 5 of this work will also examine some of the influence white supremacy has on American Christianity.

<sup>41</sup> Mike Signer, “Statement On The Rally at the University of Virginia,” Facebook, August 11, 2017, [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=10155559426310629&id=51200715628](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=10155559426310629&id=51200715628).

repugnant. Let this only serve to unite Americans against this kind of vile bigotry.”<sup>42</sup> Providing overwhelming resistance to the white nationalist groups, were counter-protestors, individuals all of colors, creeds, and religious convictions. The white nationalist and counter-protestors engaged in conflict, spurred on by inflamed tensions and the intensifying pressure of the moment. Fights broke out. Twenty-one-year-old James Fields Jr., a white nationalist, drove his 2010 Dodge Challenger down a narrow street where counter-protestors had assembled.<sup>43</sup> Thirty-five people were injured by his madness. Heather Heyer, a thirty-two-year-old woman with a heart full of compassion and a deep yearning to make a difference by speaking out for justice and equality, was one of those hit by his vehicle.<sup>44</sup> She was pronounced dead at the scene.

“We’re going to fulfill the promises of Donald Trump” to “take our country back,”<sup>45</sup> said David Duke, a former “imperial wizard” of the Ku Klux Klan, when speaking to reporters on that fateful Saturday. Donald Trump’s rhetoric had issued a challenge, directly and implicitly, to white nationalist groups across the country to come together, affirm their values, and “take their country back.” Trump refused to condemn the protest and the accompanying violence, blaming “hatred, bigotry and violence on many sides.” That weekend, speaking in the lobby of Trump Tower, Trump was asked for additional statements regarding the events in Charlottesville. And what has since been characterized as perhaps his most telling rhetoric yet, Trump offered, “You

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<sup>42</sup> Paul Ryan (@speakerryan), Twitter, August 12, 2017, <https://twitter.com/SpeakerRyan/status/896400866361704449?s=20>.

<sup>43</sup> Static Image, *The New York Times*, August 13, 2017, <https://static01.nyt.com/images/2017/08/13/us/13charlottesvilleA1/13charlottesvilleA1-jumbo.jpg?quality=90&auto=webp>.

<sup>44</sup> “Heather’s Story,” Heather Heyer Foundation, accessed September 10, 2020. <https://www.heatherheyerfoundation.com/>.

<sup>45</sup> Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Brian M. Rosenthal, “Man Charged After White Nationalist Rally in Charlottesville Ends in Deadly Violence,” *The New York Times*, August 12, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/12/us/charlottesville-protest-white-nationalist.html?action=click&module=RelatedCoverage&pgtype=Article&region=Footer>.

also had some very fine people on both sides.”<sup>46</sup> The rhetoric employed here walked the fine line between condemning the violence and supporting the violence.

## **CORONAVIRUS**

COVID-19<sup>47</sup> arrived in the United States sometime in January of 2020. After months downplaying the risk the virus posed to the American people, President Trump declared a National Emergency on March 13, 2020. Citing the pervasive spread throughout several American cities as well as the survivability threat it posed to the health care system in America, Trump declared, “Now, therefore, I, Donald Trump, President of the United States, do hereby find and proclaim that the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States constitutes a national emergency, beginning March 13, 2020.”<sup>48</sup> When this national emergency was declared, 1,645 people had been infected with the coronavirus. According to John Hopkins University of Medicine’s Coronavirus Resource Center, as of October 6, 2020, the United States had 7,477,936 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 210,487 confirmed deaths.<sup>49</sup> Over the span of a seven-month period, the United States lost more citizens than World War I, the Vietnam War, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan combined. Perhaps most appalling and disheartening, however, is that many of these deaths could have been prevented if there had been a better effort earlier in the pandemic to follow the guidelines put forth by the Center for Disease and Control of wearing of

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<sup>46</sup> Rosie Gray, “Trump Defends White-Nationalist Protestors: ‘Some Very Fine People on Both Sides,’” *The Atlantic*, August 15, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/trump-defends-white-nationalist-protesters-some-very-fine-people-on-both-sides/537012/>.

<sup>47</sup> The Center for Diseases and Control (CDC) is still learning about the novel coronavirus as of the time of this publication. More information can be found here at the CDC’s website: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/how-covid-spreads.html>.

<sup>48</sup> The White House, “Proclamation on Declaring National Emergency Concerning the Novel Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Outbreak,” March 13, 2020, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-declaring-national-emergency-concerning-novel-coronavirus-disease-covid-19-outbreak/>.

<sup>49</sup> “COVID-19 Dashboard by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at John Hopkins University,” John Hopkins University and Medicine, accessed October 6, 2020, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>.

masks, social distancing, and frequent handwashing. Despite the national emergency declared by the president himself, many of the elected officials in the country, including the president and many congressional leaders, undermined the public health guidance by publicly downplaying the virus' severity in speeches, townhalls, newspaper articles, and social media outlets.

Unconscionably, masks were ridiculed and social distancing measures ignored. A defiant rhetoric was influencing the behavior of those living in cities across the U.S. However, this time, the consequences would soon prove to be painfully severe.

On January 20, 2020, the first positive coronavirus case was confirmed in the United States. A thirty-five-year-old man residing in Snohomish County, Washington, visited an urgent care facility after suffering from a 4-day bout with severe cough and fever.<sup>50</sup> The man had recently returned from visited family in Wuhan, China – the origins of the virus – and began to experience severe symptoms. Meanwhile, government leaders, along with scientists working at the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), had begun to discuss the serious public health, economic, social, and political risks the virus posed to the country if it arrived on its shores.<sup>51</sup> Significantly, President Trump's rhetoric downplayed the severity of the virus. When asked whether he was concerned about a potential pandemic spreading across the U.S., Trump responded, "No. Not at all. And we have it totally under control. It's one person coming in from China....It's going to be just fine."<sup>52</sup> Nothing could be further from the actual events that were

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<sup>50</sup> Michelle L. Holshue, Chas DeBolt, Scott Lindquist, Kathy H. Lofy, John Wiesman, Hollianne Bruce, Christopher Spitters, Keith Ericson, Sara Wilkerson, Ahmet Tural, George Diaz, Amanda Cohn, LeAnne Fox, Anita Patel, Susan I. Gerber, Lindsay Kim, Suxiang Tong, Xiaoyan Lu, Steve Lindstrom, Mark A. Pallansch, William C. Weldon, Holly M. Biggs, Timothy M. Uyeki, and Satish K. Pillai, for the Washington State 2019-nCoV Case Investigation Team, *The New England Journal of Medicine*, (January 31, 2020), <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMoa2001191>.

<sup>51</sup> Yasmeeen Abutaleb, Josh Dawsey, Ellen Nakashima and Greg Miller, "The U.S. was Beset by Denial and Dysfunction as the Coronavirus Raged," *The Washington Post*, April 4, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2020/04/04/coronavirus-government-dysfunction/?arc404=true>.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, "Denial and Dysfunction."



taking place on the ground, however. Amid rising positive cases throughout the country, on February 24, 2020, Trump tweeted “The Coronavirus is very much under control in the USA. We are in contact with everyone and all relevant countries. CDC & World Health have been working hard and very smart. Stock market starting to look very good to me!”<sup>53</sup> Two days later, on February 26, in a news conference at the White House, President Trump provided this assessment: “When you have 15 people, and the 15 within a couple of days is going to be down to close to zero, that’s a pretty good job we’ve done.”<sup>54</sup>

The positive, optimistic rhetoric did not properly account for what was actually occurring in many areas across the country and the world. On March 11, Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus of the World Health Organization (WHO), offered this sobering assessment:

In the past two weeks, the number of cases of COVID-19 outside of China has increased 13-fold, and the number of affected countries has tripled. There are now more than 118,000 cases in 114 countries, and 4,291 people have lost their lives. Thousands more are fighting for their lives in hospitals. In the days and weeks ahead, we expect to see the number of cases, the number of deaths, and the number of affected countries climb even higher. WHO has been assessing this outbreak around the clock and we are deeply concerned both by the alarming levels of spread and severity, and by the alarming levels of inaction. We have therefore made the assessment that COVID-19 can be characterized as a pandemic.<sup>55</sup>

On March 13, following WHO’s determination and rising coronavirus cases in America, President Trump declared a national emergency. At the blink of an eye, life in America came to a screeching halt. Following the guidance of the CDC and public health officials, businesses shut

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<sup>53</sup> Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump), Twitter, account suspended on January 8, 2021, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1232058127740174339?s=20>.

<sup>54</sup> The White House, “Remarks by President Trump, Vice President Pence, and Members of the Coronavirus Task Force in Press Conference,” briefing issued February 27, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-conference/>.

<sup>55</sup> Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, “WHO Director-General’s Opening Remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19,” March 11, 2020, <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>.

down, local municipalities suspended operations, and non-essential workers were ordered to stay home. Educational institutions nation-wide transitioned to an online education format exclusively. Restaurants, hotels, and airlines all saw their respective industries come to an abrupt pause. Many businesses were lost permanently, sadly. Layoffs happened in droves, and some 20 million people would lose their jobs permanently or be furloughed in the coming weeks.<sup>56</sup>

Amid the chaos, catastrophe, uncertainty, and frustration, Trump's fiery rhetoric continued. Growing frustrated about the economic devastation occurring across the country, Trump began to encourage his followers to resist their local authorities and the advice of public health officials. Seeing the frustration some residents had regarding lockdown ordinances in the states of Virginia and Michigan, President Trump utilized social media to declare, "Liberate Virginia," "Liberate Minnesota," and "Liberate Michigan,"<sup>57</sup> rhetoric designed to both incite resistance to the guidance of public health experts and government leaders and to undermine the leadership of local authorities. Such inflammatory rhetoric resulted in threatening demonstrations of force and behavior. On April 30, at the Michigan Capital building, hundreds of Michigan residents gathered to protest an extension of the stay-at-home orders that their governor – Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer – had initiated. Protests are not uncommon in America, as the First Amendment of the Constitution guarantees U.S. citizens of this right. What was most remarkable about this demonstration was that many of those protestors, feeling empowered by Trump's rhetoric and his undermining of local authorities, were armed with high-powered rifles

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<sup>56</sup> The Economics Daily, "Payroll Employment Down 20.5 million in April 2020," Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, May 12, 2020, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2020/payroll-employment-down-20-point-5-million-in-april-2020.htm>.

<sup>57</sup> Michael D. Shear and Sarah Mervosh, "Trump Encourages Protest Against Governors Who Have Imposed Virus Restrictions," *The New York Times*, updated April 29, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/17/us/politics/trump-coronavirus-governors.html>.

and handguns.<sup>58</sup> The imagery just seemed unreal. Further, more directly, Trump likely inspired militia members to plot to kidnap the governor.<sup>59</sup>

## **GEORGE FLOYD**

“I can’t breathe” were the words George Floyd yelled more than 20 times on May 25, 2020. Following his arrest by Minneapolis police officers for allegedly using a counterfeit \$20 bill to pay for a pack of cigarettes, George Floyd, a 46-year-old black man, would soon become another unfortunate example of how police brutality continues to exist, permeating the lives of black communities across America. For an astonishing 8 minutes and 46 seconds, officer of Derek Chauvin, a white man, kept his knee on Floyd’s neck, pinning him to the ground. Even after Floyd clearly became unconscious, Chauvin’s posture remained, his knee firmly in place, his facial expression unperturbed. From the footage, it seemed as if Chauvin was perfectly at home, no concern for Floyd’s life, even as Floyd cried for his dead mother and cried out for his kids.

Police brutality and systemic racism continues to pervade the lives of black people in America, and such a fact cannot be seriously debated. The death of George Floyd was a stark reminder of its existence. Following Floyd’s death, however, a welcomed sight emerged from the ashes. People from every race, culture, and creed, across genders, age and neighborhood came together to march in communities across America for justice for George Floyd and an end to systemic racism in America. Individuals wore shirts emblazoned with the words “Black Lives

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<sup>58</sup> Dartunorro Clark, “Hundreds of Protestors, some Carrying Guns in the State Capitol, Demonstrate Against Michigan’s Emergency Measures,” *NBC News*, April 30, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/hundreds-protest-michigan-lawmakers-consider-extending-governors-emergency-powers-n1196886>.

<sup>59</sup> John Flesher, “6 Men Indicted in Alleged Plot to Kidnap Michigan Governor,” *Associated Press*, December 17, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/gretchen-whitmer-michigan-indictments-coronavirus-pandemic-traverse-city-10f7e02c57004da9843f89650edd4510>.

Matter,” carried signs that read “I Can’t Breathe,” and held hands in solidarity. Braving a pandemic, which had by this time taken the lives of tens of thousands of people in America, like-minded Americans stood in a welcoming display of unity demanding that America live up to its professed ideals, treating all of its inhabitants equally and without precondition. They too used rhetoric to convey a message, exhorting those watching and listening to act in efforts to make life better in America for all.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has offered a brief survey of several significant moments that have helped create a climate of extreme cultural, political, and social polarization. Fueled by Trump’s rhetoric, which has worked to incite violence, as in the case of the attempt to kidnap Governor Gretchen Whitmer, America’s social fabric, already stretched thin, has been torn further apart. According to a recent article in the Pew Research Center, America is perhaps more divided than it has ever been.<sup>60</sup> However, this period is also showing observers that rhetoric can be used to offer more peaceful solutions for improving lives and communities across the country, as in the case of the Black Lives Matter protest and actions of elected local officials. The Black Lives Matter mural in Washington D.C. is a fitting testament to how rhetoric can be used to offer more powerful imagery of humankind working together to address major challenges.<sup>61</sup>

Any other chapter in American history, one might suggest that the dangerous rhetoric outlined in this chapter and the events, tragic circumstances, and painful situations that such

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<sup>60</sup> Michael Dimock and Richard Wike, “America Is Exceptional in the Nature of Its Political Divide,” *Pew Research Center*, November 13, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/13/america-is-exceptional-in-the-nature-of-its-political-divide/>.

<sup>61</sup> Leah Asmelash, “Washington’s new Black Lives Matter Street Mural is Captured In Satellite Image,” *CNN*, June 6, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/06/us/black-lives-matter-dc-street-mural-space-trnd/index.html>.

rhetoric instigated was purely circumstantial, the unfolding of things beyond one's control. But what concerns this work is how rhetoric is used by individuals who proudly espouse a relationship with Jesus Christ and a connection to the Christian faith. Trump has claimed to a Christian and he is largely supported by many white evangelical Christians. Many are church going, hymn singing, Bible study attending, pot-luck cooking Christians. What we shall see however is there has long been a desire to wed the American story within the Christian story, to place American discourse within the larger Christian narrative and God's work in the world. Against this backdrop, to arrive at a better understanding of how rhetoric shapes behavior in contemporary times we must move next to examining America itself, putting it under a microscope, and exploring how it has used rhetoric to perpetuate a dream for some, and a nightmare for others.

## Chapter II – Freedom

*History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do.*

- James Baldwin

*My country, tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing; land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrims pride, from every mountain side let freedom ring!*

- Samuel F. Smith, “America” (1832)

*“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”*

- Preamble to the Declaration of Independence

The place from which one speaks is significant. Rhetoric is always offered within a historical backdrop, a place from which it springs, circumstances which have led up to and fostered a certain perspective, a certain hermeneutic. It is critical for the purposes of this work to understand some of the aspects which have given rise to the many dynamics playing out in America. In this way, we can understand not only how America has come to exist, but also the values and ideals that it seeks to uphold, and why, importantly, those values and ideals are so difficult to realize for all.

America is a land whose origins speak of scores arriving in search of a special thing called freedom. Following Christopher Columbus’ report to Europe that he had discovered this new land ripe for opportunity, hundreds of Europeans arrived here in search of two things which for them defined their quest for freedom – freedom from tyranny and freedom of religious expression.

To early inhabitants, the New World<sup>62</sup> was attractive because it was a land of opportunity, a place where one's lot in life would not be determined by the position of their birth. As the First Charter of Virginia – the document written in 1606 which authorized the founding of Jamestown – characterized, America offered the opportunity for the taking of “all the lands, Woods, Soil, Grounds, Havens, Ports, Rivers, Mines, Minerals, Marshes, Waters, Fishing, Commodities,” and to “dig, mine and search for all Manner of Mines of Gold, Silver, and Copper.”<sup>63</sup> Explorers saw and seized upon this new opportunity, feeling compelled, empowered, and imbued with a new sense of their innate abilities to shape the trajectory of their own destinies. They were also enticed by the New World's geography, thousands upon thousands of stunning land, a welcome contrast from their small communities and towns in the countries of their origins. “The vastness of the continent, the wondrous frontier, the staggering natural resources: These, combined with a formidable American work ethic, made the pursuit of wealth and happiness more than a full-time proposition. It was a consuming, all-enveloping one.”<sup>64</sup> The New World presented an opportunity to change course, to redirect lives, to write new narratives. Many who struggled as peasants across towns in Europe – barred from land ownership, upward social mobility and economic security – saw promise in America and decided to make the risky trip across the Atlantic. They knew there were no guarantees in America, but this concern was offset by a realization that the probability of securing a better life in the New World was higher

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<sup>62</sup> The Americas were referred to as the “New World” by Europeans, a nomenclature characterizing feelings of exploration, adventure and an exotic paradise awaiting future inhabitants. Mary K. Pratt, in her book “A Timeline Of The History of the Thirteen Colonies,” points out that only the bravest, most courageous of Europeans venture to explore this New World. As American history unfolds, this same character trait noted in the early Europeans who journeyed to America would help define America's national identity.

<sup>63</sup> Jon Meacham, *The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels* (New York: Random House, 2018). Much of my thinking in this chapter is indebted to Meacham for this inspiring and comforting book.

<sup>64</sup> Jon Meacham, *America*, 24.

than if they had chosen to remain in their native land. America offered the chance for economic freedom. To put in succinctly, many came to make money.

Freedom to shape and chart one's own economic course however was not the only dream that many of these early adventurers harbored. They also arrived in the New World seeking freedom of worship, the ability to express and practice their deep religious convictions without interruption, dissention, and outside influence, and the opportunity and environment which they thought was more conducive to sharing their deeply held religious beliefs with others. Perhaps no other figure was as significant in this regard than John Winthrop.

## **THE PURITANS**

John Winthrop, born January 22, 1588 in Suffolk, England to a wealthy, land-owning family, was first introduced to theological discussions at an early age as he overheard his father discussing religious matters with a local clergyman. Observing such conversations sparked an interest in Winthrop in matters of theology, ultimately leading to his devout religious convictions and determination to evangelize. This religious devotion encouraged Winthrop to commit to studying the Scriptures and prayer and, after a revelation from God, he would identify himself as a full-fledged Puritan. At the age of 15, Winthrop enrolled at Trinity College at the University of Cambridge, deciding, like most of his peers, to study law. Shortly after receiving his law degree, he would serve in several government offices in Britain and then as a country squire. Frustrated by the reduction of income from his land as the result of the local economic slump, and perturbed by King Charles I's new restrictions on anti-Puritan initiatives, Winthrop began the process of exploring other avenues for continuing his life's purpose. He had felt religiously prosecuted



while in Britain, unable to fully exercise his deep religious convictions due to the local prohibitions. England became for him a sinful land, and he now eagerly sought departure.

The time came in 1630. Upon receiving an invitation to join the Massachusetts Bay Company to plant a colony in New England, Winthrop gathered his family, packed their belongings, and made an agreement to sell their estate back in Britain. A more promising future awaited Winthrop, and he sensed excitement upon the beginning of this newest chapter. Winthrop and his family boarded a ship, the *Arbella* – the jewel of a small Puritan fleet – and headed towards the New World. Once they arrived, and before they disembarked, Winthrop, gave what many scholars note as one of the most renowned sermons in the history of America, called “A Model of Christian Charity.” This speech exudes the opportunistic vision Winthrop saw in America. Following a substantial and lengthy engagement with Scripture and its bearing upon Puritans in the New World, Winthrop offered, as he concluded, first an appeal to unity and genuine affection for the concerns of the common man:

For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others’ necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other; make others’ conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.<sup>65</sup>

Appeals to unity, to a commitment of brotherhood, was key to the success and efficaciousness of the Puritan’s work in the New World. But so too, and perhaps most importantly, according to the historical perspective, was a recognition of Winthrop’s firm belief that God was directly involved with their mission to the New World and would embolden and empower their efforts:

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<sup>65</sup> John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity,” *Winthrop Society*, accessed November 10, 2020, [https://www.winthropsociety.com/doc\\_charity.php](https://www.winthropsociety.com/doc_charity.php).

The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as His own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways, so that we shall see much more of His wisdom, power, goodness and truth, than formerly we have been acquainted with. We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, ‘may the Lord make it like that of New England.’<sup>66</sup>

Winthrop recognized the power of rhetoric, using it to promote unity and invite God into their future endeavors. There is an interweaving here of pursuing the promises of a New World with the promises of God.

While Winthrop’s speech has been embroidered in the halls of American history, one particular line in the speech stands out not just due to its remarkable relaying of early Puritan vision, but in its lasting impact on America’s sense of a national identity: “*For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill.*” For Winthrop, said Meacham, author of *The Soul of America: The Battle For Our Better Angels*, the sermon itself “linked the New World to a religious vision of a New Jerusalem.”<sup>67</sup> To this end, America, in the Puritan’s view, would become a place of Christian purity, holiness, and salvation, qualities that they believed the Church of England in their homeland did not properly embody. America offered religious freedom to those religiously devout and, importantly, it offered opportunity for Christian witness, in the lives of citizens and the actions of local governments. According to Butler, “In 1631, the Massachusetts government, headed by Winthrop, required all voters to be members of the local Puritan congregation....the ‘body politic’ would be synonymous with church members, and the civil government would be moral and virtuous, because it would be elected by good and right-minded citizens, all of whom belonged to Puritan churches.”<sup>68</sup> The match between the New

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<sup>66</sup> Winthrop, “Christian Charity.”

<sup>67</sup> Meacham, *America*, 24.

<sup>68</sup> Jon Butler, Grant Wacker and Randall Balmer, *Religion In American Life: A Short History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 57.

World and freedom was clear: for those wishing for a better life, one with uninhibited opportunity and religious liberty, America was the only viable alternative, and it would be this dynamic which would help define the early 17<sup>th</sup> century and lay the foundation for the eventual forming of American democracy.

Along with John Winthrop and the Puritans, other settlers came to the New World at the behest of the leaders in England to colonialize new territory. England, during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, was in the midst of a full-blown economic crisis, as the nation's farmers were reeling from decreased food profitability. This created a food shortage in England, and many of the country's residents were suffering. Meanwhile, England's population was growing, fueling its frustration with the overall economic climate in the country. England recognized that it needed to expand its territory in the Americas. And that expansion led to what history now refers to as the Thirteen Colonies.

As the time unfolded and as Winthrop settled in – eventually becoming one of the primary founders of New England and eventually governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony,<sup>69</sup> setting the religious trajectory and tone of the colony – other new colonies began to form, many of them fueled by various religious preferences. While some Puritans enjoyed the strict religious practices in Massachusetts, other Puritans thought Massachusetts was not pious enough, and they went on to form the colonies of Connecticut and Rhode Island. The New England colonies were each driven by groups with a desire to express their religious faith in ways which were more conducive to their own respective communities.

Along with founding of new colonies based upon divergent practices of Puritanism, other people of faith would soon arrive to the New World as well, launching what would soon be

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<sup>69</sup> Richard S. Dunn, "John Winthrop", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, January 27, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Winthrop-American-colonial-governor>.

known as the Southern Colonies. In 1634, King Charles I gave George Calvert, Lord Baltimore, an English Catholic, 12 million acres of land in what subsequently became known as the state of Maryland. Shunning the religiously intolerant climate of England and hoping that both Protestants and Catholics could co-exist civilly, George viewed the land of Maryland as a “haven for persecuted English Catholics.”<sup>70</sup> In contrast to how things were in England, George envisioned the Maryland colony as a place where “Catholics would worship privately and were ‘to be silent upon all occasions of discourse concerning matters of religion.’ The governor [George’s brother Leonard], was to ‘treat the Protestants with as much mildness and favor as justice will permit.’”<sup>71</sup>

So called Middle Colonies would help complete the early American development. New York, New Jersey, Delaware, and Pennsylvania were areas founded by new explorers in the New World, as they set out to construct locales and regions where they could govern themselves. As such expansion unfolded, remarkable diversity began to play out. For instance, following King Charles II giving the territory between Virginia and New England to his brother James, the Duke of York, it created a diverse population, as Dutch, French Huguenots, Scandinavian and Germans had been living there at the time.<sup>72</sup>

Combined, the New England Colonies, the Middle Colonies, and the Southern Colonies created what became known as the thirteen colonies, areas which would soon form the United States. These colonies would all share one overarching theme: a desire for freedom. This desire for freedom was evidenced not only by their courageous actions to brave the treacherous Atlantic into an unknown world, but also as they sought freedom to express their religious convictions

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<sup>70</sup> Butler, Wacker, and Balmer, *Life*, 54.

<sup>71</sup> Butler, Wacker, and Balmer, *Life*, 54.

<sup>72</sup> Editors, “The 13 Colonies,” *History.com*, January 4, 2021, <https://www.history.com/topics/colonial-america/thirteen-colonies>.

without having to conform to a specific monarchy. The notion of freedom – of becoming one’s own master – would begin to firmly take shape in the New World.

Freedom always comes with a price, a phenomenon that would be borne out over the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Although the thirteen colonies took shape in America, governed by leaders and individuals who prided themselves on the ability to set the trajectory of their own affairs, the fact remained that each of the colonies were still under the auspices and authority of Great Britain. While controlling their affairs for local governance, religious liberties, and economics interests, these colonies found themselves subjected to Britain’s ability to impose taxes on the American colonies, which would in turn support Britain. As is often the case, economic tensions instigated the desire for increased freedoms.

A deeper dive into the historical context is rightfully in order here. During the time when the colonies were being founded in America, Britain also sought to expand its territory elsewhere. Adjacent to the thirteen colonies across the eastern coastline of America, sat an area stretching from as far north as Canada and as far south as Louisiana. This area, then called the New France, was owned by the French and occupied by both settlers from France and Native Americans. In 1754, the British Empire and New France engaged in a war<sup>73</sup> centered upon possession and control of this territory. The French, Native Americans, and Britain viewed this territory as critical to their future endeavors, and each fought extraordinarily hard for its claim. All were jockeying for freedom – freedom for the right to own greater territory, freedom to control their own destiny, freedom to direct their own way of life. Ultimately, with the assistance of soldiers from the existing thirteen colonies, Britain would prevail, a victory which they viewed as central to their quest towards consolidating their power.

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<sup>73</sup> This war is referred to by historians as the “Seven Years’ War,” a global war of for power between the British and the French.

The possession of new territory now came with new colonies and new responsibilities. The British government, waging war across the Atlantic, now found itself in dire financial straits. To see this new strain up close, before the war began, British government expenditures were estimated to have £6.5 million annually. Following the war, British government expenditures amounted to an estimated £14.5 million annually.<sup>74</sup> Expansion had a price. To meet their financial obligations, the British government, in the early phases of their colonial endeavors, relied mostly on securing tax revenue from the elite landed classes in England. However, anticipating that the annual costs of providing defense of their ambitions would continue for the foreseeable future, the British government sought ways to expand its revenue sources to fund ongoing government operations. At the time, it was unclear to them how history would unfold as the result of their next action.

Finding themselves in debt, and without many other viable options, the British government reasoned that it made sense to impose greater taxes on the American colonies. Part of their thinking emerged due to the sense that the American colonies had not been sufficiently taxed previously and thus a higher tax burden was warranted. Moreover, the British government felt that it needed to exert a greater level of control over the affairs in their colonies abroad, which became of more pointed importance following their acquisition of New France, the newly unsettled western territory. F.H. Kenney, author of *American Revolution: A Historical Guidebook*, offers an apt description of the severity of Britain's economic turmoil when he cites historian John S. Pancake:

England emerged from the war staggering under an enormous national debt, and a program of imperial retrenchment was inaugurated. George Grenville, a capable administrator but sadly lacking in imperial statesmanship, was the first of a series of ministers who attempted to set Britain's economic house in order.

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<sup>74</sup> Contributors, "United States," *Britannica*, updated April 11, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/United-States/The-Native-American-response#ref612403>.

He began by instructing customs offices to begin enforcing the trade laws, a proposal which was not only startling but financially disastrous to crown officials who had been thriving off the bribes of colonial merchants. Under Grenville's whip they had no choice but to turn on their erstwhile benefactors and recover their former affluence by zealous – and often fraudulent – enforcement of intricate and complicated customs laws. Customs officials were entitled to a percentage of confiscated goods and cargoes and their legal racketeering outraged colonial merchants.

Lord Grenville also began to cast up the accounts of the colonial books. He discovered that the administrative cost of the American colonies was several times as great as the revenue which they contributed. To Grenville's orderly mind this was an untidy situation and he set about to remedy it through taxation. To his credit, he asked for advice, even consulting that foremost expert in American affairs, Benjamin Franklin. The solution which Grenville hit upon was the Stamp Act of 1765 which levied a tax on all kinds of legal and commercial paper – newspapers, contracts, invoices, wills, and the like.<sup>75</sup>

A year before the Stamp Act was imposed on the American colonies, the British government also imposed the Currency Act and the Sugar Act (1764), a strictly enforced attempt to eradicate smuggling of sugar and molasses from the French and Dutch West Indies and to increase tax revenues funneled to the British Government.<sup>76</sup> The American colonies met such tax with strong resistance and, coupled with the forthcoming Stamp Act, created a disgruntled environment which would give birth to the American colonies' desire to transform notions of freedom into the very fabric of their burgeoning national identity.

## **NEW YORK**

Even in 1775, New York pointed towards freedom. In October of that year, representatives from the nine colonies assembled in New York with one aim: to debate the merits of the recently imposed Stamp Act tax by the British government. Ultimately, they would pass a strongly worded resolution refusing to pay the tax. Their motivations were warranted, they felt,

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<sup>75</sup> F. H. Kennedy, *The American Revolution: A Historical Guidebook*. ProQuest Ebook Central <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>, 8.

<sup>76</sup> The Editors of Britannica, "Sugar Act," *Britannica*, May 22, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Sugar-Act>.

as the Stamp Act, in contrast to the prior acts imposed by the British government, unveiled a real sense of the British government's capacity to restrict individual freedom.

The Stamp Act differed in important ways from all previous imperial legislation. One was its pervasiveness. Any colonist who bought or sold land, became an apprentice, went to church, married, read a newspaper, drank in a tavern, gambled, took public office, shipped goods elsewhere, or went to court would feel its effects. A second was its mode of collection: the taxes would be constantly evident, not paid once at a port of entry and then hidden in the overall price. A third was its requirement that payment be in sterling, with the threat of forfeiture if payment was not made. For people who rarely saw hard British coin, that threat was real. The act was part of a general assault on provincial paper money. Since 1752 New England colonies had been forbidden to make their money legal tender, and in 1764 that prohibition was extended to all colonies. The Stamp Act managed to offend everyone. The revenues raised would remain in the colonies, paying the salaries of officials and the costs of troops. But neither the troops nor officials would be subject to colonial control.<sup>77</sup>

The delegates who had gathered in New York had grown painstakingly frustrated with the situation as it pertained to the extent to which the British government exerted control over what they perceived to be their way of life. For those delegates – and by extension those whom they represented – their individual freedom was at stake. What once originated as an expansion of British territory and the desire for the settlers and explorers to flee tyranny and oppression, now created a political, cultural, and social climate in which freedom itself was at stake. That October, the Stamp Act Congress “adopted fourteen resolutions against the act,” which included defending jury trials, protesting the burdens, and making the case that American colonies had already been enormously subsidizing the British government.<sup>78</sup>

The colonies had had enough. Their grievances ran deep; their frustrations swelled. What also became clear to the colonies, unified in their disagreements with the British government,

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<sup>77</sup> F. H. Kennedy, *Guidebook*, 9.

<sup>78</sup> F. H. Kennedy, *Guidebook*, 9.



was the discovery that they had many characteristics in common in terms of their local governments, including

the absence of a titled, hereditary aristocracy; a widespread distribution of land; an unprecedented degree of ethnic and religious diversity; and broad eligibility to vote – 50 to 75 percent of adult white males, compared to only about 20 percent in England. In contrast to the way Britons conceived of Parliament, the colonists thought of the members of the colonial assemblies as representatives of the people, accountable to their constituents and obligated to follow public instructions.<sup>79</sup>

Further, and perhaps most importantly, there was a growing sense among the representatives of American colonies of individual rights and a genuine concern for community. Walter Isaacson, in his work *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*, describes how this emerging sense of individual rights and community was exemplified in the perspective of Benjamin Franklin, who would soon be a major player on the historical scene:

A fundamental aspect of Franklin’s life, and of the American society he helped to create, was that individualism and communitarianism, so seemingly contradictory, were interwoven. The frontier attracted barn-raising pioneers who were ruggedly individualistic as well as fiercely supportive of their community. Franklin was the epitome of this admixture of self-reliance and civic involvement, and what he exemplified became part of the American character.<sup>80</sup>

The table was set. Conditions would soon give rise to a growing sense of national identity, one that conceived of America as a “truly ‘republican’ society,” one that symbolized more than “a government based on popular elections. Such a society emphasized personal independence, public virtue, and above all, suspicion of concentrated power as essential ingredients of a free society.”<sup>81</sup> Each colony recognized the threat of the British government’s unchecked imperial power, and in 1775 their initial act of defiance which formally began ten

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<sup>79</sup> F. H. Kennedy, *Guidebook*, 12.

<sup>80</sup> Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 103.

<sup>81</sup> F. H. Kennedy, *Guidebook*, 12.

years prior in New York, would now reach its apotheosis with what would transpire in Philadelphia.

## **PHILADELPHIA**

By 1776, the city of Philadelphia was the site of one of the most notable buildings in the early colonies. Constructed in 1732, what was then known as the Pennsylvania State House had served as a gathering space for elected colonial officials in the state of Pennsylvania. From 1775 through 1785, it became the principal meeting location for the important gathering of representatives from the thirteen colonies and would chart the course for the future of America. One of such meetings occurred in 1774, during what was identified as the First Continental Congress. An assemblage of fifty-six deputies from the American colonies save Georgia, ultimately rebutted a plan for reconciling with the British government, opting for colonial freedom. A declaration of personal rights was adopted as well as firm denouncement of “taxation without representation.” However, commerce with the British government was still accepted, as well as allowing the British army in the colonies if such residency was approved by American colonialist in advance. Predictably, this response by the American colonies was not met with warm reception by the British Parliament.

Before the gathering of the Second Continental Congress on May 5, 1775, the British government had made their response clear. Desiring to maintain control over the American colonies, and restricting their pursuit of freedom, British redcoats<sup>82</sup> moved from the city of Boston to arrest Samuel Adams and John Hancock, planners of the tea party, as well as seize munitions which had been stockpiled by their allies. Seeing the approaching arrival of British

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<sup>82</sup> The phrasing “British redcoats” has been adopted here based on upon Walter Isaacson’s beautiful literary work.

forces, Paul Revere, a silversmith who developed an intelligence and alarm system designed to observe the actions of the British military, took what historians call the “Midnight Ride” to alert the American military.<sup>83</sup> Once the British redcoats, arrived in Boston, they were met by seventy American “minutemen.” “Disperse, ye rebels,”<sup>84</sup> the major of the British army shouted, according to Isaacson. The Americans initially retreated, but “Then a shot was fired. In the ensuing skirmish, eight Americans were killed. The victorious redcoats marched on to Concord, where, as Emerson put it, ‘the embattled farmers stood, and fired the shot heard round the world.’”<sup>85</sup> The storm which had been slowly brewing over the course of the prior few decades, had now mushroomed into an all-intense battle for freedom.

A few weeks later, Philadelphia would become the most important destination for America’s march toward freedom. On May 5, Benjamin Franklin would arrive, and so would his old military friend George Washington. Nearly a thousand American soldiers had gathered outside the city, arming and preparing themselves, for what exactly was yet to be known. Reaching no clear consensus as to what the potential next steps as it relates to the purpose of the war – whether it be waged to achieve outright American independence or to secure American rights within the purview of the British government. The answer would come in 1776, roughly a year later.

Meanwhile, the war with the British government intensified. George Washington, nearly two months after the attack in Boston, was appointed as Commander-in-Chief of the American army, and the colonies would soon be encouraged to take up arms.<sup>86</sup> As a last-ditch effort to

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<sup>83</sup> The Paul Revere House provides a much more comprehensive, detailed, and interesting narrative of Revere’s “Midnight Ride.” See “The Real Story,” Paul Revere House, accessed December 2, 2020, <https://www.paulreverehouse.org/the-real-story/>.

<sup>84</sup> Isaacson, *Franklin*, 290.

<sup>85</sup> Isaacson, *Franklin*, 290.

<sup>86</sup> “The Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms,” written by John Dickinson and Thomas Jefferson, became a rallying cry for the American colonies. The declaration can be accessed by visiting “Editorial

avoid a full-scale war, the Continental Congress urged Britain's King George III to consider exploring avenues for resolution and agreement, an appeal to which King George swiftly rebuffed.

In the year 1776, the road to freedom became clearer for those residing in the American colonies. Thomas Paine, in his acclaimed work "Common Sense,"<sup>87</sup> spoke quite convincingly of the need for independence, of the importance of self-governance, of acknowledging the limits of a nation controlled by an imperial power located across the seas and subjected to the whims and moods of a monarchy. Many of the colonial representatives were moved, stirred into action, sensing the urgency of the moment, and realizing that the current course upon which they were now headed was unsustainable.

Over the course of the spring months, the Continental Congress went hard at work drafting a declaration, and on July 4, 1776 declared their independence:

*The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen United States of America, When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.*

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness....*

*But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security....*

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Note: Declaration of the Causes and Necessity for Taking Up Arms," *National Archives*, accessed December 2, 2020, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-01-02-0113-0001#:~:text=The%20Declaration%20of%20the%20Causes,the%20necessity%20for%20armed%20resistance>.

<sup>87</sup> Scott Liell, *46 Pages: Thomas Paine, Common Sense, and the Turning Point to American Independence* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2003).

*We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States; that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do. And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.*<sup>88</sup>

Such a declaration was remarkable rhetoric exuding the pulse of an infant nation. The careful selection of words accompanied by compelling images fostered a great sense of imagination, of humanity, of shared identity. The words within this declaration casted a certain vision: *all men are created equal; they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights*. This kind of language fundamentally underscored human dignity, decency, and freedom. It was carefully crafted rhetoric calling a new nation into being.

Yet the work was not finished. More rhetoric was required. Now that the colonies had been declared a new nation, what was of utmost importance henceforth was the preparation and development of a system of government. Eleven years later, in 1787, the Constitution of the United States was formed, outlining the system of government adopted and how everything from the inherent rights of citizens, taxation, and Federal, State and Local judicial and legislative powers ought to be administered. Setting the tone for the course of the litany of articles and sections, the Founding Fathers wrote in the preamble:

*We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and*

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<sup>88</sup> Transcribed here at excerpts from the actual document. See “Declaration of Independence: A Transcription,” *National Archives*, accessed December 2, 2020, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

*our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.*<sup>89</sup>

In touching and carefully worded language, this preamble set forth a clear vision for America. First, it spoke of a country whose citizens acknowledge their commonality, their shared sense of belonging. The phrase “We the People” conveys a sense of unity of purpose and destiny, of shared dreams and ambitions. Second, it acknowledges a sense of imperfection, emboldening an effort to form a more perfect union in contrast to how the colonies had been treated by the British government. America, the vision casted, would be a better land compared to Britain. The idea of working to establish justice, domestic tranquility, common defense and promote the general welfare of its citizens – values which had been fashioned in the decades leading up to the American Revolution – would make America the envy of the world. Perhaps, the most significant note in the preamble is a line that spoke to the deep quest for freedom: “and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.”

America sought freedom, and this pursuit necessitated action. Freedom was to become not some pie-in-the-sky dream but something very tangible, realized in the lives of America’s inhabitants. It was to become ingrained in the nation’s character, central to its identity, and significantly, could not be torn asunder by any foreign or domestic power. With the adoption of the Constitution, freedom would unmistakably define the national conscience, the heartbeat of a nation, an integral part of what Jon Meacham described as “The Soul of America.” Freedom could not be exchanged for profit or commodity, nor could it be sacrificed or substituted for any other ideal. It was in a galaxy of its own, appreciated mostly by those who at one point in their lives never knew it to be.

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<sup>89</sup> “The Constitution of the United States,” *National Archives*, accessed December 2, 2020, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript>.

Although etched in the Constitution as the principle upon which a nation would be birthed, the notion of freedom was a tender ideal, often requiring a focused pursuit and deliberate preservation, like needs of a newborn infant. As an ideal, freedom required a high degree of maintenance following its newfound place in the birth of a new nation. In its novelty, it would be tested and tried, challenged and cursed, questioned and undermined. In fact, the ensuing decades following the institutionalization of freedom within the Constitution would give rise to a historical testing of the very notion of freedom itself. And a tall, lanky man who hailed from the vast plains of Springfield, Illinois would become one of freedom's strongest advocates.

## **ABRAHAM LINCOLN**

Abraham Lincoln had destiny written all over him. Born February 12, 1809 in a long cabin on a farm in Kentucky, Abraham's early life consisted of experiencing a plethora of devastating losses and pain. His older sister, Sarah, died giving birth to a child, when he was nineteen, and one of his younger brothers died in infancy. His father, Thomas, was a deeply hurt man, having watched his father murdered at the hands of a raiding party when Thomas was six years old. This painful experience, coupled with a lack of education, "left Thomas 'a wandering laboring boy,'" as explained by historian Doris Kearns Goodwin.<sup>90</sup> The early years of Abraham's life were spent moving to different farms scattered throughout Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois, the trappings of poverty following them wherever the winds of a nomadic life carried them.

Despite a childhood experiencing the suffering and loss of those closest to him, along with the unsettling experience of a nomadic lifestyle, Lincoln would dream heroically, as if destiny silently called out to him. "From the outset, he was cognizant of a destiny far beyond that

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<sup>90</sup> Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 47.

of his unlettered father and hardscrabble childhood,” wrote Goodwin. Citing a fellow historian, Goodwin continued describing Lincoln’s precociousness and idealism:

“He was different from those around him,” the historian Douglas Wilson writes. “He knew he was unusually gifted and had great potential.” To the eyes of his schoolmates, Lincoln was “clearly exceptional,” Lincoln biographer David Donald observes, “and he carried away from his brief schooling the self-confidence of a man who has never met his intellectual equal.” His mind and ambition, his childhood friend Nathaniel Grigsby recalled, “soared above us. He naturally assumed the leadership of the boys. He read & thoroughly read his books whilst we played. Hence he was above us and became our guide and leader.”<sup>91</sup>

Lincoln’s ever-growing self-confidence, leadership ability, idealism and commitment to public service would carry him all the way to the White House as the 16<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, and his assessment of his own destiny would climax ironically in the same state that hosted the Continental Congress decades prior. Only this time, instead of the opulent Pennsylvania State House in Philadelphia, the location was a battlefield in Gettysburg.

Amid the worst civil conflict, Lincoln, on November 19<sup>th</sup>, 1863, would recognize and accept the ability of rhetoric to promulgate the theme of freedom. Considered by many one of the best speeches in American history, Lincoln would seek to use the power of rhetoric to galvanize the nation by recalling the actions of the country’s founders and appealing to the notion of freedom as he dedicated a cemetery for the fallen soldiers of the Union. He began, “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in *Liberty*,<sup>92</sup> and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.”<sup>93</sup> As Lincoln scanned the landscape, turning attention to the audience, coldly

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<sup>91</sup> Goodwin, *Lincoln*, 49.

<sup>92</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>93</sup> “Document for November 19<sup>th</sup>: Gettysburg Address,” *National Archives*, accessed December 3, 2020. <https://www.archives.gov/historical-docs/todays-doc/?dod-date=1119>.



reminded of the sacrifice of nations throughout history and as he grappled with the overwhelming responsibilities of leading his own nation at war within itself, he continued illuminating the cause to which they were engaged:

The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.<sup>94</sup>

Undoubtedly, destiny had found Lincoln. Equally important, however, exemplified in this perhaps Lincoln's most famous speech, is the ability to fully employ the tools of rhetoric to communicate not only a stirring of conscience but an influence on behavior. A masterful communicator, Lincoln's rhetoric here appealed to the better angels of the Republic, urging citizens of conscience to join in the fight in the birthing of freedom – the kind of freedom accessible to all.

In 1883, two decades after Lincoln's compelling Gettysburg Address, Lincoln's message would be further emphasized by a poem composed by author Emma Lazarus, called "The New Colossus." A prolific writer, activist, translator, and close associate of the likes of Ralph Waldo Emerson and James Russell Lowell, Lazarus composed this now famous sonnet as an effort to raise funds for the pedestal portion of the Statue of Liberty.<sup>95</sup> Her poem, noted below, is awash with beautiful imagery underscoring its most important theme – that America was a place where

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<sup>94</sup> *National Archives*, Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Walt Hunter, "The Story Behind The Poem on the Statue of Liberty," *The Atlantic*, January 16, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/01/the-story-behind-the-poem-on-the-statue-of-liberty/550553/>.

freedom stood as a beacon of light, arms open and wide, welcoming those from all corners of the world unto its teeming shores.

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.  
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she  
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"<sup>96</sup>

Different from ancient empires, “a mighty woman stands in America.” She is the “mother of exiles,” tending to her infants and babes, guiding them through periods of adolescence and ushering them into adulthood. America – this woman – sees the faces of those corralled in corners and caves and caverns around the world, and invites them to her, bidding their native lands farewell as they stretch towards newfound freedom. The wretched, the homeless, the tossed – this woman welcomes them to find a home in America, where freedom is offered to all.

## **FREEDOM**

Freedom – ingrained in the psyche of the Founding Fathers, enshrined in the Constitution, and spoken of so eloquently and memorably by Abraham Lincoln, would also be spurred on further by Franklin D. Roosevelt, the nation’s 32<sup>nd</sup> president. By the 1930’s, the duties and responsibilities of the presidency continued to evolve, and occupiers of the

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<sup>96</sup> Emma Lazarus, “The New Colossus,” *National Park Service*, accessed December 3, 2020, <https://www.nps.gov/stli/learn/historyculture/colossus.htm>.

presidential office recognized with greater clarity the need for the presidency to continue shaping the character of the nation, using the power of rhetoric to guide it through turmoil and tribulation. Facing the awful reality of World War II, Roosevelt sought to reaffirm America's commitment to freedom not just at home but abroad. In his State of the Union address delivered before Congress on January 6, 1941, Roosevelt reminded Congress of the nature of American identity and the responsibility to further the notion of freedom abroad.

In the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential freedoms. The first freedom is freedom of speech and expression – everywhere in the world. The second freedom is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way – everywhere in the world. The third is freedom from want – which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants – everywhere in the world. The fourth is freedom from fear – which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor – anywhere in the world.<sup>97</sup>

Following in the footsteps of his predecessors, Roosevelt viewed America as a place of undiminished freedom; a place that worked tirelessly to help bolster freedom around the world; a place that genuinely welcomed those searching for freedom. Freedom was the foundation of America, the backbone of the democracy. And it was a foundation that should be available across the world.

## CONCLUSION

The American narrative could be summarized as a journey towards freedom, a story which has encapsulated a certain kind of thinking leading to revolution of sorts as it relates to human relations. As this chapter has sought to narrate, America emerged as the result of, or in response to, a quest for freedom, and not just a quest for freedom, but an actualization of

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<sup>97</sup> Meacham, *America*, 158-159.

freedom, a witness of freedom. It sought to be a place of refuge for those under tyrannical governments; a respite for those hemmed in by civil strife and tribal wars, territorial frictions, and distrust of one's common man; a reprieve to those under the vicious rule of heartless dictatorships and authoritarian regimes. Considering the preceding chapter, one could argue that the decidedly deep divisions experienced in contemporary America are exaggerated mischaracterizations of a young democracy. This argument may posit that America cannot be fully – fatefully – characterized by the present conflicts and political disagreements. This line of reasoning suggests that America, as this chapter has shown, was founded to be a place where people can come and experience freedom. All would be welcomed. All would be given the chance to pursue opportunity. All would be enabled to soar without their wings tied behind their backs, running on equal playing fields. Like other prominent figures throughout American history – the courageous European explorers, the religiously devout John Winthrop and the Puritans, the brilliant Founding Fathers, the forward-minded Abraham Lincoln, and the fiercely determined Franklin D. Roosevelt – in America, one could experience freedom. However, there was only one problem.

**PART TWO**

**REMEMBERING**

## Chapter III – Caste

*Like other old houses, America has an unseen skeleton, a caste system that is as central to its operation as are the studs and joists that we cannot see in the physical buildings we call home. Caste is the infrastructure of our divisions. It is the architecture of human hierarchy, the subconscious code of instructions for maintaining, in our case, a four-hundred-year-old social order.*

- Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste*.<sup>98</sup>

*It was against the law for a colored person and a white person to play checkers together in Birmingham. White and colored gamblers had to place their bets at separate windows and sit in separate aisles at racetracks in Arkansas. At saloons in Atlanta, the bars were segregated: Whites drank on stools at one end of the bar and blacks on stools at the other end, until the city outlawed even that, resulting in white-only and colored-only saloons. There were white parking spaces and colored parking spaces in the town square in Calhoun City, Mississippi. In one North Carolina courthouse, there was a white Bible and black Bible to swear to tell the truth on.*

- Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*.<sup>99</sup>

Idealism often defies logic or practicality or even principle. At its core, the unabashed pursuit of freedom in the United States came at a steep price – a price tag at the expense of others, bequeathing ultimate benevolence upon some at the expense of others. The quest to secure something so idealistic as freedom meant more than mere rebellion against a foreign power, the drafting of the Constitution, and government officials publicly promoting the cause of freedom around the world. Freedom meant possessing absolute power to behave in outlandish ways. Such a quest came only with fully developed hypocrisy – a hypocrisy rooted in the very origins of America itself, inseparable from its institutions and operations of its hastily broadening infrastructure. There was a price to be paid for freedom if one wanted to experience it

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<sup>98</sup> Wilkerson, Isabel., *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2020), 44.

<sup>99</sup> Wilkerson, Isabel., *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Random House, 2010), 45.

maximally. Given the political formations and pressures of America's founding, freedom came as the result of the exploitation of others. It was based on an American caste system.

Early American colonialists, upon their arrival in the New World, saw massive opportunities for pursuing economic prosperity. Having now taken possession and control of territory which had previously belonged to indigenous groups,<sup>100</sup> the colonialists knew very little boundaries or limits to their pursuits. As they gazed across the country, they saw millions of acres of raw lands conducive to grow crops, like cotton and tobacco. Opportunities for prosperity were in abundance, but labor was in shortage. A problem needed a solution. But a fitting solution would not come as the result of securing indentured servants; that would be too costly and unsustainable for the excruciating and toilsome work which lied ahead. A system needed to be devised which would last well into the future, perhaps having no anticipated end, ingrained in the fabric of the new burgeoning society itself.

It began in August 1619, the same time European settlers arrived in the new world. Early settler John Rolfe would mention, in what would become the earliest surviving letter of the period, the arrival of "20 and odd Negroes which the Governor and Cape Marchant bought for victualles."<sup>101</sup> These Africans of whom Rolfe spoke "had been captured from a slave ship bound for the Spanish colonies but were sold farther north to the British" according to author Isabel Wilkerson. Historians disagree as to whether these Africans were arriving for indentured servitude or a lifetime of bondage, but what was being made clear was an early forming of an inferior status in contrast to the colonialist. Arriving onshore, as Wilkerson recounts, "The few surviving records from the time of the arrival show they 'held at the outset a singularly debased

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<sup>100</sup> Due to the focused scope of this work, I have not included an overview of this forced possession of land and territory from Native populations and the displacement, cultural, economic, etc. which materialized as a result. In this chapter, the social hierarchy of the American caste system includes the "rankings" of these groups.

<sup>101</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 40.

status in the eyes of white Virginians,’ wrote the historian Alden T. Vaughan. If not yet consigned formally to permanent enslavement, ‘black Virginians were at least well on their way to such a condition.’”<sup>102</sup>

The ensuing decades would welcome the arrival of two groups: more settlers and workers who migrated from Europe and Africans who arrived by no choice of their own. By 1630, a

hierarchy began to form. Few Africans were seen as significant enough to be listed in the census by name, as would be the case for the generations to follow, in contrast to the majority of European inhabitants, indentured or not. The Africans were not cited by age or arrival date as were the Europeans, information vital to setting the terms and time frame of indenture for Europeans, or for Africans, had they been in the same category, been seen as equal, or seen as needing to be accurately accounting for. Thus, before there was a United States of America, there was the caste system, born in colonial Virginia.<sup>103</sup>

These colonialists needed a social hierarchy, a ranking of groups, with one group of individuals considered sovereign, and another the complete opposite in order to secure their forced labor. One group would assume the dominant position and the other would be deemed subservient and thus worthy of enslavement. The colonialists reasoned that this was the only alternative which would help them shape their economic and thus political lives and livelihoods in the New World. Full market freedom required a slave system, which was underwritten by an unjust social hierarchy. Such a social hierarchy that was born in America can be fittingly described as a caste system.

In Wilkerson’s recent, most definitive work *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*,<sup>104</sup> she defines caste in this fashion:

A caste system is an artificial construction, a fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups on the basis of ancestry and often immutable traits, traits that would be neutral in the abstract but are ascribed life and death meaning

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<sup>102</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 41.

<sup>103</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 41.

<sup>104</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 41.



in a hierarchy favoring the dominate caste whose forebears designed it. A caste system uses rigid, often arbitrary boundaries to keep the ranked groupings apart, distinct from one another and in their assigned places.<sup>105</sup>

Caste assigned people to a certain position, as if in a Broadway show. It dictated which roles individuals would play, their characters' personality, identity, possibilities, terrors, and triumphs. Following this theatrical metaphor, if you were white, you were automatically qualified to be one of the main players on the stage, acting out your role of authority and domination, harnessing opportunities presented to you without fear of any repercussions, concerned not with penalties but power. Automatically, you were deemed the star without needing to prove you were capable of being the star: the color of your skin, your perceived "whiteness" based on an artificial hierarchy, was the sole evidence of your prowess. Nothing else was needed. By contrast, the further away your skin color deviated from the standard of whiteness, the more limited your position in the play became. Dreams of becoming the main actor had long ended the day you were born. Your position was at the bottom, undebated, unprotected. Your performance was measured by how subservient you were to the dominate characters. "Caste is the granting or withholding of respect, status, honor, attention, privileges, resources, benefit of the doubt, and humankind-ness to someone on the basis of their perceived rank or standing in the hierarchy," asserts Wilkerson.

Religion was not a deterrent to the development of this caste system. While Europeans Christians were exempted from lifetime enslavement, colonialists perceived indigenous peoples and Africans as warranting mistreatment and dehumanization – a devaluing of identity – given their unfamiliarity with Christianity. Their perceived "lack of purity" was deemed a seemingly just cause for exploitation. Driven then by a need "for the cheapest, most pliant labor to extract

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<sup>105</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 17.

the most wealth from the New World,” many aspects of the Christian message were disregarded to build and then eventually maintain a system of wealth and prosperity.

Another aspect of the developing caste system were traits found to be unique to Africans in the eyes of the European settlers. Wilkerson, quoting anthropologists Audrey and Brian Smedley, notes that British colonialists based in the West Indies, “saw ‘Africans as a civilized and relatively docile population,’ who were ‘accustomed to discipline,’ and who cooperated well on a given task. Africans demonstrated an immunity to European diseases, making them more viable to the colonist than were the indigenous people the Europeans had originally tried to enslave.”<sup>106</sup> A matter of talent and skill would prove advantageous as well, as the Chesapeake colonies needed specialized tilling experience for the cultivating of tobacco. Colonies further south were places more suited for rice, cotton, and sugarcane, to which the English had little experience, and the Africans “had either cultivated in their native land or were quick to master.”<sup>107</sup> “As plantation farming expanded,” wrote scholar Michelle Alexander, “demand increased greatly for both labor and land.”<sup>108</sup>

The European settlers had a deep thirst for expansion, driven by a sense of freedom and opportunity. Anyone in their way would painfully find themselves subjected to their aims, which, by and large, in this developing caste system, would be strikingly marked with a newfound level of verbal and physical dehumanization. In her work *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander writes:

The demand for land was met by invading and conquering larger and larger swaths of territory. American Indians became a growing impediment to white European “progress,” and during this period the images of American Indians promoted in books, newspapers, and magazines became increasingly negative. As

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<sup>106</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 42.

<sup>107</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 42.

<sup>108</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 23.

sociologist Keith Kilty and Eric Swank have observed, eliminating “savages” is less of a moral program than eliminating human beings, and therefore American Indians came to be understood as a lesser race – uncivilized savages – thus providing justification for the extermination of the native peoples.<sup>109</sup>

Developing in the DNA of America itself was a recognition, more pointedly – a reliance – on a language governing behavior. This new language, which sought to define and caricature certain groups of people, as in the case of “savages” or “slaves,” found welcomed acceptance in the hearts and conscience of the new Republic.

With European settlers viewing Native Americans as inferior humans yet unsuitable for slavery, what began to emerge over the course of the 17<sup>th</sup> century was a full-blown system of slavery in America based primarily upon an artificial ranking of individuals. A solution for a labor shortage had turned into a way of life, as a hierarchy of individuals and groups began to materialize. Africans were placed firmly “at the bottom, and by the late 1600s, Africans were not merely slaves; they were hostages subjected to unspeakable tortures that their captors documented without remorse.”<sup>110</sup> Such unspeakable tortures would unfold over the course of the next quarter millennium, the result of a legally sanctioned system lasting from 1619 to 1865. And importantly, slavery in America was noted for its extremism, its violent and treacherous disregard for humanity. “For the first time in history, one category of humanity was ruled out of the ‘human race’ and into a separate subgroup that was to remain enslaved for generations in perpetuity.”<sup>111</sup> The closer your skin appeared to be “white,” the better you were treated. Those of darker skin tones were relegated to a life of bondage, a state which was permanent, unparoled. There would be no plan for redemption for those considered black. So, against the backdrop of the pursuit of freedom, with America expanding its territory and crafting founding documents

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<sup>109</sup> Alexander, *Jim Crow*, 23.

<sup>110</sup> Alexander, *Jim Crow*, 23.

<sup>111</sup> Alexander, *Jim Crow*, 23.

which would provide the framework for its fervent desire for self-governance, was a growing American caste system, restricting freedom itself and undermining that professed ideal of liberty for all.

## **DIVINE WILL AND THE LAWS OF NATURE**

For the American caste system to work properly in perpetuity, it had to be based upon certain values or principles. Like the Constitution itself, a working framework had to be established to ensure its continuity. Wilkerson argues there are eight pillars which came to uphold, and continues to uphold, the existing caste system in America. The first pillar is based upon the belief that God has destined those of darker skin complexions to a life of subservience. She calls this pillar “Divine Will and the Laws of Nature,” and it is primarily concerned with justifying the subjugation of the other by attributing human social matters to divine will, God’s sole authority. To make this point, Wilkerson notes the origins of the caste system in India to offer a comparison. She explains that according to the ancient Hindu text, the all-knowing deity, Manu, was having a meditative moment when he was approached by inquiring men who wanted to know the proper ranking of the social order. “Please, Lord, tell us precisely and in the proper order the Laws of all the social classes as well as of those born in between.”<sup>112</sup> The deity Manu responded by recounting a time when the universe was in a deep slumber, when the One, after creating waters and himself as Brahma, “grandfather of all the worlds,” proceeded to fill the land with individuals based on a social order. Wilkerson narrates “he created the Brahmin, the highest caste, from his mouth, the Kshatriya from his arms, the Vaishya from his thighs, and, from his

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<sup>112</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 101.

feet, the Shudra, the lowest of the four *varnas*, or divisions of man, millennia ago and into the fullness of time.” She continues:

The fragment from which each caste was formed foretold the position that each would fill and their placement, in order, in the caste system. From the lowest to the highest, bottom to top: The Shudra, the feet, the servant, the bearer of burdens. The Vaishya, the thighs, the engine, the merchant, the trader. The Kshatriya, the arms, the warrior, the protector, the ruler. And above them all, the Brahmin, the head, the mouth, the philosopher, the sage, the priest, the one nearest to the gods.<sup>113</sup>

And further:

Unmentioned among the original four *varnas* were those deemed so low that they were beneath even the feet of the Shudra. They were living out the afflicted karma of the past, they were not to be touched and some not even to be seen. Their very shadow was a pollutant. They were outside of the caste system and thus outcasts. These were the Untouchables who would later come to be known as Dalits, the subordinate caste in India.<sup>114</sup>

The story of the arrival of the caste system in India, Wilkerson demonstrates, parallels in many respects with the origins of the caste system in America. As in the case of the social order in India, God was chiefly responsible for social rankings. In America, and by extension the Western World, explanations for the existing social order were to be found in the Old Testament. The biblical story recounts that after Noah survives the Great Flood, God blesses Noah and says, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (Gen. 9). God’s covenant with Noah is not just for Noah but for all of Noah’s descendants. The sons of Noah were Shem, Ham, and Japheth, with Ham being the father of Canaan. The story is told that one day Noah consumes too much wine and winds up drunk, passing out unclothed in his tent. Ham innocently goes inside the tent and notices the nakedness of his father, then leaving to communicate this news to his brothers Shem and Japheth outside. Shem and Japheth take a garment and clothe the nakedness of their father,

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<sup>113</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 101.

<sup>114</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 102.

turning their faces so they would not see their father's nakedness. Once Noah awakened from his imbibed state, and discovers what his younger son Ham had done, he curses Ham's son, saying "Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants he shall be to his brethren."

This story would be passed down through the centuries, until finally, "As the riches from the slave trade from Africa to the New World poured forth to the Spaniards, to the Portuguese, to the Dutch, and lastly to the English, the biblical passage would be summoned to condemn the children of Ham and to justify the kidnap and enslavement of millions of human beings."<sup>115</sup> Those with darker skin were considered cursed, and those with lighter skin were considered blessed – where you were on this continuum was God ordained. "The curse of Ham is now being executed upon his descendants....The great Architect had framed them both physically and mentally to fill the sphere in which they were thrown. His wisdom and mercy combined in constituting them thus suited to the degraded position they were destined to occupy," declared Thomas R.R. Cobb, one of the leaders of the Confederacy and a staunch defender of the institution of slavery.<sup>116</sup>

Although slavery ended officially in 1865 with the Union's military victory over the Confederacy, this pillar of the caste system remained, undaunted by outside forces, unweakened in its reliance on divinity to explain human division.<sup>117</sup> God has made it so. The darker peoples were the feared peoples, sentenced to life in bondage, unable to navigate their way through an elaborate social, political, and economic apparatus designed by God to ensure their perpetual subjugation, removing altogether their quest towards freedom.

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<sup>115</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 103.

<sup>116</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 103. Quoted directly from *Caste*. Importantly, Wilkerson notes that this interpretation of Genesis was debated at the time by even those who harbored stronger hatred towards blacks. Their argument ran that this interpretation was not plausible primarily because Africans were not human, they were beasts as in the fields and "therefore could not have descended from a son of Noah, cursed or not." In *Caste*, see Notes, 408.

<sup>117</sup> The eugenics movement would play a significant role in race and reproduction also.

## HERITABILITY

Since the caste system in America was originally conceived as the divine will of God, then the parameters put in place ensured that the social conditions were fixed to cement the desired oppressive ordering. Wilkerson calls this second pillar of caste “Heritability,” impeding one’s ability to escape the position and status in which they found themselves at birth. Wilkerson writes,

To work, each caste society relied on clear lines of demarcation in which everyone was ascribed a rank at birth, and a role to perform, as if each person were a molecule in a self-perpetuating organism. You were born to a certain caste and remained in that caste, subject to the high status or low stigma it conferred, for the rest of your days and into the lives of your descendants.”<sup>118</sup>

Significantly, in America, those born on these shores inherited the caste position of their mother, a dynamic tracing its roots all the way back to colonial Virginia. In 1662, the Virginia General Assembly declared, “Whereas some doubts have arisen whether children got by any Englishman upon a negro woman should be slave or free be it therefore enacted and declared by this present Grand Assembly, that all children born in this country shall be held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother.”<sup>119</sup>

Owing one’s caste position to the condition of their mother was not happenstance but was an intentional and ultimately profitable economic strategy for slaveholders. According to Wilkerson, “This new law allowed enslavers to claim the children of black women, the vast majority of whom were enslaved, as their property for life and for ensuing generations.” She continues:

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<sup>118</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 105.

<sup>119</sup> William Waller Hening, *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619* (New York: R. & W. & G. Bartow, 1823), 2:170, [https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Negro\\_womens\\_children\\_to\\_serve\\_according\\_to\\_the\\_condition\\_of\\_the\\_mother\\_1662](https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Negro_womens_children_to_serve_according_to_the_condition_of_the_mother_1662).

It invited them to impregnate the women themselves if so inclined, the richer it would make them. It converted the black womb into a profit center and drew sharper lines around the subordinate caste, as neither mother nor child could make a claim against an upper-caste man, and no child springing from a black womb could escape condemnation to the lowest rung. It moved the colonies toward a bipolar hierarchy of whites and nonwhites, and specifically a conjoined caste of whites at one end of the ladder and, at the other end, those deemed black, due to any physical manifestation of African ancestry.<sup>120</sup>

Flourishing in the early fabric of American society was a willingness to exploit the female body, particularly the black and nonwhite bodies, and perpetrators – residing at the top of the racial hierarchy protected by law and custom – could exploit such bodies without fear of retribution, or punishment for sin; this too was divine will.

A distinction must be made between caste and class, argues Wilkerson. Class, in contemporary minds, portends one's capacity to accomplish and succeed based solely on their own personal merits, their standing in the world the result of sheer blood, sweat, and tears. Thus, if one works hard enough, then the American dream could be had. Academic achievements, income-levels, diversity of talents and the acquisition of material possessions reflect an individual's personal effort. Caste, as Wilkerson points out, differs considerably from class. Caste is a "fixed nature," an inescapable condition. No amount of celebrity or wealth can rid one of the effects of caste. "No matter how great you become in life, no matter how wealthy you become, how people worship you, or what you do," said NBA superstar LeBron James, "if you are an African-American man or African-American woman, you will always be that."<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 106.

<sup>121</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 108.



## ENDOGRAMY AND THE CONTROL OF MARRIAGE AND MATING

The third pillar upholding the American caste system, according to Wilkerson, is called “Endogamy and the Control of Marriage and Mating.” The future likelihood of interracial dating posed a huge challenge to the continuity of caste and racial hierarchy. To prevent such a purported tragedy from occurring, “The framers of the American caste system took steps, early in its founding, to keep the castes separate and to seal off the bloodlines of those assigned to the upper rung. This desire led to the third pillar of caste – endogamy, which means restricting marriage to people within the same caste.”<sup>122</sup> This pillar was a major component of social control, prohibiting engagement between the respective groups in the country. It served to control breeding, deliberately reinforcing perceived differences in the races and “permitting only those with similar traits to legally mate.” This too was often viewed through the lens of divine will, evidenced in one instance in 1630 when, Wilkerson explains, the Virginia General Assembly gave Hugh Davis – a white man – a public whipping for having “abused himself to the dishonor of God and the shame of Christians, by defiling his body in lying with a Negro.”<sup>123</sup> Since God had made the negro inferior, so said the logic, then it was an affront to God for whites to have sexual relations with blacks.<sup>124</sup>

Moreover, this barring of intermarriage and mixing of the races would eventually go beyond blacks and whites.

Some states forbade the marriage of whites to Asians or Native Americans in addition to African-Americans, who were uniformly excluded. While there was never a single nationwide ban on intermarriage, despite several attempts to enact

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<sup>122</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 109.

<sup>123</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 110.

<sup>124</sup> Important to note the hypocrisy here given how widespread and accepted was the rape of enslaved black women by their white male owners.

one, forty-one of the fifty states passed laws making intermarriage a crime punishable by fines of up to \$5,000 and up to ten years in prison.<sup>125</sup>

America sought to control who was able to mix with whom, thereby creatively seeking to maintain a social hierarchy based upon the construct of race, what it needed to justify pervasive inequalities. The net effect of endogamy, Wilkerson suggests, was that it “makes it more likely that those in the dominant caste will see those deemed beneath them as not only less than human but as an enemy, as not of their kind, and as a threat that must be held in check at all costs.” For four centuries, this pillar of caste continued unchecked throughout America, ingrained in both the laws of the land and the laws of the mind. In 1940, a southern physician told researchers,

The way I look at it is this way: God didn't put the different races here to all mix and mingle so you wouldn't know them apart. He put them here as separate races and he meant for them to stay that way....I don't think God meant for a superior race like the whites to blend with an inferior race. I think God put all the different races here for a purpose, the Negro and the Indian and the Chinese, and all of them, and He didn't mean for them to mix. I think I am right in saying that, and my attitude is Christian-like.<sup>126</sup>

The caste system both directly and indirectly affirmed endogamy; it was God-ordained. And, along with the ideal of freedom, it became truly, uniquely, American.

## PURITY VERSUS POLLUTION

The fourth pillar that upholds the American caste system, Wilkerson observes, is what she terms “Purity versus Pollution.” Seeking to prevent or minimize contamination, this pillar of the American caste system makes deliberate efforts to maintain the purity of the dominant caste

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<sup>125</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 111. Importantly, Wilkerson notes too that “Some states went so far as to forbid the passage of any *future* law permitting intermarriage.” These laws were not overturned until 1967, when the U.S. Supreme Court relented when it issued its *Loving vs. Virginia* decision, <https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/today-in-supreme-court-history-loving-v-virginia>.

<sup>126</sup> Allison Davis, Burleigh B. Gardner and Mary R. Gardner, *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941), 16 – 17, <http://reader.library.cornell.edu/docviewer/digital?id=chla2932634#page/33/mode/lup>.

by recognizing the potential pollutants of the subordinate castes. Viewed through the lens of racial hierarchy, whites are deemed pure and holy, while blacks and other nonwhites are viewed as walking contaminants. Hence, as American history has unfolded, “the dominant caste has taken extreme measures to protect its sanctity from the perceived taint of the lower castes.” Like the caste systems in India and Nazi Germany, the American caste system “raised the obsession with purity to a high, if absurdist, art.”<sup>127</sup> For most of America’s history, blacks and other nonwhite groups were separated from most, and in some places, all, of the aspects of what would be considered normal everyday activities. Black children were forbidden to attend schools where white children attended and were barred from playing together at the local playground, the swing set and slide serving as their own fixtures of racial separation. In places like Florida, Wilkerson notes, schoolbooks for white children and black children could not be placed in the same storage areas, fear that knowledge itself can be contaminated. Jails, too, were not places of equality, even the bedsheets of white prisoners and the bedsheets of black prisoners kept in separate areas; bedsheets having the capacity to dilute white purity. “All private and public human activities were segregated from birth to death, from hospital wards to railroad platforms to ambulances, hearses, and cemeteries,”<sup>128</sup> wrote Wilkerson.

Following Emancipation, the short-lived Reconstruction era, which only minutely addressed some of the systemic injustices wrought over the prior quarter millennium, served only to further embolden and enrage those who wanted a return to the status quo of a social hierarchy based on white purity and black inferiority, fearing lost and a sense of displacement. The Confederacy wished and ultimately willed a return to their perceived place of supremacy, keeping other subordinated castes, blacks, at the bottom. In 1896, after years of litigation by

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<sup>127</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 115.

<sup>128</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 116.

Homer A. Plessy challenging a law that separated white and colored races in railroad cars in Louisiana, the case went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. In overwhelming fashion, and not surprisingly, the court ruled seven to one in favor of Louisiana's "separate but equal" law.<sup>129</sup> The U.S. Supreme Court's verdict set in motion the next seven decades of legalized separation between the races, better known as Jim Crow.

The sacrament of baptism is known in Christian circles as a public moment signifying a spiritual cleansing, a purification, washing off what was before and replacing that with what has become new. According to the biblical tradition, the water is necessary for baptism to occur, whether full immersion or drop on the forehead, depending upon the respective religious tradition. The water serves as a key ingredient, it helps bring everything together in Christ. However, this fourth pillar of caste prevented black people from enjoying that water – whether it be baptismal water or the public pool. Wilkerson recounts some riveting moments:

The town of Newton, Kansas, went to the state supreme court to keep black people out of the pool it built in 1935. The city and its contractor argued that black people could never be permitted in the pool, not on alternate days, not at separate hours, not ever, because of the type of pool it was. They told the court that it was 'a circulatory type of pool,' in which 'the water is only changed once during the swimming season.' White people, they argued, would not go into water that had touched black skin....The court sided with the city, and for decades more, the town's only public pool remained for the exclusive use of the dominate caste.

A white woman in Marion, Indiana, seemed to be speaking for many in the dominant caste across America when she said that white people wouldn't swim with colored people because they 'didn't want to be polluted by their blackness.' Far from her, in Elizabeth, New Jersey, whites blocked African-Americans at the stairwells and entrances the week the city first allowed black swimmers to its public pool.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> "Plessy v. Ferguson," Legal Information Institute, Cornell University School of Law, accessed November 15, 2020, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/163/537>.

<sup>130</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 119.

Literally ingrained into the law and figuratively into the American psyche was the notion of white purity over and against black and brown impurity. While the notion of whiteness was indicative of holiness, the notion of blackness was indicative of impurity. As we shall see, this dynamic will continue to play out over the course of American history, its impacts very present today.

### **OCCUPATIONAL HIERARCHY: THE JATIS AND THE MUDSILL**

The fifth pillar upholding the American caste system is what Wilkerson refers to as “Occupational Hierarchy: The Jatis and the Mudsill.” Simply put, this pillar provides the infrastructure that establishes a division of labor that specifies who is qualified to perform certain work. Without this pillar, it is assumed that a social system cannot stand, operating imperfectly until it reaches a complete collapse. Quoting a speech given by Sen. James Henry Hammond of South Carolina to his fellow senators in 1858, Wilkerson offers this penetrating example of this pillar in language capturing its fullest substance: “In all social systems, there must be a class to do the menial duties, to perform the drudgery of life. That is a class requiring but a low order of intellect and but little skill. Its requisites are vigor, docility, fidelity. Such a class you must have....It constitutes the very mudsill of society.”<sup>131</sup> A mudsill is the most important component of the homebuilding process. It is the first wood beam pounded into place that upholds the coming studs, flooring, windows, roofing materials and ceiling. Having no mudsill is having no house. “In a caste system,” Wilkerson writes, “the mudsill is the bottom caste that everything else rests upon.”<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 131.

<sup>132</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 131.

For the duration of American history, the opportunities presented to and allowed for black people have been based solely on this division of labor. They were “relegated to the dirtiest, most demeaning and least desirable jobs. After enslavement and well into the twentieth century, they were primarily restricted to the role of sharecroppers and servants – domestics, lawn boys, chauffeurs, and janitors.”<sup>133</sup> South Carolina, one of the Confederate states, went so far as to legally prohibit black people from serving in certain occupations. “No person of color shall pursue or practice the art, trade or business of an artisan, mechanic or shopkeeper, or any other trade, employment or business (besides that of husbandry, or that of a servant under contract for labor) on his own account and for his benefit until he shall have obtained a license from the judge of the district court, which license shall be good for one year only.”<sup>134</sup> Not to be outdone, the Governor of Mississippi declared emphatically, “Anything that causes the negro to aspire above the plow handle, the cook pot, in a word the functions of a servant, will be the worst thing on earth for the negro. God Almighty designed him for a menial. He is fit for nothing else.”<sup>135</sup>

Emerging from the shadows of a blossoming nation was a concerted effort to build and maintain national prosperity solely by assigning specific job functions to certain racial groups. The closer your skin color resembled whiteness, the better your chances of securing what would eventually be known colloquially as white-collar jobs. Literally, the darker your skin complexion the more rugged were your job prospects. While whites could liberally explore productive and meaningful careers in the areas of science, medicine, business, and law, people of color were regulated to domestic and agricultural work. “A Negro may become a locomotive fireman but

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<sup>133</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 133.

<sup>134</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 133.

<sup>135</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 134.

never an engineer,”<sup>136</sup> said historian Bertram Doyle. Furthermore, Doyle points out, a person of color could never be expected to assume a supervisory role which placed him in charge over white people. Such a division of labor based on caste were not isolated events but were widespread, stretching across the deep south. “In Chattanooga,” wrote Doyle, “Negroes dug the ore and worked in the furnaces of the iron foundries; while the white men dug the coal.” He continued:

In a Georgia town the postmen were once all Negroes; but the residents of a Texas city refused to receive mail from a Negro postman. At one time Miami, Florida, would not tolerate Negro chauffeurs; Atlanta, Georgia refused to license Negroes to operate machines. A Negro buyer, who had risen to the position in a white department store, was frequently intimidated and insulted by white people, who considered him out of place. Another Negro, who had been made head of the shipping department of a large store, experienced the situation where a white salesman refused to talk to him.<sup>137</sup>

Occupational Hierarchy is as critical to the functions of American society as any other pillar of the caste system, and even at present it continues to exert influence over individuals and groups relative to employment options and functions based upon the color of their skin, the most significant personal characteristic out of their control.

## **DEHUMANIZATION AND STIGMA**

American colonialists, the Framers of the Constitution, and those occupying the most critical roles in the forming of a self-governing democracy, found it necessary, as part of the caste system, to falsely label and caricature a certain group for the entire system to work properly. Such a process of defining and labeling is what Wilkerson notes as the sixth pillar of caste: “Dehumanization and Stigma.” Dehumanization is designed to devalue another human

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<sup>136</sup> Bertram Wilbur Doyle, *Etiquette of Race Relations in the South: A Study in Social Control* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), 154.

<sup>137</sup> Doyle, *Control*, 154.

being or group, its purpose to reduce or eliminate one's human value by seeking to distance them from the human race. To do this well, to accomplish its aims, demands that one not just dehumanize a single individual, but that one dehumanizes an entire race. Explains Wilkerson, "People and groups who seek power and division do not bother with dehumanizing an individual. Better to attach a stigma, a taint of pollution to an entire group....Dehumanize the group, and you have completed the work of dehumanizing any single person within it."<sup>138</sup>

The effort to dehumanize is an attempt to dismember one from the human race. Those who have been dehumanized are devalued and viewed as inferior creatures unworthy of the dignity, respect, and civility offered to more *human* beings. It is far easier to mistreat and abuse one if they are considered a beast of the field. It is easier on the conscience to ostracize and violate those on the bottom rungs of society, the oppressed ones deemed deserving of their lots. You do not have to treat people as *people* when they never were nor will ever be considered fully human. "A caste system relies on dehumanization to lock the marginalized outside of the norms of humanity so that any action against them is seen as reasonable,"<sup>139</sup> wrote Wilkerson.

Dehumanization robs individuals of their individuality, a uniqueness given to them by their Creator. If humans were made in the image of God, the *imago Dei*, then America robbed God too. Wilkerson offers:

Upon their arrival at the auction blocks and labor camps of the American South, Africans were stripped of their given names and forced to respond to new ones, as would a dog to a new owner, often mocking names like Caesar or Samson or Dred. They were stripped of their past lives and identities as Yoruba or Asante or Igbo, as the son of a fisherman, nephew of the village priest, or daughter of a midwife.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 141.

<sup>139</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 142.

<sup>140</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 143.



While awaiting exchange on the auction block, those Africans were not permitted to exhibit any emotion, forbidden to shed any tears as they watched their children snatched away from them to be sold to the highest bidder. Husbands could not grieve for their recently departed wives, escorted away by men with guns into the unknown sounds of a darkening forest.

Dehumanization forced people to surrender their own humanity, to give up their own individuality, which spoke to its lethality. And choosing not to relinquish your humanity had severe repercussions – the whip, the work, the lynching tree. “Their bodies did not belong to them but to the dominant caste to do whatever it wished and however it wished to do it. At auction, they were to answer any question put to them with ‘a smiling, cheerful countenance’ or be given thirty lashes for not selling themselves well enough to the seller’s satisfaction.”<sup>141</sup>

When a social group has been labeled unhuman, they are treated without dignity and respect. They are exploited to no end, their identity prostituted. Over time, they recognize that their minds do not belong to them, their bodies do not belong to them. They serve at a master’s pleasure, at a government’s disposal. They are not and cannot possibly be themselves because they do not belong to themselves. They are a distanced version of who they used to be, their former self taken from them, ghost to their past. They slowly lose the power to resist because they have slowly lost themselves. And in the process of losing themselves they have lost everything. There is nothing more to go back to, nothing more to want, nothing more to cry for.

To dehumanize another is to use the dehumanized person for one’s sole advantage, economic or otherwise. Economically, it is to work them, in those menial jobs, alternating between fourteen to fifteen hours each day depending on the time of the year, with little or no

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<sup>141</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 145.

rest in the evenings.<sup>142</sup> It is to use their culinary skills to provide for an enslaver's family meals. It is to use their housecleaning skills to keep the big house immaculate. It is to nurse the infants of those who enslaved them, changing their diapers. This worked economically because it was negro labor, black labor, colored labor. It worked medically too, such moments of sheer exploitation. Wilkerson explains:

In the United States, from slavery well into the twentieth century, doctors used African-Americans as a supply chain for experimentation, as subjects deprived of either consent or anesthesia. Scientist injected plutonium into them, purposely let diseases like syphilis go untreated to observe the effects, perfected the typhoid vaccine on their bodies, and subjected them to whatever agonizing experiments came to the doctors' minds.<sup>143</sup>

Dr. James Marion Sims, hailed as the "Father of Gynecology,"<sup>144</sup> fully employed his privileged caste to exploit the black body. His experiments on enslaved women – their sheer violation and gruesomeness – was the result of a view that dehumanized people of color. "He came to his discoveries by acquiring enslaved women in Alabama and conducting savage surgeries that often ended in disfigurement or death. He refused to administer anesthesia, saying vaginal surgery on them was 'not painful enough to justify the trouble,'"<sup>145</sup> Wilkerson described. What is witnessed here is a devaluing of another person's inherent worth, a false labeling of unworthiness rendering a certain group capable of domination and exploitation. Removing the lens which allow ones to see another as an equal creates opportunities for unchecked subjugation, now and indefinitely.

Dehumanization and its various forms of enforcement secreted itself into the bodily functions of America. From mocking the black body in theatrical plays, carnivals and cultural

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<sup>142</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 46. Wilkerson notes that the hours worked on these workdays were double the normal workday for "humans who actually get paid for their labor. In that same era, prisoners found guilty of actual crimes were kept to a maximum of ten hours per workday."

<sup>143</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 147.

<sup>144</sup> Camila Domonoske, "Father of Gynecology,' Who Experimented on Slaves, No Longer on Pedestal in NYC," *NPR*, April 17, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/04/17/603163394/-father-of-gynecology-who-experimented-on-slaves-no-longer-on-pedestal-in-nyc>.

<sup>145</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 148.

museums, to hosting games like “Coon Dip” at the local county fairs, where participants would throw projectiles at actual African Americans, the dehumanization of black people became normalized. What remained unseen, however, was that dehumanization not only destroyed the dehumanized but the dehumanizer. “A certain kind of violence was part of an unspoken curriculum for generations of children in the dominant caste. ‘White culture desensitized children to racial violence,’ wrote the historian Kristina DuRocher, ‘so they could perpetuate it themselves one day.’”<sup>146</sup>

### **TERROR AS ENFORCEMENT, CRUELTY AS A MEANS OF CONTROL**

Two pillars remain which support the American caste system. The seventh pillar is what Wilkerson refers to as “Terror as Enforcement, Cruelty as a Means of Control.” This pillar ingrains violence and terror into the DNA of a country’s identity. It removes the morality out of brutality and glorifies bloodshed. It numbs the spirit and the soul, clearing the conscience of any sense of wrongdoing. “The only way to keep an entire group of sentient beings in an artificially fixed place, beneath all others and beneath their own talents, is with violence and terror, psychological and physical, to preempt resistance before it can be imagined,”<sup>147</sup> suggests Wilkerson. Since the early days on the plantation, people of color were subjected to extreme forms of violence. Slaves were “regularly whipped, raped, and branded, subjected to any whim or distemper of the people who owned them. Some were castrated or endured other tortures too grisly for these pages, tortures that the Geneva Conventions would have banned as war crimes had the conventions applied to people of African descent on this soil.”<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 150.

<sup>147</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 151.

<sup>148</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 45.

An effective caste system, one which is truly effective, creates the environment necessary to normalize terror, to make those initiating terror and those victims of terrors' fangs vital participants of this dangerous system. And the American caste system became the standard. "In the New World, few living creatures were, as a class of beings, subjected to the level of brute physical assault as a feature of their daily lives for as many centuries as were the subjects of American slavery." Further describing the torture slaves faced, Wilkerson says of the physical assault:

It was so commonplace that some overseers, upon arriving at a new plantation, summarily chose to 'whip every hand on the plantation to let them know who was in command,' Stampp wrote. 'Some used it as incentive by flogging the last slave out of the cabin in the morning. Many used it to 'break in' a young slave and to 'break the spirit' of an insubordinate older one.'

A teenager endured a whipping that went on for so long, he passed out in the middle of it. 'He woke up vomiting,' the historian Edward Baptist recounted. 'They were still beating him. He slipped into darkness again.'

One enslaver remarked 'that he was no better pleased than when he could hear...the sound of the driver's lash among the toiling slaves,' for then, Baptist wrote, 'he knew his system was working.'<sup>149</sup>

Violence became a way of life for America, a natural way of being. Rarely was it ever challenged, questioned, or opposed, for such an act would welcome its terror all over again. Slowly, but surely, violence in America became a fixture on the American psyche, a perceived virtue alongside individual and national liberty, one with a clear beneficiary and a clear victim.

As violence became normalized in America, as part of this pillar of terror and cruelty as a means of control, what also took strong root was a connection between rhetoric and behavior, language and its ability to bring about a specified or preferred end. We need look no further than the rhetoric employed by slaveholders themselves. To keep their slaves in check, slaveholders

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<sup>149</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 152.

would verbally abuse their slaves, warning them of severe consequences if they were to disobey orders, engage in certain schemes, or plot escapes. They took out advertisements in newspapers and secured the help of local justices for finding runaway slaves. One such runaway slave was named London. The justices in New Hanover County, North Carolina, sent out the following order in search of London: “any person may KILL and DESTROY the said slave by such means as he or they may think fit.”<sup>150</sup> Such violence was normalized, and it would continue to be normalized even after slavery concluded.

After slavery ended, the former Confederates took power again, but now without the least material investment in the lives of the people they once owned. They pressed down even harder to keep the lowest caste in its place. African-Americans were mutilated and hanged from poplars and sycamores and burned at the courthouse square, a lynching every three or four days in the first four decades of the twentieth century.<sup>151</sup>

The mere news of a recent public lynching, or hearing that someone you know has been castrated, or seeing up close a family member flogged until near death, causes its own psychological terror in the minds of those not deemed white. One is less likely to attempt a runaway or enter a department store or seek to enroll in a local school if such an attempt could potentially lead to death in the worst case and imprisonment in the best case. Since America’s beginning, violence was unapologetically accepted, in rhetoric and behavior, both components intertwined, needing each other like a seesaw to properly function, the sway of language only as powerful as the actions it bears forth. The slaveholder knew this, and so did the enslaved. Slaveholders recognized early the strong correlation between violence and action, language and dehumanization, rhetoric, and reality.

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<sup>150</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 153.

<sup>151</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 155.

Using terror as a mechanism for social control, has not dissipated with time, for as we shall see, once terror is ingrained in the fabric of a society's conscience it outlives its originators. The intensity of its terror does not subside with time, it only morphs into something more indistinguishable, more invisible, while retaining its absolute power.

## **INHERENT SUPERIORITY VERSUS INHERENT INFERIORITY**

The final pillar upholding the American caste system, according to Wilkerson, is “Inherent Superiority versus Inherent Inferiority.” This pillar serves to make it indisputably clear that one group is better than another in every aspect of life. This pillar distinguishes those who have been perceived to have been born into a privilege caste, always deserving the very best of life, while those who have been born into a subordinate caste, deserve the worst of life. “Beneath each pillar of caste,” writes Wilkerson,

was the presumption and continual reminder of the inborn superiority of the dominate caste and the inherent inferiority of the subordinate. It was not enough that the designated groups be separated for reasons of ‘pollution’ or that they did not intermarry or that the lowest people suffer due to some religious curse, but that it must be understood in every interaction that one group was superior and inherently deserving of the best in a given society and that those who were deemed lowest were deserving of their plight.<sup>152</sup>

To keep the entire system functioning at its optimal capacity, this pillar of caste must be ingrained into the fabric of society as well, giving feet to the final structure. It demands that the subordinate group – the blacks and other non-white persons – be duly in a place of submission to the dominate group. “At every turn, the caste system drilled into the people under its spell the deference due to those born to the upper caste and the degradation befitting the subordinate caste. This required signs and symbols and customs to elevate the upper caste and to demean those

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<sup>152</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 160.

assigned to the bottom, in small and large ways and in everyday encounters.”<sup>153</sup> For instance, Doyle notes that slave women were commonly referred to as “Wench,” only using terms like “girl” and “woman” when it became necessary to distinguish them for sale. Doyle continues, “When persons wished to refer to slaves as their possessions, they used the term ‘people’ – such as ‘my people.’ When they referred to slaves working in a company, the inclusive term became ‘gang’; if the number were quite small, the term was ‘hands’; and, if the reference to the entire working capacity of a plantation were made, the word ‘force’ was used.”<sup>154</sup> The caste system demanded that “If a Negro, man or woman, met a white person on the street in Richmond, Virginia, they were ‘required to ‘give the wall,’ and if necessary to get off the sidewalk into the street, on pain of punishment with stripes on their bare back.”<sup>155</sup> Each of these behaviors, each of these nomenclatures, were signs, customs, and symbols which reinforced notions of white superiority and black or colored inferiority. This eighth pillar of caste gave people within American life a worldview based not on the “content of their character but on the color of their skin.” It created a fictitious world where social creatures would be artificially ranked and grouped, some revered and others revulsed, some welcomed, and others disparaged.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has demonstrated that what was originally designed in the very framework of American society was a caste system based on an artificial ranking of races. Consciously and subconsciously, such a framework guides most of the American psyche today, its thoughts and actions, its rhetoric and behavior, its political leaning, and views. The caste system is so

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<sup>153</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 160.

<sup>154</sup> Doyle, *Control*, 55.

<sup>155</sup> Doyle, *Control*, 55.

ingrained that is has become normalized, a default mechanism for assessing and evaluating the perceived worth of individuals at home and abroad. It takes stock of one's value not by their human value, but by how close their skin appears to be to a notion of whiteness. It is also the very framework which explains the wicked and atrocious treatment of migrant families on America's southern border.



## Chapter IV – Animals

*Back of the writhing, yelling, cruel-eyed demons who break, destroy, maim and lynch and burn at the stake, is a knot, large or small, of normal human beings, and these human beings at heart are desperately afraid of something. Of what? Of many things, but usually of losing their jobs, being declassified, degraded, or actually disgraced; of losing their hopes, their savings, their plans for their children; of actual pangs of hunger, of dirt, of crime.*

- W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 1935.

*I do not want to be here anymore....The way I have been treated makes me feel like I don't matter, like I am trash.*

- Sergio C., 2018

*And they have come for us, two of us and four of them and I think, perhaps they are still human, and I ask them "When do you think this all began?"*

- Adrienne Rich, "Deportations," 1994<sup>156</sup>

Alexander Asig-Putul did not grow up in America. He spent the first 11 years of his life in Guatemala. He and his mother, Otilia Asig-Putul, were, like many, fleeing death threats and violence in their homeland for asylum in America in May of 2018. For the past centuries, America has been admired abroad for its commitment to freedom, noting Emma Lazarus' warm welcome – *give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be breathe free*. When Alexander and his mother arrived at the U.S. border however, they were met with the fiercest resistance imaginable, Emma Lazarus' words long forgotten in memory. Alex and his mother had not passed the test: in an American caste system, they did not have the proper skin color, which subjected them to verbal and physical abuse. Alexander was apprehended and sent

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<sup>156</sup> Adam Goodman, *The Deportation Machine: America's Long History of Expelling Immigrants* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

to a makeshift temporary housing facility, a place designed to hold migrant families captive, without regard for their human rights, welfare and humanity. It was there where Alexander saw something he never thought he would see. “They sent me to a room with other children. I saw my mom and she was chained at her feet, her waist and her hands, and I was crying. There was another little boy who was 6 years old and he was crying because his dad was also chained.”<sup>157</sup> Alexander would be separated from his mother, the person serving as his greatest protection suddenly gone with the wind.

Dixiana S. was 10 years old when she was separated from her mother after being apprehended at the U.S. Southern Border. Like Alexander, she too had sought to flee the circumstances in Honduras by seeking asylum in America. She and her mother did not anticipate such a strong unwelcome upon their arrival. That first night in the facility where she was housed, “there were so many young girls at the facility that they had to sleep sitting up on the concrete floor because there was no room.”<sup>158</sup> She recounted the mistreatment inside the facility, the lack of adequate food and – a sign of the American caste system – the sheer brutality, the acts of dehumanization: “For breakfast, they gave me a frozen ham sandwich. The ham was black. I took one bite but did not eat the rest because of the taste.” Eventually, she and her mother would be transported to another facility, the different location not warranting different treatment. She and her mother were taken to the “doghouse,” known, as Daniella Silva notes in her article narrating these stories, for sizable fencing enclosures. There, Dixiana would be separated from her mother again, and she would also describe being physically abused. She said she and other girls were “kicked by guards to wake them up.” Kicking was a common occurrence, one used to

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<sup>157</sup> Daniella Silva, “Like I am Trash: Migrant Children Reveal Stories of Detention, Separation,” NBC News, July 29, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/i-am-trash-migrant-children-reveal-stories-detention-separation-n895006>.

<sup>158</sup> Silva, “Separation.”

intentionally traumatize, inflict pain, stoke fear. “I was half asleep and they were calling a girl who had a similar first name as me. A male officer kicked me to wake me up to confirm whether or not I was person they were looking for. I was not.”<sup>159</sup> At another facility, she would contract chicken pox and develop other physical ailments requiring medical attention.

A migrant mother from Honduras would experience a different type of suffering too. As she awaited sentencing at a detention center after being detained for entering the country illegally, federal authorities snatched her breastfeeding child away from her.<sup>160</sup> Demonstrating motherly instinct to resist such a painful extraction, the mother resisted. Although her own resistance was met with aggressive force; the authorities handcuffed her for attempting to be human. Terrorized, tortured, dehumanized – the effects of having your child ripped away from your tender breast.

These stories are illustrations of a pervasive long storied history of verbally and psychologically brutalizing individuals and families based upon the color of their skin. To fully grasp the depths of brutality inflicted on Latino population and the shape of its vicious character, it is necessary to briefly explore some of the most significant events shaping American immigration policy over the last century. We shall notice that what is borne out in contemporary times is a long and deliberate effort to minimize the perceived inherent value of some while maximizing the perceived inherent value of others. In America, this plays out in the course of divisive rhetoric and behavior and it is often, unfortunately, undersigned by a distortion of Christian principles. A closer examination is warranted.

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<sup>159</sup> Silva, “Separation.”

<sup>160</sup> Ed Lavandera, Jason Morris, and Darran Simon, “She says Federal Officials Took Her Daughter While She Breastfed the Child in a Detention Center,” CNN, June 14, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/12/us/immigration-separated-children-southern-border/index.html>.

## THE MEETING

During a meeting in May of 2018 with a selected group of governing officials in California who opposed Mexican migration specifically to the United States, Trump offered the following assessment: “We have people coming into the country – or trying to come in, we’re stopping a lot of them – but we’re taking people out of the country, you wouldn’t believe how bad these people are. These aren’t people. These are animals.”<sup>161</sup> *These aren’t people. These are animals.*

When Trump characterized individuals, who had either already arrived in America or were in the process of migrating to America as animals, he was just repeating a worn line in a chorus long sung by the dominant caste in America. That chorus affirms the ideal of the superiority of one group, while minimizing the value of subordinate groups. As we have seen, the American caste system is a ranking based upon the fallacy of a racial hierarchy, those closer to sharing lighter skin tones more able to blend into the dominant system, participating in its mainstream benefits, while those of darker skin tones restricted in their opportunities and ability to pursue the so-called American dream. The result: judging people based on artificial rankings.

## BUILDING WALLS

Walls have been fixtures in world history. The Great Wall of China, perhaps the most famous wall in history, boasts a length of 13,171 miles, connecting Juyongguan on the west and Gubeikou on the east.<sup>162</sup> It is beautiful in its architecture, its craftsmanship. Looks can be

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<sup>161</sup> Scott Neuman, “During Roundtable, Trumps Calls Some Unauthorized Immigrants ‘Animals,’” *NPR*, May 17, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/05/17/611877563/during-roundtable-trump-calls-some-unauthorized-immigrants-animals>.

<sup>162</sup> “About Mutianya Great Wall,” accessed January 27, 2021, <http://www.mutianyugreatwall.com/homePage/toIndexEn>.

deceiving, however, as its original purpose had underlying military motivations. The Berlin Wall is another wall etched in memory if anything for its imposing terror. Constructed in 1961, the Berlin Wall, spanning roughly 96 miles, was designed to prevent so called western “fascist” movements from migrating to Eastern Germany.<sup>163</sup> Walls even play a significant role in Scripture. The Battle of Jericho, chronicling the fall of a wall (Joshua 6:1 – 27), is probably one of the more well known.

The construction of walls has very specific goals and functions. They are designed to separate, to isolate, to prevent an intermingling of cultures and a mixing of ideas. The sheer architectural design of walls is dominating in appearance, the work of creative and engineering prowess, dedicated hands and brawn braving the risk of death, torrid rains, chilling winters and overbearing heat to erect a magnificent structure. And these walls are designed not just as physical barriers, but their true potency is in their psychological intimidation, their standing terror, conveying an implicit message of one side being better than another, suggesting that those outside the walls are unwantedness, undeserving of entry, wretched. While walls are often excused as necessary measures to protect those enclosed within, the motivations often run deeper, to prevent the changes anticipated by welcoming those who reside without. Walls contain their own aura - the fear of mixing, of allowing too much and too many to enter. At the beginning of his candidacy for president, one of the promises Donald Trump made was that he would build a wall on America’s southern border. He vowed that the wall was necessary to keep rapists and criminals out of the country. He promised that the glory of America would return with the erection of this wall. His message was well received, not only by his early supporters,

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<sup>163</sup> History.com authors, “The Berlin Wall,” *History.com*, accessed January 27, 2021, <https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/berlin-wall>.

but soon by a significant portion of the American people. Trump considered a wall a top priority of his presidency. *Animals* were coming.

In January 2019, the United States entered its 30th day of a partial government shutdown. The central issue that the White House and Congress were wrestling over was whether to acquiesce to Trump's desire to fund and construct an estimated \$5.7B wall on the southern border to try and keep men, women, and children who were of a darker racial group from entering the United States. They posed, Trump argued, a risk to our way of life, and their presence will take away jobs from real Americans and bring more violence. They would become wards of the state, unable to take care of themselves. Reportedly, Trump did not want more people "from all these shithole countries," preferred immigrants from places like Norway.<sup>164</sup> Daily, the gridlock at the federal level intensified. Government employees and officials were furloughed, impacting lives in countless ways. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi recommended that President Trump's annual State of the Union Address be rescheduled to a future date when government employees all returned to work. The president responded to her recommendation by saying she could no longer use military aircraft to fly to previously undisclosed locations overseas to visit troops who were fighting daily in harm's way.<sup>165</sup> As the moment unfolded, ingenuity would give Trump the victory he so desperately sought – he would direct his team to re-allocate and repurpose funds from certain areas of the military to pay for his wall.

## **DEPORTATION – AN AMERICAN FIXATION**

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<sup>164</sup> Jen Kirby, "Trump Wants Fewer Immigrants From 'Shithole Countries' and More From Places like Norway," *Vox*, January 11, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/1/11/16880750/trump-immigrants-shithole-countries-norway>.

<sup>165</sup> Jeremy Diamond, Sarah Westwood, and Kevin Liptak, "Trump Denies Pelosi Military Aircraft for War Zone Trip," *CNN*, January 17, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/17/politics/donald-trump-nancy-pelosi-trip-cancel/index.html>.

The events as described above could potentially be perceived as lacking historical precedence, the witness of America's true history. To counteract such a notion, there is considerable value to be gained by briefly surveying aspects of America's history on immigration particularly focused on migrants of Mexican descent. Deeper questions must be asked. Trump and his administration wanted to build walls. Why was the American citizenry such a gullible audience? What was it about the building a wall that warranted such fierce urgency, such swiftness, to the point they would be willing to endure a government shutdown for Congress to pass a budget which included funding for the walls' construction? What were the underlying motivations?

As previous chapters of this work have sought to narrate, the true story of America is the story of migration. From the arrival of the Puritans and the days of the European explorers, America has been a place which has, for many varied reasons, attracted people. But such migration has always had caveats, dynamics which have operated at the individual and collective level consciously and subconsciously, and at the government level deliberately and directly. In Matthew Fry Jacobsen's exemplary work *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*,<sup>166</sup> he helps readers see that any kind of study of immigration has to be understood as a racialized history. Our society is deeply racialized and has always been defined by the idea of whiteness, with those closer to whiteness, or European decent, treated more favorably by American society. There is a long history in America here, a history that goes back to when, as Jacobsen points out, American began to really experience demographic and cultural change.

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<sup>166</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobsen, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

In his critical work *The Deportation Machine: America's Long History of Expelling Immigrants*,<sup>167</sup> Adam Goodman, offers a penetrating historical perspective and analysis tracing how America, while celebrated as a nation of immigrants, has a long history of welcoming some while expelling others. He argues chiefly that expulsion has been a “central feature of American politics and life since before 1900, and particularly in the post-World War II era.”<sup>168</sup> In fact, since 1882, America has deported 57 million people, and, Goodman notes, “During the last century, federal officials have deported more people from the land of freedom and opportunity than they have allowed to remain on a permanent basis.”<sup>169</sup> It is against this backdrop that the words of Trump and the recent issues on current American immigration policy must be understood. America did not only recently become explicitly anti-immigration; its roots go back another 140 years. As we seek to understand contemporary issues related to matters of immigration, we must start by placing the issues in proper historical perspective.

Goodman’s research is critical on this point. To assist his readers with understanding recent debates and issues on immigration, Goodman uses the metaphorical language of a machine to characterize the U.S. government’s historical approach to immigration. He refers to it as “the deportation machine,” since it operates systematically in its carefully crafted attempts to exert social control. The machine was created and institutionalized to maintain and assert power, to regulate populations that reside within a certain border. And, as Goodman notes, the machine operates out of sight, without much of a documented track record, a nod to its desire to operate well below the radar. The machine, he notes, has three mechanisms ensuring the effectiveness of its operation: self-deportation, voluntary deportation, and coerced removal. Collectively, the

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<sup>167</sup> Goodman, Adam., *The Deportation Machine: America's Long History of Expelling Immigrants*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020.

<sup>168</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 6.

<sup>169</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 1.



machine operates masterfully out of sight, although upon closer review, its engines can be heard, the roars of pistons ever so clear.

To begin with, in conducting research for his own work, hoping to comb through massive deportation records which would inform his work, he found his efforts more difficult than they originally seemed. Recounting a visit to see the chief of the Historical Research Branch of the Department of Homeland Security's US Citizenship and Immigration Services, Goodman discovered that there were few actual records to examine:

There was nothing for me to look at....The government's effort to streamline expulsions and cut enforcement expenses depended not only on reducing the use of detention and bypassing removal hearings, but also on minimizing the processing of apprehended immigrants – and the voluminous records that would generate.<sup>170</sup>

Relying upon patchy and sometimes inconsistent or unprocessed data from national archives, local and state archives, Freedom of Information Act requests, filings of legal aid organizations and district courts, as well as interviews with migrants, deportees, their family members and other officials, Goodman gives us a look at a machinery designed from its very inception to treat immigrants like animals. Hence, we must go down memory lane, to a small town in California named Truckee.

America was changing quickly in the mid-nineteenth century. Demographics were shifting, towns and cities growing, and economic prosperity seemed to be within reach for most who had enough chutzpah to chase it. The evolving landscape was not unique to America alone, as countries all over the world began to experience demographic and cultural shifts. In many cases, working in lock step unison with other countries, America in “concert with other nations around the world, took administrative, legislative, diplomatic, and judicial action to harden

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<sup>170</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 7.

international borders and assert sovereignty.”<sup>171</sup> However, America would eventually take on a more aggressive stance to combat the influx of migrants and their families.

### **Mechanism 1: Self-Deportation**

The California Gold Rush, which took place between the years 1848 and 1855, attracted many people on a quest in pursuit of riches. While many American citizens relocated to California to jump on board this rush for gold, other cultures around the world arrived as well. Chinese migrants began arriving in 1848. Residing mostly on the Pacific Coast, particularly in California, Chinese immigrants, of whom 95 percent were men, found jobs as “miners, cooks, cigar makers, lumberjacks, and laundrymen. They also laid tracks for the transcontinental railroad.”<sup>172</sup> Against the backdrop of a country that supposedly welcomed cultures and diversity within their midst, this assumption, as it would turn out, was in name only. The vision of an America being a place of freedom did not prove to be a reality. As the Chinese helped spur the economic growth of the United States upon their arrival, their continued presence began to pose significant challenges for Americans, who started to view the Chinese as, according to Goodman, “an existential threat to the nation.”<sup>173</sup> They saw that the increase of the Chinese population not only created greater competition for scarce jobs and opportunities, but it also posed a direct threat to their way of life that they had been building over the course of the prior two centuries. The American caste system, as we have noted, has a way of revealing itself beyond mere private thoughts and conversations and when unleashed into the public domain are like live viruses looking to find hosts who will share in their sensibilities. Hence, “as early as the 1830s, the

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<sup>171</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 10.

<sup>172</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 10.

<sup>173</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 11.

penny press, mass produced newspapers that sold for a cent, described and depicted Chinese people, as a distinct race of unassimilable ‘heathens.’”<sup>174</sup> The dynamic was then laid out bare. Rhetoric was being used to spread a viewpoint, a certain portrayal of the Chinese people. Media outlets proved beneficial in this regard. Newspapers articles casted those of Chinese descent in a negative light. Signs posted in local establishments as well as the reliance upon local news channels served to promulgate an opinion, a posture, that sought to dehumanized those deemed unwelcomed. Such acts were reminiscent of the strategy employed by slaveowners when attempting to capture a runaway slave.

As Americans read the newspapers and engaged in conversations with their neighbors and friends, the stereotypical image of “heathens” served as their point of reference, the lens through which they would see and assess the Chinese immigrants. Goodman insightfully characterizes this escalating viewpoint shared by many Americans:

By the time migration picked up in the 1850s, this stereotype was both firmly entrenched and pervasive. The Chinese ‘are uncivilized, unclean and filthy beyond all conception, without any of the higher domestic or social relations; lustful and sensual in their dispositions; every female is a prostitute, and of the basest order,’ Horace Greeley’s New York Daily Tribune asserted in 1854. ‘If the tide continues,’ the newspaper warned, the Chinese – ‘clannish in nature’ and ‘pagan in religion’ – would soon outnumber the white population on the West Coast.<sup>175</sup>

Over the course of the next two decades, this anti-Chinese sentiment would continue its ascent, growing in depth and breadth. Following the abolishment of slavery with the passing of the thirteenth amendment, one question remaining was “what do we do with the Chinese?” And like those who had been deemed lower caste within the American caste system, the Chinese were on the receiving end of every economic calamity experienced by white Americans, with Goodman

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<sup>174</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 12.

<sup>175</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 12.

noting, “When wages dropped and unemployment rose in 1873 and amid the prolonged economic depression that followed, white workers blamed the Chinese.”<sup>176</sup> This is called, as Wilkerson notes, scapegoating, and it plays a vital role in upholding the American caste system.

If such bigotry and xenophobia could be restrained and localized within the radius of a certain area, a certain state even, perhaps it could be managed and contained. A racial system, however, escapes its laboratories and spreads its treacherous wings elsewhere, throughout the highest levels of government. Goodman notes that an anti-Chinese stance had been taken by both Republican and Democratic presidential candidates by 1876 and large anti-Chinese movements began to emerge across the country. “Are you ready to march down to the wharf and stop the leprous Chinamen from landing?” said Denis Kearney, leader of the Workingmen’s Party of California. Seizing white sentiment at the time, Kearney, in a harbinger of sorts, wanted more than simply the exclusion of the Chinese; he wanted deportation: “The Chinese must Go!” he said.<sup>177</sup> Washington D.C. was receptive to messages like this, for the government shared these views deeply and widely, passing the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882,<sup>178</sup> which prohibited the immigration of Chinese workers for a decade and established “grounds to deport ‘any Chinese person found unlawfully within the United States.’”<sup>179</sup>

While government is supposedly responsible for overseeing and managing the affairs of the nation, entrusted by voters to work towards their common interests, government often falls short, and the residents of local communities – daftly – often take matters into their own hands. Unsatisfied with the continued presence of the Chinese population in America, residents decided

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<sup>176</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 13.

<sup>177</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 13.

<sup>178</sup> See “Chinese Immigration and the Chinese Exclusion Acts,” Office of the Historian, *U.S. Department of State*, accessed February 1, 2021, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1866-1898/chinese-immigration>.

<sup>179</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 13.

they would be both judge and jury, asking themselves why they should rely exclusively on the government to remove the Chinese population when they had the power to do so themselves. “During 1885 and 1886,” Goodman writes, “at least 168 communities carried out Chinese expulsion and self-deportation campaigns, relying on a combination of force and coercion in hopes of accomplishing what the federal government could not, or would not, do. Many of these purges involved violence; some concluded in massacres.”<sup>180</sup> Divisive rhetoric was employed to rally the citizens. “Hang all the Chinamen!” and “Let’s go and burn the devils out!” were words uttered by local mobs and town people in Eureka, California, enraged by the presence of the Chinese community and caught up both in the fury of the moment and wrath of America’s own sense of exclusivity. Predictably, such rhetoric spurred action, proving the connection between words and behavior. Goodman offers the following:

The mob went door to door, telling the Chinese residents to gather their belongings and go to the docks by 3:00 p.m. the following day. They constructed gallows in front of Chinatown and suspended an effigy of a Chinese man from it. A nearby sign read, “ANY CHINESE SEEN ON THE STREET AFTER THREE O’CLOCK TODAY WILL BE HUNG TO THIS GALLOWS.” The vigilantes coerced more than 300 Chinese men and women to leave Eureka in less than forty-eight hours.<sup>181</sup>

These were not isolated incidents in 1885, as Goodman notes additionally:

That September a group of Chinese miners in Rock Springs, Wyoming Territory, refused to join a strike organized by the Knights of Labor. In response, an armed mob of 150 white (mostly European immigrant) miners killed twenty-eight Chinese workers, wounded fifteen others, and scared hundreds more, causing them to flee. Then they set Chinatown ablaze.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 13.

<sup>181</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 13. Goodman also points out that over 200 communities sought to purge Chinese residents during the 1880’s. See page 225, citation 10.

<sup>182</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 14.

Anti-Chinese sentiment was everywhere, separated not by geography or political affiliation and was unified in its efforts to ban all Chinese people from America. In Tacoma, Washington that same year, Goodman writes that

more than 500 men wielding clubs and pistols took to the streets after many Chinese residents failed to heed a warning to leave. The mob kicked down doors, smashed windows, looted stores, and dragged Chinese men and women from their homes before forcing them on a nine-mile march out of town in the driving rain and mud. As one resident wrote in the aftermath, “The Chinese are no more in Tacoma...Tacoma will be *sans* Chinese, *sans* pigtailed, *sans* moon-eye, *sans* joss-house, *sans* everything Mongolian.”<sup>183</sup>

And just like that, mechanism 1, self-deportation was born.

Simply defined, self-deportation is a tool that is used by federal, state, and local officials to convince and persuade immigrants to deport themselves from the country or face the risk of severe consequences. Essentially, this mechanism is a scare tactic which seeks to utilize all tools at the U.S. government’s disposal to inspire a preferred behavior on the part of the immigrant community. This mechanism came to be known as the “Truckee method,” a name given to such tactics as Chinese workers arrived in Truckee, California in 1864. This method sought to rally local anti-Chinese groups and individuals, stirring a unified effort to persuade the Chinese to leave the country. Goodman notes the campaigns to push Chinese out of the country “relied in part on economic boycotts and the public shaming of anyone who defended or employed Chinese workers,” and, he continues, “depended on incendiary scare tactics, pervasive psychological violence, the strategic use of newspapers, and the long history and ever-present threat of bodily harm ranging from the routine to the murderous.”<sup>184</sup> Not surprisingly, this so called Truckee method was widely endorsed in other cities and counties, with many “resolving that the Chinese represented ‘a mental, physical, moral and financial evil’ and must be forced to go using lawful

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<sup>183</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 14.

<sup>184</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 16.

means.” Such scare tactics were effective, causing more than 15,000 Chinese men, women, and children to leave the United States. “When the drives finally concluded, Truckee’s white residents had succeeded in forcing out the vast majority of the town’s Chinese community, a sign of the self-deportation’s effectiveness as an expulsion strategy,” wrote Goodman.<sup>185</sup> Using scare tactics to force others to leave on their own accord was revered for its sheer effectiveness.

## **Mechanism 2: Formal Deportation**

Unsatisfied with the policies and regulations which sought to restrict immigration at the local and state level, anti-immigration activists endeavored to ensure legal parameters were put in place at the federal level that would deport more “unwanted” people from the United States. After watching what was taking place on the West Coast as well as sensing the anti-Chinese sentiment spreading rapidly across the country in the 1880s, Congress decided to act boldly. Taking shape was an effort to provide federal oversight over immigration policy in the United States, crafting a unified policy that would guide local and state officials. Concerned also about the migrants arriving from southern and eastern Europe, federal officials decided to institute some restrictions. However, as debates raged over how to proceed most effectively, a key recommendation emerged. Significantly, Goodman notes, “a joint congressional committee recommended the best approach would be ‘to sift it, to separate the desirable from the undesirable immigrants, and to permit only those to land on our shores who have certain physical and moral qualities.’”<sup>186</sup> Congress would then pass a law in 1891 that would create a new position of superintendent of immigration falling under the auspices of the Department of the Treasury. Now, the federal government set the course on immigration policy, rather than state

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<sup>185</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 20.

<sup>186</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 21.

and local officials. “Congress would determine who could enter the United States, stay in the country, and become a citizen, and who was inadmissible, deportable, and therefore inherently un-American.”<sup>187</sup>

Over the course of the next few decades, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Congress would expand their powers to control immigration in the United States. They built upon their list of who was included and who was excluded, those considered deplorable classes and those who were not, and those who were welcomed and those who were rejected. Importantly, what also began to emerge was a more refined sense of those truly considered to be “American.” While the United States did depend on many foreign laborers to spur economic growth in the industrial and agricultural sectors of the economy, what also continued to intensify was a growing sense of xenophobia, acutely exacerbated when there was an economic recession. “A dire four-year depression in the mid 1890s,” wrote Goodman, “spurred widespread claims that immigrants stole Americans’ jobs and undercut wages and working conditions.”<sup>188</sup> Organized labor unions were livid at this perceived reality, pressuring lawmakers and labor leaders to make immediate changes.<sup>189</sup>

While immigration posed economic challenges for many American workers, the pillars upholding the American caste system were operating at full force. As in the case of black people who were deemed scientifically unfit and inherently inferior, so too was the case here, resting not on one specific group of people to classify as lower caste. “Scientific racism and the proliferation of eugenics also played an important role in the push to curtail immigration and expel foreigners.” Goodman continues:

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<sup>187</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 23.

<sup>188</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 23.

<sup>189</sup> The political clout of labor unions cannot be understated. Goodman points out that three former labor leaders had direct lines to the federal government. See Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 24.



On the East Coast, the Immigration Restriction League (IRL), founded by a group of Harvard graduates in 1894, sought to reduce immigration from southern and eastern Europe that “lower the mental, moral, and physical average of our people.” On the West Coast, the Asiatic Exclusion League, formed in San Francisco in 1905, aimed to combat the “Yellow Peril” by ending Asian immigration, segregating children in schools, and advocating for new laws that limited Asians’ ability to buy land....Around the same time, social scientist at the nation’s leading universities popularized the idea that different racial, religious, and national groups possessed innate, immutable biological characteristics. The intersection of eugenics, immigration, and public health led authorities to declare some people inadmissible or unfit for citizenship based on physical or mental disabilities, or their supposed susceptibility to carry and spread communicable diseases.<sup>190</sup>

The federal government led the way forward on all matters pertaining to the perceived unworthiness of immigrants arriving to America. In a forty-two-volume report, Republican Senator William P. Dillingham of Vermont sought to demonstrate the inferiority of new immigrants and their perceived inability to assimilate, directly blaming them for the social problems.<sup>191</sup> Immigrants posed an existential threat to the nation, its purity and holiness, its freedom and perfection, the values upon which it had been convincing itself for two centuries.

With Congress providing federal oversight, it now granted officials at the local level the ability to exercise nearly unlimited power on matters of immigration. Across the immigration bureaucracy, officials now could deport people for “reasons related to economics, race, politics, health, gender, sexuality, or ability,”<sup>192</sup> wrote Goodman. It follows then that, according to Goodman,

Officials within the immigration bureaucracy enjoyed tremendous discretionary power. In some cases, even low-level officers without any special legal training or knowledge served as inspector, interpreter, and stenographer, single-handedly deciding immigrants’ fates....As a federal judge put it, “If the Commissioners [of immigration] wish to order an alien drawn, quartered, and chucked overboard

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<sup>190</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 24 – 25.

<sup>191</sup> “Dillingham Commission Report on Boston, 1911,” *Global Boston*, accessed February 21, 2021, <https://globalboston.bc.edu/index.php/home/eras-of-migration/test-page-2/commission/#:~:text=Led%20by%20Vermont%20Senator%20William,to%20the%20nation's%20well%20being>.

<sup>192</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 28.

they could do so without interference”...The deportation machine that legislators and immigration bureaucrats established during these decades prioritized speed and economy over people’s constitutional right to due process.<sup>193</sup>

With a formal deportation framework now institutionalized at the federal level, with occupiers in the highest political offices cherishing the same feelings of xenophobia that their constituents possessed, another tool in the deportation machinery was erected throughout the daily operations of the United States. For immigrants, constitutional rights were not recognized, due process was not provided, and a sense of common humanity and human decency was never considered.

### **Mechanism 3: Voluntary Departure**

With the mechanism of self-deportation now firmly established and the mechanism of formal deportations ingrained and institutionalized in the fabric of the country, there then came, according to Goodman, the arrival of a third mechanism: voluntary departure. Voluntary departure is a mechanism that places the power within the context of supposedly individual choice. It presents those who have been residing or trying to reside in the country with the option to leave: “Under voluntary departure, immigration officials across the country permitted or coerced apprehended immigrants to leave ‘on their own.’”<sup>194</sup> This mechanism gave authorities much flexibility to enforce stringent immigration policies without substantial financial cost and complex legal constraints. Goodman continued: “Voluntary departure reduced both the number of arrest warrants issued and the number of people awaiting administrative hearings, thus saving the bureaucracy money and minimizing or eliminating the time immigrants spent in detention as cases worked their way through the system.”<sup>195</sup> According to Goodman, the federal government

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<sup>193</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 28 – 29.

<sup>194</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 30 – 31.

<sup>195</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 31.

did not begin tracking voluntary departures until 1927, but Goodman's research on the history of immigration reveals that records can be traced to 1907.<sup>196</sup> One clear discovery came to light as part of his research, which is that the government began to rely heavily upon voluntary departure. While they used the mechanism of voluntary departure to extradite people from China, Japan, and other areas of Europe, it was mostly widely used to deport Canadians and, most notably for the work of this thesis, Mexicans.

While the California Gold Rush attracted Chinese to the area in pursuit of riches and opportunity, it also attracted people from Mexico, who, reeling following the disappointment of the Mexican American War (1846 – 1848), were in search of a better life. Although many came in search of the precious metal, Goodman notes that Mexican immigration did not experience substantial acceleration until 1907, following the U.S. Government reaching a Gentlemen's Agreement with Japan that, for a time, ended labor migration from Asia.<sup>197</sup> Following this agreement, "US employers came to depend on Mexican labor as never before," said Goodman, and Mexican immigration sped up, "going from an average of just a few hundred per year between 1899 and 1907 to around 15,600 in 1909."<sup>198</sup> Companies based in the U.S. began actively recruiting workers from Mexico to transition to the U.S. to work for their firms, and given the cheap labor costs and geographic proximity, this prodding "caused migration to the United States to grow even more after 1910."<sup>199</sup> Meanwhile, a growing number of Mexicans sought refuge in the U.S., desiring to flee war torn places in their country in exchange for what they had assumed was a land of freedom. Nearly six decades removed from America's Civil War, it is plausible that immigrants assumed that America was finally on the verge of

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<sup>196</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 31.

<sup>197</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 32.

<sup>198</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 32.

<sup>199</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 32.

manifesting its creed. “From 1910 to 1921,” noted Goodman, “an average of nearly 20,000 Mexicans immigrated each year, including more than 51,000 in 1920 alone.”<sup>200</sup>

Along with the rise of Mexican migrants, however, also came renewed anti-Mexican sentiment. While many Mexicans migrated through ports and inspection points that were set up alongside the southern border, some did not, posing challenges for local officials. To combat some of the surge being experienced, federal officials began aggressively apprehending perceived violators for “attempting surreptitious entry,” and, as Goodman writes, “gave officials authority to deport people for entry without inspection.”<sup>201</sup> It was this dynamic that fueled the rise of voluntary departure as what would be the primary mechanism for deportation. Goodman helpfully describes how this dynamic played out:

During fiscal year 1918, voluntary departures to Mexico (3,811) outpaced formal expulsions across the nation for all nationalities combined (1,569) by more than two to one. A similar gap persisted in the years ahead. In 1921, an economic recession, an unemployment crisis, and the expiration of wartime waivers on Mexican labor migration caused informal expulsions to jump to 7,482. That year, officials in the Southwest deported more than 80 percent of all apprehended immigrants via voluntary departure....In these cases, simple arrest resulted in deportation – no conviction necessary. Authorities’ exploitation of this other means of expulsion expanded the power and reach of both individual officers and the bureaucracy as a whole.<sup>202</sup>

What would take place in the coming decades would continue to lay the groundwork for the immigration policies embraced and institutionalized in America today, a turning point that would cause the dominant caste in America to go deeper and deeper in its cherished beliefs about who was welcomed and who was unwelcomed, those embraced and those estranged. Voluntary departure – convincing those to leave on their own – became the last component of the deportation machine.

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<sup>200</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 32.

<sup>201</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 32.

<sup>202</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 33.

## OPERATION WETBACK

Economic insecurity has played a major role in the process of stoking xenophobia. As we have noted, in a caste system, there always needs to be someone to blame. When resources or jobs seem scarce, or there is a felt sense that one's life is not progressing according to expectations, one often looks for a scapegoat. Blaming another requires a certain ideology, a posture, a perspective, allowing an individual to forgo analyzing their own responsibilities and shortcomings in life in favor of casting the cause for their misfortunes on others. Such was the case during the years of the Great Depression. On the heels of the recently passed Immigration Act of 1929, which imposed a misdemeanor charge on unauthorized entry into the U.S. and a felony charge for trying to reenter the country after a deportation, there was a growing recognition of the power of using scare tactics to cause unwanted migrants to leave the country and those entertaining the idea of entering the country to rethink their ambitions. Goodman argues, "After the 1929 act went into effect, authorities also became increasingly aware of the power of scare tactics to exert control over noncitizens, and especially Mexicans. The act, an immigration official observed, had 'put the fear of God in their hearts.'"<sup>203</sup> Describing in further detail how this was played out in Mexican communities, Goodman continues:

Fear of apprehension and deportation became so pervasive in Mexican communities across the country that it changed the bureau's enforcement strategy. Whereas the Bureau of Immigration used to send undercover agents into dance halls to collect intelligence in hopes of building cases against people, under the new law authorities realized that all they had to do was send in a couple of uniformed officers. As one agent explained, "In a few minutes, the people who are here illegally begin to sneak out only to fall into the arms of a cordon who are waiting for them. A guilty conscience does the job." Though such fear may have been impossible to quantify, it was very real and caused a considerable number of people to preemptively leave the country.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 41.

<sup>204</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 41.

With a renewed sense of purpose, backed by and granted authority by the federal, state, and local government, officials executed this strategy without any concern for human dignity. This was the climate of those decades, revealing itself ever more acutely during the Great Depression.

The stock market crashed cataclysmically in October 1929, leading to massive economic suffering, with record unemployment, business failures, and general nationwide anxiety. As America sought to navigate its way through these unpredictable terrains, the Mexican community became one of the victims. “The beliefs that foreigners stole US citizens’ jobs, drained public coffers, carried diseases, committed crimes, and harbored communities and radical political views resulted in a rising chorus across the country calling for their expulsion.”<sup>205</sup> As people called for the expulsion of foreigners, the power of rhetoric for underscoring these views was once again on full public display, as media outlets began to share, promote, and encourage these views before their massive audiences. According to Goodman,

William Randolph Hearst, the nation’s most powerful media mogul, repeatedly used the pages of his twenty-eight newspapers (which reached 5.5 million daily subscribers and 7 million people on Sunday) to call for deportations and harsher immigration laws. “The farmer rids his barn of rats, his hen house of weasels. Good housekeepers wage ceaseless war against vermin. And employers, will not have dishonest people about them....No man keeps in his own house those that are enemies of his family or for any other reason harmful. Uncle Sam should clear his house, clear it thoroughly of all ‘undesirables.’”<sup>206</sup>

And Uncle Sam sought to do just that. William N. Doak, the Secretary of Labor responsible for managing the affairs of the Bureau of Immigration, expressed to Congress that over 400,000 people currently living in the United States were doing so without authorization. Doak was forceful, abrasive in his efforts to deport what he believed were individuals who posed

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<sup>205</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 41.

<sup>206</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 41.

monumental problems for the country. Goodman provides a look into some of Doak's rhetoric and behaviors he supported, writing:

Doak set out to remove "every evader of our alien laws, regardless of nationality, creed, or color." During his tenure, a contemporary commentator observed that "alien hunting...became a gladiatorial spectacle" in which agents raided homes, churches, picket lines, public spaces, bars, dance halls, and pool halls, sometimes without a warrant.

"If we can't raid these places, where the hell do you expect we are going to get these fellows?" It was the federal government's responsibility to "protect its own citizens against illegal invaders" Doak said, and he made clear that he would use "every weapon in [his] power" to do just that. "The gates of the promised land have been closed," he wrote in an op-ed later that summer. "Our self-preservation has demanded it."<sup>207</sup>

Doak was not a single actor. His views, Goodman writes, were widely shared across the nation's political infrastructure. "Despite our disastrous experience since colonial days creating race problem after race problem, Negro, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino and now the Mexican Indian, have we learned anything as a nation?"<sup>208</sup> said J.C. Brodie, head of a Democratic Committee in Arizona, Goodman records. Relying upon using divisive rhetoric to promulgate his positions, Brodie would claim that "Mexicans had pushed millions of citizens out of jobs and into bread lines, lowered the country's morale and living standards, and infected the 'white American population' with everything from smallpox and meningitis to typhoid and venereal diseases."<sup>209</sup> Writing further, Goodman notes importantly this national sentiment:

Though it would have been easy to dismiss Brodie as a crank or extremist, authorities recognized that a sizable portion of the population supported his positions. People in Arizona and other states formed "America for Americans" nativist societies, based in part on the Ku Klux Klan (which itself had experienced a resurgence during the previous decade), that advocated policies and actions similar to those that Brodie preached. What he preached was mass deportation. "The way to cure a disease is to remove it's [*sic*] cause, not treat the symptoms

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<sup>207</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 42.

<sup>208</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 41 – 42.

<sup>209</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 42.

and we are treating symptoms,” he wrote to an immigration official. “The cause is Mass alien employment and mass alien indigence; the cure is...the deportation of alien indigents.”<sup>210</sup>

Many felt that Mexican immigrants were to blame for everything; they were a drain on the American economy, a threat to the American way of life, a stake in the core of the American republic. Simultaneously, Goodman notes that the Mexican state, to spur economic growth, sought to encourage southbound migration of its former residents, “announcing that it would waive duties on automobiles, appliances, and other household items, as well as provide free land and transportation from the border to those who returned.”<sup>211</sup> Consequently, as many as five hundred thousand Mexican and Mexican Americans were either deported or repatriated between 1929 and 1939.<sup>212</sup>

As earlier noted, names were often given to describe, insult, and dehumanize Mexican immigrants. One such name which arrived in the 1950s was the derogatory term “wetback,” an individual thought to have entered the U.S. by swimming in the waters of the Rio Grande.<sup>213</sup> It is also a term best understood within the larger context taking place in America during that period. On the heels of rising Mexican migration to the United States throughout the 1940s,<sup>214</sup> the environment across the country remained anti-Mexican. Many were concerned about a perceived takeover of the country. “The influx of aliens illegally entering from Mexico appears like an incoming tide with mounting waves of people entering the country, and being sent back, and returning again but in ever greater volume, and always reaching further inland with each

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<sup>210</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 42.

<sup>211</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 46.

<sup>212</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 46. Goodman notes here that while it is impossible to identifying what exactly influenced each individual’s decision, “one thing is clear: the collective efforts of local, state, and federal officials caused or contributed” to such repatriation.

<sup>213</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 48.

<sup>214</sup> This rise was due mostly in part to World War II and agreements with the U.S. government to supply labor for certain sectors of the national economy, including agriculture and the railroad construction.



incoming wave,”<sup>215</sup> Goodman, quoting a report from the Immigration Naturalization Service, wrote. Not to be outdone by the federal government, news media outlets enthusiastically joined the efforts to disparage the overwhelming tide of Mexican migration to America:

A May 1951 *LIFE* magazine article titled “Wetbacks Swarm In” noted the supposed “inexhaustible perseverance of the wetback” and concluded that because of the “patient invasion force” even the Border Patrol’s “most valiant efforts” would prove to be “exasperatingly futile.” The “wetback,” the article continued, undercut domestic wages and would never be unemployed, “because he can weed a 1,000-foot furrow without once straightening up, and he willingly works with the short-handled hoe which, so much more efficient around delicate plants, tortures American spines.”<sup>216</sup>

The role that the American media played in promulgating messages of hate and xenophobia helped drive home a perception that the Mexican migrant should be feared, a threat to the American way of life.

Migration officials across the land seized on the derogatory term of “wetback” to push their agenda and ideas forward. Attempting to justify the horrendous conditions of ships used for deportation, where Mexican migrants were subjected to overcrowding, excessive heat, poor ventilation and lack of adequate food, Navy Captain John D. Reese Jr., after he was called in to inspect the conditions of the ship *Mercurio* in 1956, described the character of the wetback:

The wetback, by and large, has never been accustomed to the necessities of life, much less luxuries.

Most wetbacks have never known what it is like to sleep in a modern bed, most of them living in the open, sleeping on the ground and living in general not much better than animals.

Many of the wetbacks are not used to such modern conveniences as wash basins and toilet facilities....the wetbacks frequently make their toilet in the wash basins, and wash their hands and face in the toilet bowls.

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<sup>215</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 48.

<sup>216</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 48.

Many wetbacks do not sleep in the same position as the average American, but squat on their haunches and bury their heads in their arms.<sup>217</sup>

In other words, “wetbacks” deserved to be treated anyway American officials deemed necessary to advance American interests.

A dark cloud had settled over the country concerning matters of Mexican migration. These “wetbacks” posed a threat, and some private citizens and organizations wanted their voice to be heard too. Goodman cites some disturbing examples on this front. Dr. Hector P. Garcia, writing to the U.S. Attorney General Herbert Brownell in 1953, wanted to “urge that whole border from California and Texas be effectively patrolled and closed to wetback invasion which is undermining our American standard of living.”<sup>218</sup> Goodman continues:

A Phoenix man suggested offering “a \$50.00 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of persons illegally in this country.” He recommended placing those apprehended in “two very large Prisoner of War camps in Arizona” (with a total capacity of around 50,000), and then sentencing them to hard labor. “If these ‘Wet-backs’ had to work one year at hard labor without being paid for it, I am quite certain that this would be a deterrent [*sic*] in so far as any new arrivals are concerned.”<sup>219</sup>

Another unsettling view and proposed action started to play out as well. “Why don’t you flood Mexico with contraceptives + birth control propaganda so there will not be so many wetbacks that want to come over to this country?” wrote a farmer from Iowa to the Attorney General.<sup>220</sup> The Mexican family – the unit which keep generations together, histories tied to one another, traditions and cultures passed on – became a target to officials and many private citizens in America. In their eyes, the Mexican family was no family at all; they were a threat.

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<sup>217</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 101.

<sup>218</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 48.

<sup>219</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 48 – 49.

<sup>220</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 49.

When families are separated, considerable damage is done which takes decades and even centuries to rebuild and repair, if it is ever rebuilt or repaired at all. In dealing with the perceived threat of Mexican migration, officials started to target the destruction and deportation of Mexican families, making sure all would be done to expel them from the country. Women and children became the most victimized. Mexican women, barred from participating in many labor agreements that the U.S. government had with Mexico, migrating to the U.S. often to reunite with relatives or in search of work themselves, in most cases arrived without authorization. Different from Mexican men who were, in many cases, deported for attempts to secure employment in the U.S., women, as Goodman suggests, were removed to “regulate morality and social boundaries. Officials distinguished between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ women and specifically singled out those they deemed prostitutes.”<sup>221</sup>

Women were separated from their children, without any regard for the lasting psychological damage such an event caused. “In February 1942,” Goodman recounts, “while detained in a Brownsville, Texas, jail, María Fernanda Prieto pleaded with authorities to reunite her with her three-year-old daughter and some of her clothes – all she had to her name. This was, she thought, ‘a request that I honestly never thought they were going to reject on humanitarian grounds.’” Speaking of María’s predicament, Goodman narrates further:

Instead, immigration officials deported her. A month later Prieto wrote to Mexican migration officials, lamenting that “neither my first efforts, nor my later begging, nor prayers while they carried out my deportation had the slightest effect on [the US] authorities.”<sup>222</sup>

Goodman chronicles further, in another disturbing example:

Something similar happened to Durango native Elena Gómez. She and her family entered the United States without authorization in 1944. Her husband died shortly thereafter, and for the next five years Gómez worked hard to provide for her five

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<sup>221</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 50.

<sup>222</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 51.

school-aged children and buy and furnish a humble home in Edinburg, Texas. One day in October 1949, US immigration officials apprehended and deported Gómez while her children were at school.<sup>223</sup>

Such illustrations are watershed moments, etched in history by their sheer unfathomability. A *mother deported while her children were at school*. No thought given to what would happen to the children when the school bell rang for dismissal and Elena was not there to retrieve them. No plan put in place to make sure her children completed their homework assignments that evening; that they ate dinner; that they went to bed on time and said their prayers. Immigration officials did not consider those things, those human things.

Operation Wetback was an attempt to control how, and what kind, of Mexican migrants could remain in the United States. The campaign was lethal in its physicality and its psychological horror. It thrived on fear, fueled by government officials and organizations alike. “It stoked and mobilized public fears that ‘wetbacks’ propagated disease, committed crimes, drained the tax base, and degraded the labor standards and living conditions of domestic workers,”<sup>224</sup> wrote Goodman. Between 1942 and 1965, over six million deportations were carried out, most to Mexico.<sup>225</sup> The objective was clear: “inflict trauma on migrants’ bodies and minds with the explicit goal of discouraging them from returning to the United States,”<sup>226</sup> wrote Goodman.

The deportation machine, as Goodman notes, continued to evolve between 1965 and 1985. While some progress was made during this time frame in efforts to improve U.S.- Mexico relations and immigration policies, the fact remained that the U.S. government held strong anti-

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<sup>223</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 51.

<sup>224</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 53.

<sup>225</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 53. Goodman notes that this was “roughly six times as many as in the previous century.”

<sup>226</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 74.

immigration policies when it came to Mexican migrants. Mexican migrants, and Mexican people in general, continued to be dehumanized. The continued attempt to prohibit Mexican migration to the country and to intensify efforts to remove those already residing inside the country fostered a climate of great activism in the 1970's and 1980's for immigration rights.<sup>227</sup>

Throughout the 1970s there were many lawsuits filed against the Immigration and Naturalization service in efforts to ensure many basic human rights for immigrants. Quoting a representative from the National Coalition for Fair Immigration Laws and Practices, Goodman writes, “Essentially we are dealing with an agency that has a fiefdom of its own, that handles people without any discretion [in] terms of their rights, and without any discretion in terms of what they are enforcing or what law they are breaking.”<sup>228</sup>

Despite the attempts by the U.S. government to restrict Mexican migration to the country, Goodman notes that Mexican migration increased during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Against this backdrop, new border and immigration enforcement ramped up. Programs such as Operation Hold the Line and Operation Gatekeeper worked behind the public view to continue massive deportation efforts across the country.<sup>229</sup> Goodman writes:

These policies had a devastating impact on migrants. First, they forced migrants to rely more heavily on coyotes, or migrant smugglers, who doubled or tripled their fees in accordance with newfound demand. Second, they increased the amount of time it took to cross the border.... Ultimately, the United States government's prevention through deterrence strategy resulted in more migrant deaths than ever before. In 1994 officers recovered the remains of twenty-three people along the California-Mexico border. Two had died of hyperthermia or heatstroke and nine of drowning. Just four years later authorities recorded 145 deaths – including sixty-eight of hypothermia or heatstroke and fifty-two

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<sup>227</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 135. In chapter five, “Fighting the Machine in the Streets and in the Courts,” Goodman offers a historical account of the many efforts to combat the U.S. government's enforcement and discriminatory efforts pertaining to Mexican communities. See this chapter for a fuller, more descriptive accounting of such work, much of which continues currently.

<sup>228</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 157.

<sup>229</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 175.

drowning – along that same stretch, although the actual number was certainly higher, since agents never found some of the dead.<sup>230</sup>

By all accounts, there was a substantial price to pay if one wanted what America supposedly offered: *freedom*. The terrible caveat – within an American caste system – was that that price continued to be exacted from those on the lower rungs of the racial hierarchy.

## **TAKE THE SHACKLES OFF**

The history of U.S. immigrant policy and practice was brutal and dehumanizing long before Donald Trump’s meeting with border officials that May of 2018. As we have sought to narrate, the deportation machine in America has been alive and well, not contracting in its cruelty and pure viciousness over the past few decades. It has survived and thrived under many Republican and Democratic administrations, evidence that it is a fixture in American society and identity. Mostly out of public view, the machine operates behind the scenes, only front and center to those on the front lines, fighting for the rights of immigrants. However, when Trump was a candidate for the highest office, he ran on a promise to get tougher on immigration, to restrict entry into the country, to build a 2,000 – mile wall on the southern border, and to make Mexico pay for it. This was central to his effort to “Make America Great Again.”

He got to work immediately. In Trump’s first week in office, he signed several significant executive orders, including hiring an additional 10,000 ICE officers and 5,000 Border Patrol agents, and an executive order barring immigration to the country from seven Muslim countries.<sup>231</sup> The latter act came to be known as the Muslim Ban, and Trump later described countries included in that ban as “shithole countries.” Emboldened by his newfound authority,

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<sup>230</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 175.

<sup>231</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 198.

Trump vowed to publish a weekly list of crimes committed by immigrants and promised punishment for those “who facilitate their presence in the United States.”<sup>232</sup> He took other actions, including limiting the number of refugees seeking asylum in the U.S., as his administration officials “gummed up the vetting process, suspended the federal refugee resettlement program, and rewrote the rules to exclude victims of gang violence and domestic violence.”<sup>233</sup> For Trump, it was war on immigration. The president, his press secretary said, “wanted to take the shackles off” border agents.<sup>234</sup>

The shackles would indeed come off during the late spring of 2018 as a renewed effort began to combat migration from Latin American countries, referred to as the “Zero Tolerance” policy. At the direction of Trump, Attorney General Jeff Sessions said that the federal government would criminally charge anyone caught illegally entering the country. Prosecutors across the United States gleefully charged migrants for crimes, and some migrants who had been apprehended previously now faced felony counts with stiffer penalties, such as a lifetime ban from entering the United States. Many migrants discovered that the land of the free and the home of the brave was a myth.

Unsatisfied with the threat of apprehension and more severe penalties, another facet of the administration’s zero tolerance policy would be enacted, one which was more dehumanizing: the forced separation of migrant parents from their children. “We need to take away children,”<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> “Executive Order 13767: Border Security and Immigration Enforcement Improvements,” *Federal Register, Presidential Documents*, January 30, 2017, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2017-01-30/pdf/2017-02095.pdf>.

<sup>233</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 200.

<sup>234</sup> “White House Daily Briefing,” *C-Span*, video, 58:54, February 21, 2017, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?424360-1/sean-spicer-briefs-reporters-white-house>.

<sup>235</sup> Michael D. Shear, Katie Benner, and Michael S. Schmidt, “We Need To Take Away Children, No Matter How Young, Justice Dept. Officials Said,” *The New York Times*, updated October 21, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/06/us/politics/family-separation-border-immigration-jeff-sessions-rod-rosenstein.html?referringSource=articleShare>.

Jeff Session quipped, an effort to deter potential future migration.<sup>236</sup> According to a recent *New York Times* article, Rod Rosenstein, the deputy attorney general at the time, wanted to push the envelope even further, telling the government lawyers that “it did not matter how young the children were.”<sup>237</sup> The administration got to work expeditiously, adding premium fuel to the deportation machine along with a fresh oil change. The U.S. Customs and Border Patrol posted warning on its website to all potential Mexican and Central American migrants:

The risks of crossing the Rio Grande and desert terrain, or hiding in stash houses or tractor trailers, are high for adults and even more deeply concerning for children. Individuals who seek to enter the United States should do so at ports of entry.

The Attorney General directed United States Attorneys on the Southwest Border to prosecute all amenable adults who illegally enter the country, including those accompanied by their children, for 8 U.S.C. § 1325(a), illegal entry.

Children whose parents are referred for prosecution will be placed with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR).<sup>238</sup>

Goodman notes that “between October 2017 and May 2018, the Trump administration separated more than 1,350 children from their parents, ‘including more than 100 children under the age of four.’ DHS [Department of Homeland Security] took another 2,300-plus kids from their parents between then and June 20, 2018.”<sup>239</sup>

America’s war on immigration consisted of a war on children too, and the trauma instilled on these children created lasting damage. “The American Academy of Pediatrics,” wrote Goodman, “warned that the family separation policy would cause irreparable harm.”<sup>240</sup> While

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<sup>236</sup> Significantly, as noted earlier in chapter, family separations were not a new tactic used by the federal government. This method had been in place throughout American history for exerting power and enforcing measures for social control.

<sup>237</sup> Michael D. Shear, Katie Benner, and Michael S. Schmidt, “Children.”

<sup>238</sup> “Zero Tolerance Immigration Prosecutions – Family Fact Sheet,” U.S. Customs and Border Protection, modified June 15, 2018, <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/zero-tolerance-immigration-prosecutions-family-fact-sheet>.

<sup>239</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 201.

<sup>240</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 201.



some government officials decried the chorus of criticism coming their way as being overblown and not rooted in what was actually occurring on the ground, saying the separated children were treated well, as “like a summer camp,” what was happening was far removed from good summer fun. The suffering of children in many detention centers took on the form and contours of the Antebellum South. “Photographs showed kids in cages and leaked audio revealed their desperate, inconsolable cries for ‘Mami,’ and ‘Papá,’<sup>241</sup> wrote Goodman. Detained children were treated like prisoners of war:

At one facility near the Mexican border in South Texas, kids woke up at dawn and proceeded to clean the bathroom, including scrubbing the toilet, before eating breakfast and going on to have some schooling. The rules included no running, no sitting on the floor, no sharing food, and no touching other children, “even if that child is your hermanito or hermanita – your little brother or sister.” DHS held some 250 kids and teens at a remote Border Patrol station in Clint, Texas, without adequate food, water, or sanitation. Some of the children had been there for weeks, without showering or changing clothes, even though government regulations require immigration officials to transfer them to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) within seventy-two hours. And at federally funded immigration shelters in Chicago where authorities held minors for months, some tried to escape, undertook hunger strikes, and even contemplated suicide. Between fall 2018 and spring 2019, six children died in federal custody.<sup>242</sup>

The most saddening aspect of war are casualties, the lives lost, the futures never seen, the surviving family members left alone to grieve. When a migrant child dies as a casualty of war – war based on an artificial measure of who belongs in America and who does not – we must pause to deeply consider how America can willingly cage and brutalize kids even if it means protecting and perpetuating its own self-interest.

## **THE UTERUS COLLECTOR**

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<sup>241</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 201.

<sup>242</sup> Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 202.

The dehumanization of immigrants, specifically those of Latin American decent, has led to severe, major human rights violations. Noted above are developments of major concern for which, at the time of this writing, has led to ongoing investigations across various agencies. If ripping breastfeeding children from mothers, or starving detainees so that they die of hunger, or physically and verbally abusing those housed in detention facilities are actions of a supposedly just nation, then a deeper and more complete assessment of the nation's principles and policies should be pursued. There is no national conscience to speak of, as many Americans find themselves detached from such heinous acts of violence and treachery committed by American government officials, desensitized from the pain and suffering of humanity. As many Americans enjoy the American lifestyle, in well-tended neighborhoods where schools are adequately funded and toxins from nearby chemical plants are nonexistent, there are locales in America where immigrants are kept, where those who are being housed find little respect for their humanity. Another chilling example is fitting here.

Irwin County Detention Center (ICDC), located in Ocilla, Georgia, is not known to most people. While it boasts a mission of serving the community by “operating safe and secure facilities with integrity and family values, providing rehabilitation, training, and community re-entry programs to the men and women in our care, while treating them with dignity and professionalism,”<sup>243</sup> it recently found itself in the middle of a federal investigation. In September 2020, reports began to surface that mass hysterectomies were being performed on immigrant women who were being detained at the facility. On September 19, 2020, members of the U.S. Congress, led by Pramila Jayapal, sent a letter to the Department of Homeland Security asking that they “open an investigation to thoroughly examine allegations raised by whistleblower

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<sup>243</sup> “Our Mission,” *LaSalle Corrections*, accessed January 30, 2021, <https://lasallecorrections.com/our-mission/>.

Dawn Wooten and immigrants currently and formerly detained in the ICDC.”<sup>244</sup> The letter, citing recent complaints filed by the whistleblower and other detainers, recounted the account of one immigrant who said she knew of five women who had hysterectomies during the last three months of 2019. “This woman,” the letter read, “likened the facility to ‘an experimental concentration camp,’” and referred to the doctor performing the surgeries as “the uterus collector.”

Notably, there was also major concern that these hysterectomies performed on these immigrant women were done without informed consent. According to the letter, citing reports from the same whistleblower, there were claims that “several women who had hysterectomies did not know why they even went to the doctor.” Referencing the whistleblower, the letter continues:

Further, she reports that the language line was not consistently used by medical staff and some nurses attempted to communicate with the Spanish-speaking detained women using Google or asking other detained immigrants to interpret. One immigrant woman explained her experience receiving three different explanations as to why she was going to have a hysterectomy, and she said that she “felt like they were trying to mess with my body.” She reports that a nurse became angry and yelled at her for expressing that she thought the procedure was not appropriate for her.<sup>245</sup>

When you are viewed and defined as an animal, your body does not belong to you. As we have seen, this too is one of the pillars of the American caste system. Hence, when Trump labels immigrants as animals, when his rhetoric speaks of others as unhuman, it gives permission to his supporters and many others throughout the country to act and do as they please without fear of consequence. Being named as an animal is lacking mere human value in the eyes of some, robbed of individuality and identity, torn asunder by the dogged unwillingness of others to treat

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<sup>244</sup> Pramila Jayapal, “Letter to Inspector General of Homeland Security,” *Congress of the United States*, September 15, 2020, [DHS-IG-FINAL.pdf \(house.gov\)](#).

<sup>245</sup> Pramila Jayapal, “Letter.”

you with a sense of dignity, of mutual respect. Animals do not have rights. They are treated as if their bodies do not belong to them. They have nothing to call their own. Once you are called an animal, chastened as an animal, caged like an animal, even your own children do not belong to you.

## **CONCLUSION**

As this chapter has sought to demonstrate, the labeling of migrants as animals, the stoking of fears of their arrival, the attempt to dehumanize and devalue them by the use of harsh rhetoric culminating to mistreatment, is another episode in the long history in America of affirming and welcoming those who fit the dominate group's system and artificial ranking while minimizing those who are deemed unwelcomed. And as we have noted, this is not a new phenomenon; it is rather, sadly, a direct continuation of a concerted attempt to keep certain people out of this country, away from the very ideals this country espouses. The system works, undeterred, because of the power of rhetoric, both written and verbal, used to motivate and persuade the actions of hearers. From presidential speeches, media coverage, and government directives, rhetoric has the capacity to form and shape cultural, political, and religious identity, and left unchecked, often leads to dangerous ends. Immigration is a lens through which we can see that dynamic played out most clearly. However, we are still left with the challenge of exploring in a much deeper way the role and function of rhetoric, its influence on human behavior, and most pertinently for our purposes, how it is to be understood and practiced as part of Christian identity.

**PART THREE**

**REDISCOVERY**

## Chapter V – Wisdom

On Tuesday, December 8, 2020, during a state health board meeting in Idaho called to discuss the possible imposition of stronger public health measures guidelines in the county, Diana Lachiondo, the county commissioner, suddenly and tearfully excused herself. She had just received news that stunned her. “My 12-year-old son is home by himself right now and there are protestors banging outside the door. I’m going to go home and make sure he’s okay,” she said.<sup>246</sup> Visibly distraught, she exited the meeting and rushed home.

That same night, the Arizona GOP reposted a startling twitter post by a right-wing activist which included an image of a man with the arrow of a bow pointed directly between his eyes. Below the image, it read “willing to give up my life for this fight.” The Arizona GOP retweeted this message, adding, about the tweets original author, “He is. Are you?”<sup>247</sup> The next morning, amid rising tensions across the country reaching a boiling point, Donald Trump tweeted “We will soon be learning about the word courage and saving our country.”<sup>248</sup>

Clint Watts, former national security analyst, told Nicolle Wallace, host of “Deadline: White House” on MSNBC during the show on December 9, 2020, that there “Weird currents are in the country. And I don’t know how this ends without violence and death.”<sup>249</sup> He continued by offering a stark warning:

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<sup>246</sup> Katie Shephard, “An Idaho Official Left a Meeting in Tears as Anti-Maskers Swarmed Her Home,” *The Washington Post*, December 9, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/12/09/idaho-coronavirus-protest-homes/>.

<sup>247</sup> Oma Seddiq and Jake Lahut, “The Arizona GOP Asks Supporters if They Are Willing to Die to Overturn Trump’s Election Loss,” *Business Insider*, December 8, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/arizona-gop-tweet-asks-if-supporters-would-die-overturn-election-2020-12>.

<sup>248</sup> Donald Trump (@realdonaldtrump), Twitter, account suspended January 8, 2021, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1336691515398250498?s=20>.

<sup>249</sup> “Deadline: Whitehouse,” YouTube video, 7:04, posted by MSNBC, December 9, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5C-y5j4I9bk>.

We could have this kick off and domino effect, over the next couple weeks and even couple months. To be honest, my biggest worry is post-inauguration, when Trump is not president, we now have extremists out there, they are plotting and planning. There are no targets for them cause it's COVID-19. That's part of it right now. We're all at home. So there is a very limited number of ways they can attack. I'm worried about the Timothy McVeigh, the Eric Rudolph types, going back to the nineties, those case studies. What's the summer of 2021 going to look like if we continue with this sort of rhetoric and polarization in this country.<sup>250</sup>

A taste came, shamefully, on January 6, 2021, a day that will live on in infamy, the course of events becoming another stain in American history. It began with a rally near the White House, a so-called "Save America" rally. Context is necessary here. For the prior two months, Trump had been leading a repeatedly disproven claim that the 2020 presidential election was stolen from him. Trump invited his supporters to the event, saying "Big protest in D.C. on January 6<sup>th</sup>. Be there, will be wild."<sup>251</sup> Like most if not all of his prior positions and thoughts, he took to social media to advertise this protest on the day that the U.S. Congress was set to officially certify the electoral results of the fifty states, a mere procedural formality mandated by the U.S. Constitution. While Congress began their proceedings, Trump told the crowd gathered near the White House:

Our country has had enough. We will not take it anymore and that's what this is all about. To use a favorite term that all of you people really came up with, we will stop the steal....We're gathered together in the heart of our nation's Capitol for one very, very basic and simple reason, to save our democracy....They've used the pandemic as a way of defrauding the people in a proper election.

The weak Republicans, they're pathetic Republicans and that's what happens. If this happened to the Democrats, there'd be hell all over the country going on. There'd be hell all over the country. But just remember this. You're stronger, you're smarter. You've got more going than anybody, and they try and demean everybody having to do with us, and you're the real people. You're the people that built this nation. You're not the people that tore down our nation.

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<sup>250</sup> "Deadline: Whitehouse."

<sup>251</sup> Dan Berry and Sheera Frenkel, "Be There. Will Be Wild! Trump All But Circled The Date," *The New York Times*, updated January 8, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/06/us/politics/capitol-mob-trump-supporters.html>.

We're going to have to fight much harder and Mike Pence is going to have to come through for us. If he doesn't, that will be a sad day for our country because you're sworn to uphold our constitution. Now it is up to Congress to confront this egregious assault on our democracy. After this, we're going to walk down and I'll be there with you. We're going to walk down. We're going to walk down any one you want, but I think right here. We're going walk down to the Capitol, and we're going to cheer on our brave senators, and congressmen and women. We're probably not going to be cheering so much for some of them because you'll never take back our country with weakness. You have to show strength, and you have to be strong.

The Republicans have to get tougher. You're not going to have a Republican party if you don't get tougher.... So I hope Mike has the courage to do what he has to do. And I hope he doesn't listen to the RINOs and the stupid people that he's listening to.

We did a great job in (sic) the wall. Remember the wall? They said it could never be done. One of the largest infrastructure projects we've ever had in this country and it's had a tremendous impact and we got rid of catch and release, we got rid of all of the stuff that we had to live with. But now the caravans, they think Biden's getting in, the caravans are forming again. They want to come in again and rip off our country. Can't let it happen.

So we're going to, we're going to walk down Pennsylvania Avenue, I love Pennsylvania Avenue, and we're going to the Capitol and we're going to try and give....The Democrats are hopeless. They're never voting for anything, not even one vote. But we're going to try and give our Republicans, the weak ones, because the strong ones don't need any of our help, we're going to try and give them the kind of pride and boldness that they need to take back our country.<sup>252</sup>

The events of that day were the consequence of a long and deliberate effort by Donald Trump to use rhetoric to incite his followers to behave in ways contrary to what many would consider reasonable actions. Here we have a quintessential case study of how rhetoric is used dangerously to bring utmost damage, of why rhetoric matters. It is helpful to understand the stark differences and dangers of such rhetoric by comparing it with rhetoric used by one of the nation's leaders

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<sup>252</sup> Donald Trump, "Donald Trump Speech 'Save America' Rally Transcript January 6," *REV*, January 6, 2021, <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-speech-save-america-rally-transcript-january-6>.



who was more mindful and purposeful concerning the power of rhetoric to influence and inspire human behavior.

## **DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.**

On January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2021 two days before Trump's tenure as president concluded, the nation celebrated the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Given the climate of the nation at this moment in time, a quick summary of Dr. King's life and work contributions is particularly instructive. Dr. King was a person who had the ability to carefully examine the contours and complexities of the American landscape and identity, its unique place as a melting pot of diversity, place them within the context of the Holy Scriptures, and provide a carefully framed social gospel message rooted in the foundations of authentic Christianity. He was born January 15, 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia, to a Baptist preacher named Martin Luther King Sr. and a mother named Alberta Williams King. He was a son of the American South, raised in the black church tradition, inspired by the likes of Walter Rauschenbusch, Reinhold Niebuhr, Mahatma Ghandi, and Howard Thurman.<sup>253</sup> A graduate of Morehouse College, Crozer Seminary, and Boston University, Dr. King was a bona-fide intellectual, having earned his academic chops. His destiny guided him to be the leader of the famed Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Inspired by non-violence as the most Christian-based and efficacious method for social, political, and economic change, Dr. King led a social activist movement, joined by hundreds of thousands of people, marching and demonstrating peacefully across the country for positive change.

Dr. King was also an esteemed pastor. Pastors are relied upon most notably to preach, to communicate, to bring the Word of God. For Dr. King, preaching was so powerful because the

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<sup>253</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., edited by Clayborne Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 1998).

preaching moment possessed the capacity to utilize rhetoric to foster change, a new conscience of sorts. In his sermons, speeches and writings, King exhaustively spoke of social equality and justice for all, repeatedly casting a vision of brotherhood and sisterhood, what he framed as the “single garment of destiny.” In a speech he delivered at the National Cathedral of March 31, 1968, he said:

Through our scientific and technological genius, we have made of this world a neighborhood and yet we have not had the ethical commitment to make of it a brotherhood. But somehow, and in some way, we have got to do this. We must all learn to live together as brothers or we will all perish together as fools. We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the way God’s universe is made; this is the way it is structured.<sup>254</sup>

He called on people of conscience, of every race and creed, to recognize their interconnectedness, their common humanity, their sameness, their similar concerns of living together in mutual respect. King saw that human potential was inextricably tied together, that one could not become all they could be until all had the same chance, the same opportunity to chase dreams and pursue freedom.

Another theme King espoused throughout his many speeches and writings was that of a love ethic. So interwoven was the theme of love throughout King’s theological and philosophical framework that it becomes inseparable from every aspect of his preaching and teaching. Seeing love as a fundamental, non-negotiable precept of the true gospel of Jesus Christ, King lifted the perplexing question that if one does not love all people, how could they possibly call themselves Christian.

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<sup>254</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution,” King Papers, *Stanford University*, accessed January 18, 2021, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/publications/knock-midnight-inspiration-great-sermons-reverend-martin-luther-king-jr-10>.

Then the Greek language comes out with another word which is called the *agape*. *Agape* is more than romantic love, *agape* is more than friendship. *Agape* is understanding, creative, redemptive, good will to all men. It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. Theologians would say that it is the love of God operating in the human heart. So that when one rises to love on this level, he loves men not because he likes them, not because their ways appeal to him, but he loves every man because God loves him. And he rises to the point of loving the person who does an evil deed while hating the deed that the person does.<sup>255</sup>

Hate, bigotry, and attempts to divide and dehumanize people from their God-given potential were unjustified in the context of a close exposition of Scripture seen through the lens of Christ. King's messages of unity, humanity, love, and of allowing our hearts and our intellect to frame our social existence were so powerful that it inspired a great shift in the country. King's work would prove critically instrumental in the passing of the Civil Rights Acts and the Voting Rights Act, and it also awakened the national conscience to a large degree. Both King and Trump used rhetoric for very different purposes.

King shows us Christian rhetoric at its very best. While few of us have his same gifts, all who claim to be Christian are called to use our words in ways which align with both the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is thus troubling when divisive rhetoric emanates from those claiming an allegiance to Christ. Most white evangelical Christians have been devoted followers of Trump, with some claiming that he was akin to a second coming of Christ.<sup>256</sup> These Trump supporters thus dangerously conflate Trump's words and actions with words and the actions of these participants to what they perceive to be words and actions exhibited by Jesus Christ and expected of the Christian life. Such an approach cannot be farther from the truth. Following Jesus Christ, as attested by the historic teachings of the church, requires an authentic effort to be

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<sup>255</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., edited by James M. Washington, *The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 46-47.

<sup>256</sup> Jay Louder, "I'm an Evangelist and a Trump Voter. But Trump as the 'Second Coming of God' is Blasphemous," *The Washington Post*, August 22, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/08/22/im-an-evangelist-trump-voter-trump-second-coming-god-is-blasphemous/>.

guided by the Holy Scriptures and the Christian community. The rhetoric spoken by and for Christians and the actions taken by and on behalf of Christians must then, by nature and necessity, correlate with what God has provided to God's people by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Said simply, true Christian rhetoric must be carefully informed by wisdom.

## **ST. AUGUSTINE AND AMANDA GORMAN: THE ROLE OF RHETORIC**

One of the most prominent church figures throughout history is St. Augustine. The son of a pagan father named Patricius and a Berber Christian mother named Monica, Aurelius Augustinus (Augustine) was born November 13, 354 in Thagaste, within the region of Numidia in North Africa. Born into a family that was relatively indigent, Augustine was privileged to have a mother who made incredible sacrifices to ensure her son received a classical Latin education. At age 12, Augustine would go on to study rhetoric at Madaura, as a strong command of persuasive speech and language was foundational to a career in law or public life. Well before his time as priest and bishop, Augustine knew the reach and power of rhetoric.

In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine defines rhetoric as “being the art of persuading people to accept something, whether it is true or false.”<sup>257</sup> It is the ability, writes Augustine, to lead “people either along straight or along crooked ways.”<sup>258</sup> Writing to the early church, Augustine sought to elevate the role rhetoric played within in the church, asking “why the sophists should brandish their rhetorical artillery while Christians stand unarmed.”<sup>259</sup> For Augustine, rhetoric was necessary because it was a truly human form of expression, and it was how ideas were exchanged, debates were raged, and, for the Christian church, how the gospel

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<sup>257</sup>Richard Lischer, *The Company of Preachers: Wisdom On Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 278.

<sup>258</sup> Lischer, *Preaching*, 278.

<sup>259</sup> Lischer, *Preaching*, 277.

was preached. Rhetoric could not possibly take a back seat in Augustine’s viewpoint. It needed to be front and center, examined and cultivated, tweaked and revised: “Why should good [Christian] men not study to acquire the art, so that it may fight for the truth, if bad [unchristian] men can prostitute it to the winning of their vain and misguided cases in the service of iniquity and error?”<sup>260</sup> For Augustine, there were three functions of eloquence – rhetoric done and said rightly – which are: to teach, to delight, and to sway. Augustine writes, “An eloquent man once said, you see, and what he said was true, that to be eloquent you should speak ‘so as to teach, to delight, to sway.’ Then he added, ‘Teaching your audience is a matter of necessity, delighting them a matter of being agreeable, swaying them a matter of victory.’”<sup>261</sup> For Augustine, rhetoric mattered, because it had the power to uplift the mind and heart, to share the Gospel message in ways which aligned to the life and teachings of Christ.

Amanda Gorman was mostly unknown before Joe Biden’s inauguration on January 20, 2021. The stunningly confident twenty-two-year-old hailed from Los Angeles, California, and was a recent graduate of Harvard University. She also happened to be the first National Youth Poet Laureate. She had an acute familiarity with the power of rhetoric to influence, to change, to inspire, and to convict. In her poem entitled “The Hill We Climb,”<sup>262</sup> she sought to cast a vision for a brighter future. The following are some excerpts:

*And so we lift our gaze not on what stands between us,  
but what stands before us...*

*We lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another...*

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<sup>260</sup> Lischer, *Preaching*, 277.

<sup>261</sup> Lischer, *Preaching*, 284.

<sup>262</sup> Julio Barajas, “Watch and Read L.A. Native Amanda Gorman’s Inauguration Day Poem,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 20, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2021-01-20/watch-and-read-amanda-gormans-inauguration-day-poem>.

*We seek harm to none and harmony for all...  
Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true:  
That even as we grieved, we grew.  
That even as we hurt, we hoped,  
That even as we tired, we tried...  
That is the promised glade,  
The hill we climb if only we dare it.  
Because being American is more than a pride we inherit,  
It's the past we step into and how we repair it.  
Our people, diverse and beautiful,  
Will emerge battered and beautiful.  
When day comes we step out of the shade,  
Aflame and unafraid.  
The new dawn blooms as we free it.  
For there is always light if only we're brave enough to see it,  
If only we're brave enough to be it.<sup>263</sup>*

Amanda recognized the power and potential of rhetoric to influence behavior, to shape, form, and reform the imagination. Two weeks since the day Trump gave his remarks at the “Save America” rally, Amanda sought to use her rhetoric to close divides, not widen them; to build bridges across communities, instead of destroying them; to appeal to our common hopes and dreams, rather than diminish them. Wise words mattered more than ever before.

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<sup>263</sup> Julio Barajas, “Amanda Gorman.”

## WISE SPEECH: THE WISDOM OF THE SAGES

The Scriptures, themselves, consist of words, language, rhetoric. For Christians, they are the inspired Word of God, given to humanity through the leading and guiding of the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures, in the words of Dr. Ellen Davis, “is God’s love story,”<sup>264</sup> narrating for us the extent of humanity’s brokenness but also the extent of God’s graciousness. Word’s matter to God, exhibited further in the creation story itself. “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep....Then God *said*,” (Gen. 1:1-3). The creation of the world, the universe, the heavens, the earth, and humankind were the result of God’s Word working. “Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done,” (Gen. 2:1-3). God pays attention to words and, as grandmaster of words, created the universe by the spoken Word. Even before humanity had begun to experience life and the pursuit of human flourishing, God had given a precedence: words matter and they have power!

The Book of Proverbs is a beautiful compilation of collections and wise sayings. Once attributed to King Solomon, scholars now ascribe most of the sayings to be the work of sages, “a social class that served as counselors, bureaucrats, and teachers during the divided kingdom and as preservers of tradition in the later period.”<sup>265</sup> Together, the sayings then represent those of the “intellectual elite,” the wise ones. As one scholar notes, the book in its entirety was likely designed to provide instructions to youth about how to “cope with life through observations, docility, and fear of the Lord.”<sup>266</sup> Proverbs also deals with navigating forces “of life and death”

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<sup>264</sup> As a former student of Dr. Ellen Davis this quote was derived from a lecture given by Dr. Davis during the Fall 2018 cohort intensive week.

<sup>265</sup> *Harper Collins Study Bible* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1993), 938.

<sup>266</sup> Paul J. Achtemeier, *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1996), 890.

for Israel's flourishing. Additionally, the writer of Proverbs recognizes that words are powerful and because of their innate power, we need help in discerning how to use them. For the purposes of this chapter, we will consider a few timely proverbs that show us how important wisdom is for our flourishing and how wisdom should guide our speech.

### **FEAR OF THE LORD – Proverbs 1:7**

*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.*

The Proverbial writer offers this first instruction at the very beginning of this work, an omen for many things to come. The first part “fear of the Lord,” calls for our attention here. It requires that we read more closely, with a greater level of intentionality, in search of a deeper understanding. It seems that the writer appears to know that humanity has a proclivity to search many different avenues to acquire knowledge. Perhaps humanity's search leads toward scientific and technological discovery, or in America's case, the expansion of territory, the search for security and material well-being, the knowledge of how to acquire and maintain riches. The writer of Proverbs counters such a search by suggesting that it is the fear of the Lord that is beginning of knowledge. Ellen Davis points out helpfully that modern interpreters of this text observe that fear in this sense does not refer to a certain terror, as in being terrified of the Lord. Instead, it is to hold the Lord in awe, in reverence. However, such a recognition should be tempered a bit, Davis points out. A healthy fear of God, a healthy fear of God's innate power and authority, is warranted, often mandated. “Indeed, to experience the full measure of God's power and *not* to feel some stirring of fear would indicate a profound state of spiritual numbness, if not acute mental illness.”<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Davis, Ellen F. *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 28.



In thinking through the form and the shape of our rhetoric, we must begin not with a focus on communication, but on listening, which ultimately should transfer directly into obedience. Listening to God means silencing ourselves, placing us in a position to spiritually connect with God. If communication is so fundamental to the human experience, necessary for the exchange of culture, information, and traditions, so to, in equal measure, should be the form and practice of listening.

Further, Davis notes in her commentary that proper fear of the Lord compels us to view and understand God as our proper moral authority. God sets the rules, and all human attempts at governing social relationships apart from God's principles fall short. Fear of the Lord implies "recognition of God's moral authority, recognition that shapes the believer's moral character and ultimately leads to pervasive commitment of one's life," Davis suggests.<sup>268</sup> "More accurately," she argues, "it involves developing the habit of making choices that do not reflect our own self-interest or the mood of the moment. Acting in accordance with our proper fear of the Lord means putting God's preferences before our own."<sup>269</sup> This, the Scripture affirms, is called humility, subordinating one's own priorities to the priorities of God Almighty. Such an action grants one the ability, Davis opines, to "choose what God prefers, not because they are goody-goodies or without will of their own, but because, unlike Pharaoh, they have the grace (literally) to see that the consequences of choosing otherwise are inevitably bad."<sup>270</sup> The wisdom writer then points out to people of God that all knowledge begins with a fear of the Lord, a holy reverence of God, and that recognition should cause one to cultivate a deep humility, an acceptance of their own fallibility. Further, it is this fear of the Lord, which, Davis contends, is linked with humility on

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<sup>268</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 28.

<sup>269</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 28.

<sup>270</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 28.

the one end, and hatred of evil on the other end, as it is impossible to hold a healthy fear of the Lord while feeling nourished or indifferent about the reality and actions of evil.<sup>271</sup>

The writer of Proverbs helps us discern that true knowledge, the kind which should inform rhetoric in both its written and verbal forms, should be undergirded by a healthy fear of the Lord and a revulsion of evil. Such rhetoric should immerge from a place of deep humility, of love, of kindness, of grace, worthy to be connected in some form to the Lord.

### **CONSTRUCTIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE CRITICISM – Proverbs 10:10**

*“Whoever winks the eye causes trouble, but the one who rebukes boldly makes peace.”*

The winking of the eye can often seem like a very innocent maneuver, small and blameless. The adolescent male may find winking of the eye an effective flirtatious device that could be discreetly deployed during science class. The parent may find winking of the eye necessary to provide encouragement to their child before the soccer game. On the surface, eye winks may appear harmless. There is also, though, a different lens through which one could view the winking of the eye: it can often be used for mischief, for demonstrating support of a rotten endeavor, as a silent nod of approval for perhaps a rumor being spread. In some ways, the winking of an eye in this negative sense is akin to the spread of conspiracy theories or appealing to a reality based on suspicion instead of fact. While appearing innocent, a small wink of an eye can pose dangers of great consequence.

The writer of Proverbs demonstrates here the contrast between the criticism offered in the open and criticism promulgated undisclosed. More pointedly, “This proverb draws a contrast between open criticism and a contemptuous gesture made behind a person’s back.”<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 28.

<sup>272</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 75.

Underscoring this proverb is a shared sense by the sages of a clear benefit of reproof, of correction, as Davis points out.<sup>273</sup> The sages, the wise ones, recognize that for a person to operate to the fullest extent of wisdom, blossoming into their potential and the fullest portion of individuality and social interactions, requires the ability to both receive and give criticism. The Proverbs, then, Davis contends, “are not addressed to fragile egos who cannot accept correction. The stock character, the fool, is someone who will not seriously consider the possibility of being wrong. The wise person, on the other hand, takes reproof to heart. . . .”<sup>274</sup> It takes a strong person, a wise person, suggests the writer of Proverbs, to receive criticism without overreacting, lashing out, trying to get even, or demonizing the one who offered criticism. On April 23, 2020, when a reporter asked President Trump a question about a report from his administration that said the coronavirus could be suppressed by heat and humidity, Trump countered, “You are fake news!”<sup>275</sup> In another instance, one month prior, a reporter asked Trump if he had any words of encouragement to the Americans concerned about the rapid spread of the coronavirus, to which Trump replied, “I say you are a terrible reporter – that’s what I say. Very nasty.”<sup>276</sup> For the writer of Proverbs, the wise person can receive criticism and not overreact. And, as Davis suggests, there is an element of beauty in the criticism itself.<sup>277</sup> Criticism forces one to dig deeper, explore the contours of their decision-making process, evaluating influences both perceived and tangible.

The writer of Proverbs offers too that one cannot ignore the place from which criticism is leveled, or said another way, the motivations of the one offering the criticism. Drawing upon the

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<sup>273</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 75.

<sup>274</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 75.

<sup>275</sup> J. Edward Moreno, “Trump Hits CNN and Washington Post Reporters as ‘Fake News’ During Briefing,” *The Hill*, April 23, 2020, <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/494426-trump-hits-cnn-and-washington-post-reporters-as-fake-news-during>.

<sup>276</sup> Natalie Colarossi, “11 Times Trump has Lashed Out at Reporters and Called Them ‘Nasty’ During His Coronavirus Press Briefing,” *Business Insider*, May 13, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-lashes-out-at-reporters-during-coronavirus-press-briefings-2020-4>.

<sup>277</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 75.

Proverb here, Davis suggests that “the manner in which criticism is offered it itself a test of wisdom. ‘A wise rebuke’ aims at peace, that is, at continued goodwill between two parties, but also at the well-being of the larger community.”<sup>278</sup> There is then both an individualized, social benefit to criticism, and a larger communal benefit to criticism. Executed with wisdom, which is to say, if criticism is written or spoken in wisdom, it benefits the one offering the criticism and the one receiving the criticism. “It is probably fair to say that we are only fully in community with those to whom we dare to offer criticism and from whom we are willing to receive it,”<sup>279</sup> says Davis. The objective of peace allows for a cordial interchange between these two parties. Further, there is a communal benefit to their exchange as well, as it creates for an environment of mutual respect, genuine warmth, and a sense of empathy and compassion. A powerful message is sent to the larger community when criticism can be offered and received without a need for retribution of sorts; a genuine desire to exhibit godliness, led of course, by wisdom.

Significantly, criticism which aims towards peace, and, by extension, forms of reconciliation, “is difficult and time consuming. It costs something to the person who offers it,”<sup>280</sup> says Davis. In contrast to the easy wink, criticism which has at its basis an attempt to uplift and improve a situation or a circumstance, requires real and sustained effort, a level of intentionality and deep determination. The flirtatious adolescent becomes more effective with conversation. The writer of Proverbs makes clear that criticism, like conversation, is more effective when done boldly. It is also important for us to acknowledge here too that there is a big difference between criticism that dehumanizes and one that aims at true peace. While Trump and many of his supporters might think they are “rebuking boldly” when they engage in name

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<sup>278</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 76.

<sup>279</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 76.

<sup>280</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 76.

calling, their aims are not to heal but to destroy, not to reconcile but to demean. Their true objective is not to secure peace but inflame tensions. Criticism of this kind falls terribly short of what the writer of Proverbs intends to convey.

#### **HEALING SPEECH – Proverbs 15:4**

*“A gentle tongue is a tree of life but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.”*

The writer of Proverbs, infused with wisdom, cautions hearers to take instruction of the power and potential of speech. There is a direct connection between wisdom and speech, one’s thoughts manifesting as one’s speech. In the case of this proverb, its beginning should be translated “a healing tongue,”<sup>281</sup> as Davis wonderfully points out by referring to the original Hebrew text. At the outset, the writer of Proverbs provides a linkage between speech that heals and the imagery of the Garden of Eden. The Garden of Eden for us symbolizes God’s perfect beauty, creation at its finest hour, and then, suddenly, creation at its worst hour. By incorporating the image of Eden here, the “inference would seem to be that wise speaking points the way back to Eden,”<sup>282</sup> says Davis. Davis continues, “More than any other sphere of human activity, speaking has the potential to effect healing at the deepest level. It is a tree of life; it restores us to the condition of harmony with God and our fellow creatures for which we were made.”<sup>283</sup> However, like the Eden context, speaking has the potential to inflict suffering. It was the serpent’s speech, his way with words, his craftiness, his substance, that proved sufficient to sway the minds and hearts of Adam and Eve and get them to disobey the command of God. Speech heals but it can also hurt.

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<sup>281</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 96.

<sup>282</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 97.

<sup>283</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 97.

The writer of Proverbs recognizes the potential of speech and instructs hearers in the first case to the use speech in ways which heal. Understood this way, speech is a balm. It functions less like a bandage and more like sutures tying together areas which were once separated and will now bond together again. Underneath the surface, the areas which have been ravaged unexpectedly by a penetrating force, now have opportunity for new life. Speech creates a place of solitude, of rest, or beauty. Eden represented the magnificent place of which God spoke. This is the gentle tongue, a healing tongue.

The writer points out too in the second case that the tongue also has the potential to cause disruption, "*perverseness in it breaks the spirit.*" There is a destructive element to improper usage. Used destructively, it does more than bend the spirit; it breaks the spirit. It inverts its power to heal, using the power to destroy. Used in this matter, it is if Eden became a desolate land, with trees which were once there, and grass that had long been replaced with weeds. In this manner, there is no sense of hope, for that would convey a spirit that still had a pulse. The perverse tongue has broken the spirit, causing death, Eden now a wasteland.

Davis points out helpfully that three inferences can be teased out of this latter portion of this proverb. First, speech used in this destructive way inflicts harm on others. The notion that one cares about others is put to the test rightfully by their speech. Second, speech used in this destructive way "inevitably springs from the speaker's own wounded spirit."<sup>284</sup> One's own brokenness metamorphoses as a weapon, used to inflict the same kind of brokenness on others, unsatisfied with its current host and wishing only to replicate its army and grow in intensity. Further still, when we have been hurt, Davis invites us to remember this point as "one of the keys to learning to pray for our enemies."<sup>285</sup> Finally, speech used destructively works towards the

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<sup>284</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 98.

<sup>285</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 98.

“speaker’s own self-destruction.”<sup>286</sup> Instead of removing the sword from the speaker’s abdomen, the sword is lodged deeper, and although still breathing, those breaths are becoming more intermittent, harder to come by. As the unwise speaker desires for others to perish, those same desires are accelerating the process of his own downfall. Unbeknown to him, he has swallowed his own tongue.

Amanda Gorman’s speech on inauguration day is a fine example of the kind of healed speech that the writer of Proverbs is conveying. In Gorman’s speech, she used words which were designed to heal, serving as a tree of life. When she said, “We lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another...,” and “We seek harm to none and harmony for all,” she was using rhetoric informed with wisdom designed to heal. This is what the writer of Proverbs is inviting hearers to practice, a rhetoric which enables them to flourish.

### **GAINING A HEART – Proverbs 15:30 – 33**

*“The light of the eyes rejoices the heart and good news refreshes the body. The ear that heeds wholesome admonition will lodge among the wise. Those who ignore instruction despise themselves, but those who heed admonition gain understanding. The fear of the Lord is instruction in wisdom, and humility goes before honor.”*

Davis reminds us of the significant role the heart plays in biblical language. “The one who casts off *discipline* despises *his own self*, but the one who *hears* reproof gains a *heart*,” she transliterates verse 32. For the writer of Proverbs, the process of acquiring wisdom and maintaining wisdom could be traced to the condition of the heart. The sages felt, according to Davis, that the heart was necessary for the full formation and development of the self. “In

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<sup>286</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 98.

biblical language,” Davis writes, “the heart is the center of the personality. Not only feeling but also thought and faith originate in the heart.”<sup>287</sup> She continues, insightfully offering:

Accordingly, the Hebrew word *lev*, ‘heart’ is often translated as ‘mind’ (e.g. Prov. 16:1; 25:2). The sages’ most important insight is that a truly human heart, full personhood, is not a natural endowment, given at birth. Like the tin woodsman in *The Wizard of Oz*, we who aspire to be wise must earnestly desire to *acquire* our hearts.<sup>288</sup>

The proverb points out that the heart is the center of the self, a fully developed self, a whole self. There seems to be no wiggle room for a half-developed heart, for that would be the equivalent of a half-developed self. Importantly too, as Davis points out, one is not expected to be born with such a heart; it is the work of a sustained effort to acquire wisdom. One is not born with a heart the same way one is not born being a medical professional or an astronomer. Heart development takes time, the slow-moving process of acquiring wisdom in its purest form. For the sages, heart development required no shortcuts, no easy options. It required only sincere desire in search of wisdom.

There is a second point in this proverb worthy of further consideration. The writer offers, as Davis points out, that the one who *hears* reproof gains a *heart*. First, a connection is drawn between the ears and the heart. These two bodily organs are intertwined organs for the sage. Deductively, a heart cannot be gained if the ear has not properly heard.<sup>289</sup> Second, reproof, admittedly, can be hard to hear. Who delights in hearing correction? Who celebrates criticism? Who welcomes with warm embrace an upending of their efforts? For the sage, it is the wise one.

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<sup>287</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 99.

<sup>288</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 99.

<sup>289</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 99. Davis makes this point wonderfully, drawing attention to the “verbal echoes” and noting a valuable series of cross-references throughout Proverbs.



In fact, for the sage, as Davis points out, the following is true: *A good thing heard refreshes the bone.*<sup>290</sup> (v. 30). Further noting, Davis contends,

the sages counter our inclination to ignore criticism with what is perhaps their most striking statement on the value of correction (v. 32). Ignoring discipline and ‘reproof of life’ (v. 31) is an act of self-hatred! Our modern society has idealized the journey of self-discovery, often making it appear as a solo flight into the unknown. The sages do urge respect for the learners own ‘way.’ Yet at the same time they caution strongly that a stable self is achieved in large part by accepting correction from others who see us differently and often more accurately than we see ourselves.<sup>291</sup>

If a good thing heard refreshes the bone, then a bad thing heard likely destroys the bone. The latter is much more severe than osteoarthritis, for many have braved such discomfort long after initial diagnosis. When bone decay occurs, the body is weakened, only to weaken even more in the future until its complete demise is assured. Good things, good speech, *good news*, builds up the bones within the body, making the body stronger, more able to endure and adapt, to adjust and to create, to manage and to be manageable.

A third point in this proverb is also fruitful. When the writer of Proverbs offers, “*the ear that heeds wholesome admonition will lodge among the wise,*” there is an appeal to be mindful of those we listen to and how we are ultimately perceived. The ear that can receive admonition is ultimately considered wise, lodging themselves among the halls of the true sages. The appeal then is to embrace admonition, to welcome it, knowing that it will inevitably lead to one’s own growth and development. As this is achieved, there is a respect given by the wise, a warm embrace, welcoming such wisdom into their ranks. Conversely, and appropriate to this project’s purpose, rebuffing admonition disqualifies one from gaining the kind of wisdom the writer of Proverbs suggests. And, instead of being lodged among the wise, the one who rebuffs

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<sup>290</sup> NRSV Study Bible points out that v. 30 literally translated “makes fat the bone.”

<sup>291</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 99.

admonition is denied entry. Hateful rhetoric, divisive rhetoric – the kind that tears down rather than builds up – not only prevents one from obtaining wisdom but denies them fellowship among the true sages.

### **DEADLY AND LIFE-GIVING SPEECH – Proverbs 18: 20 – 21**

*“From the fruit of the mouth one’s stomach is satisfied; the yield of the lips brings satisfaction. Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.”*

The Proverbial writer invites us to see a different type of satisfaction however, using the imagery of food consumption. Words, the writer invites us to see, puts food on our tables. A mastery of rhetoric, in modern society, can make you an esteemed lawyer, a respected politician or a really good preacher. Possessing a wide vocabulary with equal skill in thoughtful and effective grammatical usage has the potential to open many opportunities. Secretaries are sought after for their communication skills, letters needing to be written and emails composed. And as we have seen, a good press secretary will help make or break a president’s administration. Davis points out however, that the writer of Proverbs wants us to look deeper, beyond viewing words as mere tools for sustenance and provision. She suggests that while “The fruit-bearing tongue is a living source of nourishment, delight, and sustenance,”<sup>292</sup> the sages want us to see that “a healing tongue is a tree of life,” an observation we noted earlier. Along these lines, there ought to be equal, if not greater, effort to use our tongues to heal compared to food consumption. Perhaps the buffets will not appear as attractive if our satisfaction came from speaking life into others, and therefore living more fully ourselves.

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<sup>292</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 113.

Still, there is more that the writer of Proverbs wants us to see by offering this proverb.

Davis contends that the “biblical perception is that words are powerful bearers of intention, for good and for ill.”<sup>293</sup> She continues,

In speaking, we imitate God, who once spoke the world into being. Serving God requires that our words further the intentions first expressed in God’s own purposeful word: ...my word...that goes out of my mouth, it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:11)<sup>294</sup>

Christians are not merely saved by God revealed in Christ Jesus, but they are also imitators of God in speech, in declarations. God’s speech has intended actions designed to accomplish holy work, and those who have come to know God should seek to imitate such speech in honor of God.

There is another helpful insight in this proverb that can be appropriate to contemporary times. When the writer offers “the yield of the lips brings satisfaction,” this seems to suggest that some might be convinced to feed off their own rhetoric, addicted to their own voice. An apt illustration perhaps is Trump’s prolific social media use. Before Trump was banned from Twitter, that platform was his main medium for sharing his immediate thoughts and ideas, often without any constraints, limitations, or considerations of any consequences. He seemed to be infatuated with his own voice, always seeking pleasure in his own words and to garner the attention of others. This kind of yield cannot be interpreted as fruits which produce satisfaction, as they often left more destruction, confusion, and uncertainty in their wake.<sup>295</sup> The content of

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<sup>293</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 113.

<sup>294</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 113.

<sup>295</sup> During the Trump Administration, U.S. domestic and foreign policy was often shaped by Trump’s random tweets, posing great challenges for key officials who often had to alter major policy and direction in real-time, having been granted no briefing or rationale.

Trump's tweets communicated no desire to see human flourishing; in its place was human deprivation.

## **CONCLUSION**

This chapter has sought to demonstrate that rhetoric has the power to persuade and influence actions of mind and heart. The writer of Proverbs offers that speech must be carefully informed with wisdom and failing to do so presents clear and present dangers. Indeed, speech informed with wisdom is how human identity is formed and Christian identity shaped. God has created all things through God's speaking, and those, redeemed through Christ, have a responsibility to imitate God by allowing wisdom to inform our rhetoric. Relying upon speeches, contemporary events, several well-known figures throughout history, as well as the work of Ellen Davis in shedding light of the several key proverbs, this thesis has argued that when rhetoric and speech is untethered to wisdom, as the sages warningly point out, it has the potential to become an assault weapon, discharged at will and at whim. Unrestrained, rhetoric, in the hands of an individual unversed in the wisdom of the sages, finds the wherewithal for unimaginable destruction, wounding others while wounding oneself.

As part of this work, a final thread remains to be interwoven which demonstrates, painfully so, how rhetoric can incite an insurrection on one's home turf.

## Chapter VI – Insurrection

*‘Special train to Newnan! All aboard for the burning’*

- Atlanta and West Point Railroad, as  
cited by Robert P. Jones<sup>296</sup>

*“If you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore.”*

- Trump Speech, January 6, 2021

On February 13, 2021, then former President Trump was acquitted of impeachment for the second time by the United States Senate. The impeachment charge for his second impeachment was for inciting an insurrection on January 6, 2021 of the United States Capital, the hallmark location signifying American democracy. The prosecutors, a team of House Managers, spent a full week making a legal case for convicting Trump for his role in the Capital siege. They sought to directly connect his rhetoric with the behavior of his supporters. This chapter explores in real-time how rhetoric directly influences actions and behavior, and invites a close reading of Jesus’ Good Samaritan parable as a foundational lesson which should inform behavior.

On that infamous day of January 6, 2021, at the end of Trump’s speech at the Ellipse in which he worked the crowd into a frenzy using rhetoric laced with violent messaging, the crowd marched down Pennsylvania Avenue to the U.S. Capitol. A band of rebels, fueled with a perceived patriotic mission by the leader, the President of the United States, who, ironically, is the same person responsible for protecting places such as the U.S. Capitol. The group arrived at the U.S. Capitol during the certification process, a simple procedural process acknowledging the

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<sup>296</sup> Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 29.

recent election of a new U.S. President, and, defying capital security, stormed the grounds of the capital, entering the building. Grown men and women climbed the steps of the capital, headed for the doors. Some ascended the exterior walls, as if teenagers. One could hear the boisterous yells of the crowd, “Stop the Steal, Stop The Steal, Stop The Steal.” Busting through barricades, persons in the crowd swung baseball bats at capital police officers. One individual, armed with a hockey stick, used it to both beat a Capitol officer and the door he was trying to guard. Cursing and screaming ensued. Mayhem erupted. Not to be denied, as they were instructed by Trump to “fight like hell,” the crowds broke the windows of the Capitol to gain entry. Doors, which had been guarded by Capitol officers, found themselves under considerable strain.

The events which occurred on the aptly named Insurrection Day on January 6, 2021 have become clearer over the ensuing weeks as videos chronicling the pro-Trump mob’s actions have surfaced. On one video, a capital police officer is seen sandwiched between what appears to be glass-doors, holding his weight up against the door as domestic terrorists tried to rush in. The officer screams in agony, blood dripping down his face, his strength up against scores of others. Another video shows the mob beating a capital police officer with an American flag, tied to a pole they had brought to the invasion. Some were beating police officers with their own batons, having snatched their weapons away from them. Another video recording shows these domestic terrorist yelling and screaming dangerous epithets, violent language fitting for those in America who cling to false notions of the inherent superiority of the dominate caste. Gallows were erected outside the capital building. The crowd chanted “Hang Mike Pence,” a nod to Trump for Pence’s unwillingness to try not certifying the election results, which he had no power to do under the U.S. Constitution. Explosive devices were planted, strategically, orderly, awaiting detonation.

Inside the U.S. Capital itself, offices were stormed. Chambers turned into places of mockery. Confederate flags were waved throughout the innards of the nation's capital. A woman named Ashli Babbitt, an ardent Trump supporter, died after being shot by a Capital Policier offer when trying to break through doors with the intent to confront congressional leaders.<sup>297</sup> Three more were pronounced dead later that evening, and then a capital officer died too – five lives lost. “The violent and deadly act of insurrection targeting the Capitol, our temple of American Democracy, and its workers was a profound tragedy and stain on our nation's history,”<sup>298</sup> said Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House of Representatives. This day of destruction at the U.S. Capital was a sad but perfect illustration of how Trump used rhetoric to incite violence and terror. “There is no question that the president formed the mob, the president incited the mob, the president addressed the mob. He lit the flame,”<sup>299</sup> said Liz Cheney. On the final day of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Trump Impeachment trial, following Trump's acquittal, Sen. Mitch McConnell offered the following, “There's no question – none – that President Trump is practically and morally responsible for provoking the events of the day. No question about it.”<sup>300</sup> This was an all-out assault on American democracy, but its root causes were within.

## THE BIG LIE

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<sup>297</sup> Ellen Barry, Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs, and Dave Philipps, “Woman Killed in Capital Embraced Trump and QAnon,” *The New York Times*, updated January 20, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/07/us/who-was-ashli-babbitt.html>.

<sup>298</sup> Peter Hermann, Tom Jackman, and Rachel Weiner, “U.S. Capital Police Officer Brian D. Sicknick, Who Died After Assault on Capitol, Protected with a Kind Touch,” *The Washington Post*, January 8, 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/brian-sicknick-capitol-police-officer-dies/2021/01/08/5552e036-51bc-11eb-83e3-322644d82356\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/brian-sicknick-capitol-police-officer-dies/2021/01/08/5552e036-51bc-11eb-83e3-322644d82356_story.html).

<sup>299</sup> Natalie Andrews, Alex Leary, and Josh Mitchell, “After Capital Riot, Resignations and Calls for Trump's Removal,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 8, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-agrees-to-orderly-transfer-of-power-to-biden-after-day-of-turmoil-at-capitol-11610027394>.

<sup>300</sup> Magie Haberman and Jonathan Martin, “After the Speech: What Trump Did as the Capitol Was Attacked,” *The New York Times*, February 13, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/13/us/politics/trump-capitol-riot.html?referringSource=articleShare>.

On November 8, after a long and grueling presidential campaign, one waged during a global pandemic, with positive cases increasing and death tolls climbing, Joe Biden was declared winner of the 2020 presidential race. Immediately following Joe Biden's victory, President Trump began a huge campaign to challenge the results of the election. His core argument was that the election was somehow stolen from him, that he in fact won the election in a landslide victory, and that the country had been robbed of this fact. The following months would see a remarkable effort to undermine, sway, and challenge the legality of votes. The Trump campaign filed multiple lawsuits across the U.S., claiming, among other things, that many of the votes were rigged, that voting systems were altered to manipulate voting tallies, and that millions of voters themselves had abused the system, voting more than once, not fully completing ballots properly, and voting after their state's respective election period. The lawsuits filed failed overwhelmingly in the courts, granting Trump a record of 1 – 61.<sup>301</sup> What is also worth noting is that many of the lawsuits filed were directed at urban areas where black people made up a large portion of the voting electorate, including Philadelphia, Detroit, Atlanta and Milwaukee.<sup>302</sup> Caste – alive and well.

The months of November and December 2020 witnessed the Trump campaign's lawsuits continuing to fail, and on December 14, 2020, each individual state certified their election results. During this period however, what has now become known as "The Big Lie" grew in popularity and vitality. The Big Lie is used to describe how factual events can be twisted and co-opted in an effort to re-write reality. It is based on a premise that what people have experienced

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<sup>301</sup> William Cummings, Joey Garrison, and Jim Sergent, "By The Numbers: President Donald Trump's Failed Efforts to Overturn the Election," *USA Today*, updated January 6, 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/politics/elections/2021/01/06/trumps-failed-efforts-overtun-election-numbers/4130307001/>.

<sup>302</sup> Juana Summers, "Trump Push to Invalidate Votes in Heavily Black Cities Alarms Civil Rights Groups," *NPR*, November 24, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/11/24/938187233/trump-push-to-invalidate-votes-in-heavily-black-cities-alarms-civil-rights-group>.



with their own eyes is not real, that they have been manipulated by events outside of their control. Instead of relying upon wisdom to inform their behavior, they look to conspiracy theories and fantastical events to guide them. Thus, what dictates their actions is not a sense of proper judgement or deep reasoning but an unchecked will to possess and maintain what one wants no matter the consequences or dangers such actions may pose. It was The Big Lie which enabled Trump to spend two months rallying his supporters with fiery speeches and endless tweets. “Big protest in D.C. on January 6<sup>th</sup>...It will be wild,”<sup>303</sup> he tweeted on December 19, 2020. In another tweet on January 1, 2021, he said: “The BIG protest rally in Washington D.C. will take place at 11:00AM on January 6....StopTheSteal.”<sup>304</sup> And, on January 6, Trump’s rhetoric incited an insurrection. “He said it, and they did it”<sup>305</sup> said Joe Neguse, one of the House Impeachment Managers.

As Insurrection Day unfolded, what was probably one of the most disturbing aspects of the event was not just the sheer shock of the U.S. Capitol being ransacked by a vicious mob, or the fact that far right-wing groups such as the Proud Boys, who President Trump had recently instructed to “stand back and stand by” were present, or that several congressmen, by all accounts, seemed to both support and encourage such violence, as in the cases of U.S. Senators Ted Cruz, Lindsey Graham, Tommy Tuberville and Josh Hawley, but that, more significantly, much of the violence was purportedly being waged by Christians and on behalf of what they perceived as a Christian mission. Indeed, President Trump himself, who egged on the violence, watched it unfold with unbridled excitement and eagerness and reluctantly called in more

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<sup>303</sup> Dan Barry and Sheera Frenkel, “Be there. Will be Wild’: Trump All But Circled the Date,” *The New York Times*, updated January 8, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/06/us/politics/capitol-mob-trump-supporters.html>.

<sup>304</sup> Dan Barry and Sheera Frenkel, *Ibid.*

<sup>305</sup> Joe Neguse, “Impeachment: ‘He said it and they did it,’” posted February 11, 2021 by Reuters, YouTube video, 2:23, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k\\_AGocsk5Wk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k_AGocsk5Wk).

reinforcement personnel only after being persuaded and guilted into acting more swiftly or face his own legal criminal charges, is a professed Christian, who claimed repeatedly that he was working on behalf of Christ and devoted to Christian values.<sup>306</sup> And herein lies the critical question: how must we as Christians understand the role of rhetoric in influencing human behavior? By what standard should we measure right Christian action and who is setting and maintaining the standard? When violence is clothed in Christianity, dressed in garbs of goodness, when it has been stoked by the rhetoric of both the Christian parishioner and the Christian leader, how does one make sense of it, find truth in it? There it, undoubtedly, a fundamental disconnect between the behavior of many Christians and the behavior of Christ. Considering all the helpful, critical observations which have preceded this chapter, to attain more thorough explanations which shed light on answers to some of these questions, it is necessary to dig deeper to briefly examine how and why America has and is experiencing these great divides in the name of Christianity.

## **VIOLENCE IN THE NAME OF GOD**

Thomas B. Edsall, writing an Op-Ed published in the *New York Times* entitled “The Capitol Insurrection was a Christian Nationalist as It Gets”<sup>307</sup> helps provide an additional framework from which we can interpret these recent events. He argues, chiefly, that “It’s impossible to understand the Jan. 6 assault on the Capital without addressing the movement that has come to be known as Christian nationalism.” Samuel L. Perry, a professor and co-author of

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<sup>306</sup> Jack Jenkins and Maina Mwaura, “Trump Confirmed a Presbyterian, Now Identifies as ‘Non-Denominational Christian,’” *Religious News Service*, October 23, 2020, <https://religionnews.com/2020/10/23/exclusive-trump-confirmed-a-presbyterian-now-identifies-as-non-denominational-christian/>.

<sup>307</sup> Thomas B. Edsall, “The Capitol Insurrection Was as Christian Nationalist as it Gets,” *The New York Times*, January 28, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/28/opinion/christian-nationalists-capitol-attack.html?referringSource=articleShare>.

the book *Taking America Back For God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*,<sup>308</sup> writes that Christian nationalism

included the assumptions of nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy and heteronormativity, along with divine sanction for authoritarian control and militarism. It is as ethnic and political as it is religious. Understood in this light, Christian nationalism contends that America has been and should always be distinctively “Christian” from top to bottom – in its self-identity, interpretations of its own history, sacred symbols, cherished values and public policies – and it aims to keep it this way.<sup>309</sup>

From the beginning of Trump’s arrival as a presidential candidate, he has dutifully leveraged the undercurrents of Christian nationalism to his distinct advantage, garnering the attention of Christian nationalists through his strategic use of rhetoric and provoking their actions from Charlottesville to the Insurrection. And, apart from Trump, Christian nationalism had already begun a sharp ascendance, as evidenced by the events of 2015 shooting at Emmanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, South Carolina, in which the assailant wrote in his manifesto: “I have no choice....We have no skinheads, no real KKK, no one doing anything but talking on the internet. Well someone has to have the bravery to take it to the real world, and I guess that has to be me.”<sup>310</sup>

Although the violence which occurred on Insurrection Day has garnered much of the attention, what should not be lost in the moment is the how the behavior of the mob’s actions was inseparably interwoven with claims that Jesus Christ justified the mob’s actions. Violence, according to the mob, was being authorized by Jesus Christ. Citing recent remarks by Samuel Perry as evidence, Edsall writes:

Obviously the best evidence would be use of sacred symbols during the insurrection such as the cross, Christian flag, Jesus saves sign., etc. But also the language of the prayers offered by the insurrectionists both outside and within the

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<sup>308</sup> Edsall, “The Capitol.” Cited as reference.

<sup>309</sup> Edsall, “The Capitol.”

<sup>310</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 138.

Capitol indicates the views of white Americans who obviously thought Jesus not only wanted them to violently storm the Capital in order to take it back from socialists, globalists, etc., but also believed God empowered their efforts, giving them victory.<sup>311</sup>

Among the most startling lines in this quote, is the *language of the prayers offered by the insurrectionists*. Such language calls into question not only how Christians understand the role and function of prayer but also their own theological understanding of the nature of God. Invoking the presence of God for the purposes of violence speaks directly to the power of rhetoric to influence behavior. One is less likely to question their own behavior and evaluate their own actions if indeed they feel that those behaviors and actions are divinely sanctioned. The notion that God has authorized violent actions on behalf of some proves to be of severe consequence. “This is our day. This is our time. This means something for the Kingdom. As a matter of fact, THIS MEANS WAR,”<sup>312</sup> said pastor Greg Locke, a conservative evangelical pastor, in September 2020 about the presidential election. The day before Insurrection Day, Locke declared: “May the fire of the Holy Spirit fall upon Washington DC today and tomorrow. May the Lamb of God be exalted. Let God arise and His enemies be brought low.” This was a pneumatological event, a reminder of the Day of Pentecost. God, through His Holy Spirit, was giving the mob supernatural ability to inflict violence.

On Insurrection Day, many of those who stormed the U.S. Capitol did so believing they were vessels being used by the Lord. They saw their practice of Christianity intertwined with violence. Christ was forcing them, they believed, to behave recklessly, defying law and order. They saw this, in the same view of Trump’s spiritual advisor Paula White, to be battle between

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<sup>311</sup> Edsall, “The Capitol.” Cited as reference.

<sup>312</sup> Edsall, “The Capitol.”

good and evil, angels and demons, God and Satan.<sup>313</sup> Earlier that morning, evangelical leader Franklin Graham, a staunch Trump supporter, helped set the stage. “I believe God’s judgement is coming, for the sins of our nation are great and they are a stench in the nostrils of our Creator,” he said.<sup>314</sup> As they walked through the Capitol, they waved their Christians flags alongside their Trump flags. As they occupied the Senate chamber, “they consecrated it to Jesus.”<sup>315</sup> God wanted them to do this, they believed. God was on their side.

Robert P. Jones, in his book *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity*,<sup>316</sup> explores the historical interweaving of the ideals of white supremacy in American Christianity. Throughout his work he examines the role Christianity has played in both promoting and providing cover to white supremacy. An author, scholar, social scientist, widely regarded researcher and CEO and founder of the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), Jones lifts the following core argument:

The historical record of lived Christianity in America reveals that Christian theology and institutions have been the central cultural tent pole holding up the very idea of white supremacy. And the genetic imprint of this legacy remains present and measurable in contemporary white Christianity, not only among evangelicals in the South but also among mainline Protestants in the Midwest and Northeast.<sup>317</sup>

Despite having no political experience to his name, Trump became a prominent political figure and ultimately, the president of the United States, mainly by shoring up support from white Christians. Despite his divisive rhetoric, his inexperience, his questionable reputation and

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<sup>313</sup> Joe Sommerlad, “The Lord Says It is Done’: White House Spiritual Advisor Paula White Prays for ‘Angels from Africa’ to Cement Trump’s Re-Election,” *Independent*, November 5, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-election-2020/us-election-trump-paula-white-house-prayer-b1616014.html>.

<sup>314</sup> Peter Manseau, “Some Capitol Rioters Believe They Answered God’s Call, Not Just Trump’s,” *The Washington Post*, February 11, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/02/11/christian-religion-insurrection-capitol-trump/>.

<sup>315</sup> Manseau, *Ibid*.

<sup>316</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*.

<sup>317</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 6.

multiple instances of alleged sexual exploits, Trump secured the faithful, cultic-like support of most white Christians. “Trump’s own racism allowed him to do what other candidates couldn’t: solidify the support of a majority of white Christians, not despite, but *through* appeals to white supremacy”<sup>318</sup> wrote Jones.

One of the significant findings of Jones’ research is the linear connection between white Christianity as expressed in America and violence. Since the nation’s founding, many white Christians, as in the case of the recent rise of Christian nationalism, saw no issue whatsoever with inflicting violence on others. Jones argues,

Perhaps the most powerful role white Christianity has played in the gruesome drama of slavery, lynchings, Jim Crow, and massive resistance to racial equity is to maintain an unassailable sense of religious purity that protects white racial innocence. Through every chapter, white Christianity has been at the ready to ensure white Christians that they are alternatively – and sometimes simultaneously – the noble protagonists and the blameless victims.<sup>319</sup>

This sense of innocence, draped in the garb of Christianity, has fueled an American culture where violence on others is often not condemned but celebrated. When placed in the larger historical context of American society, Christianity has been co-opted as a tool used by white supremacy – those in the dominate caste – to enact, justify, and perpetuate violence. This is evidenced in real time by America’s propensity for the allowance of a militaristic style bearing of arms, the avid support of the death penalty, the over-policing of low-income neighborhoods, and the blind eye given to police officers using excessive force at whim without concern of being reprimanded. It is this deep predilection to violence that is profoundly rooted in American Christianity. Hence, those who stormed the capital, nudged on by Trump and supported by one

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<sup>318</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 15.

<sup>319</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 20 – 21.

another, felt nothing wrong with their actions; their actions were in fact, divinely sanctioned. God gave the blessing, they believed, unreflectively.

Jones illustrates this dynamic even more clearly – how inextricably it is ingrained in the American psyche and how chillingly treacherous it can be – by recounting what happened in 1899 when Samuel Thomas Wilkes, also known as “Hose,” a black farmer in Georgia, was accused of murdering a white planter, named Alfred Cranford. Citing newspaper accounts, Jones chronicles how white newspapers seemed intent on “outdo[ing] the other with shocking details of the proposed crime. The storyline in the newspapers reported that Wilkes broke into Cranford’s home while he was eating, killed Cranford with an ax, threw his infant child to the floor, and raped Cranford’s wife in a pool of blood.<sup>320</sup> But Wilkes offered a very different account of what really transpired. As Jones narrates, Wilkes and Cranford had a dispute regarding payment of wages owed by Cranford to Wilkes for services rendered. Cranford refused to pay Wilkes what was his rightful compensation. Cranford told Wilkes not to visit him again asking for his back pay, or risk being killed. The very next day, according to Wilkes, as told by Jones, Cranford approaches Wilkes while Wilkes is chopping wood. Another argument ensued. Cranford pulled out a gun, but before he could shoot, Wilkes struck Cranford in the head with his ax. Then, knowing as a black man he had committed the sin of defending himself, Wilkes fled into the woods.

What happens next draws our attention. As Jones notes, the Atlanta Constitution ran the headline, “Determined Mob After Hose; He Will Be Lynched If Caught.”<sup>321</sup> Allen Candler, the then governor of Georgia, and also, Jones notes, belonging to a prominent Methodist family, offered a \$500 reward for the capture of Wilkes, who even after a week later, was still on the run.

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<sup>320</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 28 – 29.

<sup>321</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 29.

The newspaper offered to match Candler's reward with another \$500, saying, reported by Jones, "When Hose is caught he will either be lynched and his body riddled with bullets or he will be burned at the stake...the mob which is in pursuit of him is composed of determined men...wrought up to an unusual degree."<sup>322</sup> By that Sunday morning, Wilkes had been captured, and the word traveled fast. Here is what happened next:

The scene was surreal. When the city's white churches emptied from morning services, many worshippers streamed straight from church to the train station, hoping to participate in the much-anticipated lynching. To meet demand, the Atlanta and West Point Railroad put together a special run with six coaches: conductors roamed the platform, shouting, "Special train to Newnan! All aboard for the burning." But that train was soon overwhelmed, with people hanging on to the outside of the cars and climbing onto the roofs to ensure they didn't miss the spectacle. Police had to be called in, and the railroad commissioned a second ten-car train behind the first. Packed with approximately two thousand Atlanta citizens, both trains sped toward Newnan.<sup>323</sup>

When the trains arrived in Newnan, church was letting out, Christians gathering in front of the courthouse, awaiting the day's festivities. "Members who had attended the Sunday morning services now stood on its steps watching or joined the procession as it passed by,"<sup>324</sup> noted Jones. And as the anxious crowd waited, "there is no record that any clergyman addressed the crowd,"<sup>325</sup> says Jones. The crowd, the Christians, who "just moments after a significant portion of the crowd had shared pews, observed Communion, read the Bible, sang hymns, and listened to sermons,"<sup>326</sup> they now supposedly saw God's work in action. Speaking of the ex-governor, Jones writes, he "must have instinctively understood that white Christianity, as it was believed and

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<sup>322</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 29.

<sup>323</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 29.

<sup>324</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 30.

<sup>325</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 30.

<sup>326</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 31.



practiced by his fellow townspeople, was perfectly compatible with the mob lynching of a black man.”<sup>327</sup>

The next scene offers the gruesome climax of events. It was not enough to catch a wanted man; it was not enough to read him his rights; it was not enough to pray with him or give him legal counsel. Because he was black, and therefore part of the subordinate class, he could not be human; he could not even be Christian. Jones narrates what happens to Wilkes:

At the site, he was stripped naked, and a chain was wrapped around his body from neck to foot, locked around his chest, and attached to a tree. Tree limbs and railroad ties were laid at his feet, and young boys scavenged for additional brush to add to the pyre. Before the fire was lit, Wilkes was tortured for a half hour. His ears were cut off, his fingers removed one by one, and his genitals severed – with each held up for the approval of the cheering crowd. With Wilkes in agony but alive, he was doused with kerosene, and the pyre was lit. At that point, he screamed his last words: “Sweet Jesus!”<sup>328</sup>

While Wilkes screamed in agony, experiencing his flesh being burned, an old man in the crowd was recorded as saying, “Glory....Glory be to God!”<sup>329</sup>

Viewing violence as God’s work is not a new phenomenon, but something deeply ingrained in American society, and because it is so deeply ingrained, it cannot be treated with slaps on the wrist, prayer, or even seeing the videos of the killing of George Floyd or the double standard applied by capital offices on Insurrection Day. The purpose of this work is not to offer as exhaustible illustration of the connection between American Christianity and violence, but to demonstrate its continual role in the affairs of the American Republic, exemplified in the events on January 6, 2021. Regrettably, for various expressions of American Christianity, violence and its perceived justification by God is as American as apple pie. “White Christianity has been

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<sup>327</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 31.

<sup>328</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 31. The work of Jones in this book is masterful. Due to limited space here, a more thorough summary of his historical finding may be noted in any future works that I write.

<sup>329</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 31.

many things for America. But whatever else it has been – and the country is indebted to it for a good many things – it has also been the primary institution legitimizing and propagating white power and dominance.”<sup>330</sup>

### **GOOD SAMARITAN – LUKE 10: 25 - 37**

For Christians, the definitive litmus test for our behavior is whether those actions align with the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. For Christians, Jesus Christ sets the standard for both rhetoric and behavior. The life of Jesus and His ministry are exemplary for the serious Christian. Throughout both his preaching and teaching, Jesus makes the expectations of his followers clear, and he exemplifies these expectations through his own life. Perhaps the most significant issue raised in this work centers upon humanity, more precisely, how humanity ought to treat one another. The Gospel of Luke 10: 25 – 37 records:

*25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus.[a] “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 26 He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” 27 He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” 28 And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”*

*29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” 30 Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii,[b] gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ 36 Which of these three, do you think, was a **neighbor** to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” 37 He said, “The one who showed him **mercy**.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”*

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<sup>330</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 71.

Upon close exegetical examination of the text, we notice three main participants. There is first and foremost, Jesus, who, within the larger narrative of chapter 10, is in the midst of having a private conversation with seventy-two of his recently appointed followers. Suddenly, the private conversation between Jesus and the seventy-two is interrupted by a visitor, a lawyer, one proven to be an expert in the law. It is helpful for our purposes to note that the lawyers are typically well-versed in the power of rhetoric to shape thought and behavior. As experts in the law, and in this lawyer's case, Jewish customs, it is reasonable to assume this lawyer knows the power of rhetoric for influencing behavior. Further, as Luke records elsewhere in his narrative, lawyers are often present to "monitor Jesus' faithfulness to the law," and are "also among those identified as persons responsible for Jesus' pending rejection and suffering,"<sup>331</sup> writes scholar Joel Green.

Not changing the scenery, Luke seems to include the lawyer to add a new element to the narrative. There appears to be some significance to the fact that the lawyer breaks in on a private conversation. Boundaries seemed to be removed here. What was once private, a conversation between Jesus and his followers, now becomes more public. Green offers, "That the lawyer is present at all raises questions about the boundaries between the disciples and others outside the circle of Jesus' followers both here and elsewhere in the journey narrative."<sup>332</sup> The scene opens up for a wider audience.

The lawyer's appearance shifts to a moment of revelation, fostered by his question in verse 25: "*Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*" The central verb that is operating in this pericope is that of "to do." Up until this point in Luke's presentation of Jesus, the central motif of Jesus' teaching is the applicability of God's word into the lives of God's followers, of

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<sup>331</sup> Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 427.

<sup>332</sup> Green, *Luke*, 425.

both a *hearing* of God's word and a *doing* of God's word. Jesus, as Luke narrates, seems intent on underscoring this dynamic of *praxis*, transferring spiritual revelation into concrete, daily action. When Jesus responds, "what *do* you read in the law" (26b), "do this" (28) and "go and do likewise" (37), it underscores perhaps the narratives most important point in manifesting God's work in a tangible way, moving from the abstract into the concrete. Too, the one who is a neighbor, is the "one who showed him mercy" (37). There is a clear endgame with this text. According to Green, the purpose of the narrative does not then offer an example of what it means to act morally, as in a moral ethos for examining behavior; rather, as Jesus closing words indicate, "they return to the original question of the lawyer: 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' The parable thus serves a hermeneutical function. It interprets the summation of the law provided by the legal expert....it is nonetheless true that, for Luke, hearing is authenticated in doing."<sup>333</sup> The heavenly quest is predicated then on the earthly work, the doing.

After Jesus asks the lawyer what is written in the law, the lawyer's response proves to be sufficient initially in the view of Christ. Reciting the *shema* (Deut. 6.5) – "a passage that was fundamental to Jewish life and worship in the home, the synagogue, and the temple,"<sup>334</sup> as well as Lev. 19:18, the lawyer demonstrates a knowledge of the law. "To the *shema*," writes Green, "the lawyer attaches, inexorably, the law of neighbor-love found....In its co-text in Leviticus, love of neighbor is a disposition of the heart expressed in tangible behavior."<sup>335</sup>

But, as Luke narrates, the lawyer wanted to "justify himself," challenging Jesus, an attempt to perhaps find some incongruency in Jesus' teachings on modeling a life of faithfulness. To that end, the lawyer poses a follow up question in verse 29: "Who is my neighbor?" It is

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<sup>333</sup> Green, *Luke*, 425 – 426.

<sup>334</sup> Green, *Luke*, 428.

<sup>335</sup> Green, *Luke*, 428.

important to note the manner with which Jesus responds here. Green offers insightfully, “Jesus, challenged with respect to his status as a teacher, maintains common ground with this expert on the law while redirecting the challenge with a counterquestion.”<sup>336</sup> Jesus’ tone and demeanor does not appear to be one of disgust, frustration, or impatience. Instead, Jesus uses this moment with the lawyer to invite deeper inquiry for the lesson He wishes to convey. In so doing, Jesus provides a helpful model when faced with challenges, criticism, or inquiries.

The question of “who is my neighbor” had practical implications for the lawyer, or so it appears. With a firm grasp of the knowledge of the law, he was trying to challenge Jesus on the nuances of the law, seeing this an opportunity for self-justification. And, as Green helps us see, the lawyer wishes to exploit some ambiguity:

In its co-text in Leviticus 19, love for the neighbor is love for fellow Israelites, though love for the other is extended to “resident aliens” who embrace the covenant with Yahweh (Lev. 19: 33 – 34). As a consequence of Hellenistic imperialism and Roman occupation, it could not be generally assumed in the first century of the Common Era that those dwelling among the people of Israel qualified as “neighbors.” Different attitudes towards these foreign intrusions developed into a fractured social context in which boundaries distinguished not only between Jew and Gentile but also between Jewish factions. How far should love reach?<sup>337</sup>

The lawyer, although attempting to justify himself, does lift some important questions, such as what are the parameters of a love ethic? Should one love those from a different social, religious, and cultural world?

Luke writes in verses 30 – 32 that Jesus provides a parable of a certain man walking down the road for Jerusalem to Jericho. When Jesus refers to him as a “certain man” he is employing a rhetorical device, a powerful one, suggests Green. “In light of the debate surrounding the reach of love, grounded in how one reads Leviticus 19, the impossibility of

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<sup>336</sup> Green, *Luke*, 428.

<sup>337</sup> Green, *Luke*, 429.

classifying this person as either friend or foe immediately subverts any interest in questions of this nature....he is simply a human being, a neighbor, in need.”<sup>338</sup> Jesus sets the stage for a powerful parable, upending how one is to perceive and define a “neighbor.” For Jesus, the neighbor is any human being, and recognizing them as such is recognizing their humanity, their humanness.

During his travel from Jerusalem down to Jericho – a path of travel which already carried a certain level of risk – Jesus narrates that the certain man fell into the hands of robbers who stripped him of his clothes, beat him, and left him for dead. Jesus here, as Luke reports, sets the stage for additional probing. For the man, his journey has already started out badly. Will there be a redemptive element, a lesson which can be extracted from his unfortunate turn of events? As he lay bleeding profusely on the side of the road, the man is passed by a priest who saw him and decided not to provide any assistance. A Levite similarly walked by and failed to care for him. Both priests and Levites “shared high status in the community of God’s people on account of ascription – that is, not because they were trained or were chosen to be priests but because they were born into priestly families,” writes Green. Importantly, in characterizing the role of the priest and Levite, Green continues,

They participated in and were legitimized by the world of the temple, with its circumspect boundaries between clean and unclean, including clean and unclean people. They epitomized a worldview of tribal consciousness, concerned with relative status and us-them catalogueing [sic]. Within their world, their association with the temple commends them as persons of exemplary piety whose actions would be regarded as self-evidently righteous. They are accustomed to being evaluated on the basis of their ancestry, not on the basis of their performance. Accordingly, their failure to assist the anonymous man would have been laudable in the eyes of many.<sup>339</sup>

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<sup>338</sup> Green, *Luke*, 429.

<sup>339</sup> Green, *Luke*, 430 – 431.

Both the priest and the Levite, temple workers who held power, influence, and authority, saw the man laying in despair but did nothing to attend to him. Both the priest and the Levite share in their inaction and their indifference, their sense of piety preventing action. And as Green points out, no motivation for their lack of action is provided here by the narrator.<sup>340</sup> Interpreters can only speculate as to why they chose not to see to the man's well-being. Perhaps they had become numb to seeing violent acts performed on innocent people. Perhaps they had learned to accept the abnormal for normal. Perhaps they had chosen to ignore the most substantive aspects of their religious background and traditions, so as not to shake the foundations of the status quo. Perhaps power had corrupted them, and they no longer possessed the ability to discern between good and bad action. Or, perhaps, worst of all, they saw, parochially and sinfully, the divinity within themselves, and the inhumanity in the other.

The narrator directs our attention to the person Jesus introduces next – the Samaritan. His introduction immediately carries a bit of shock. Samaritans were already considered social-religious outcasts, so his presence in this story within the larger Lukan account demands attention.<sup>341</sup> In a way too, in the telling of this parable, Jesus is also reflecting on himself, a social-religious outcast, one whom they would reject. The Samaritan here in this encounter differs quite considerably from the priest and the Levite; while the priest and the Levite are holy men, the Samaritan is a traveling merchant.<sup>342</sup> But, the most significant difference here is in their reactions when they saw the wounded man. While the priest and Levite came and saw the man,

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<sup>340</sup> Green, *Luke*, 430. Some scholars suggest that a possible motivation for the priest and Levite's inactions could be based upon fears of contamination from contacting a person who was half-dead. Green argues that such motivation is doubtful.

<sup>341</sup> Green, *Luke*, 431.

<sup>342</sup> Green, *Luke*, 431.

then walked by on the other side of the road, only the Samaritan came and saw the man and was moved into action.

Luke records Jesus saying of the Samaritan that *he was moved with compassion* (33).

Here again we find an emphasis on praxis, *to do*. The Samaritan, an outcast himself, was moved with compassion for another outcast. And his compassion prompted action. Green offers:

What distinguishes this traveler from the other two is not fundamentally that they are Jews and he is a Samaritan, nor is it that they had held high status as religious functionaries and he does not. What individualizes him is his compassion, leading to action, in the face of their inaction....his status in comparison with theirs becomes shockingly relevant, for it throws into sharp relief the virtue of his response....his actions condemn their failure to act.<sup>343</sup>

The Samaritan realizes something so profound, that only in caring for another can one fully become human themselves and humanize others through a recognition of *their* humanity. He bandages his wounds, after cleaning them with oil and wine. He gives of his own possessions, having placed the wounded man on his own animal, then securing lodging and paying for the boarding fees. In telling the parable of the Samaritan, Jesus is also telling about God. “The Samaritan, then, participates in the compassion and covenantal faithfulness of God, who sees and responds with salvific care.”<sup>344</sup> It is the Samaritan who is performing the godliest action; not the priest or the Levite, those who most thought were dedicated to such action. In this, God rearranges and reorders the source and performance of true love, a manifestation of compassion, demonstrating through the actions of the Samaritan a comprehensive platform from which to turn spiritual insights into direct application. God then, cares not so much about what one has been born into, but how one performs, how one acts, how one goes about the business of *doing*. And significantly, we may see this notion of doing as consisting of two parts: one of using wise words

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<sup>343</sup> Green, *Luke*, 431.

<sup>344</sup> Green, *Luke*, 431.



designed to heal, as the writer of Proverbs point out, and one of using wise actions designed to heal. Wise words and actions employed to cultivate human flourishing.

Jesus' point here then seems not to direct us to adopting a certain moral model. It goes much deeper, much wider. It points to compassion that is rooted fundamentally in self-sacrifice, of reducing one's own footprint to help another, of going above and beyond to help one in need, even if it means personal discomfort. "The care the Samaritan offers," writes Green, "is not a model of moral obligation but of exaggerated action grounded in compassion that risks much more than could ever be required or expected."<sup>345</sup> In the case of Jesus Christ most magnificently, it meant a bodily sacrifice.

With the parable now complete, Jesus returns to the lawyer and goes straight to the heart of the matter: "Out of these three, who acted as a neighbor?" (36). In leading with this question, Jesus redirects the lawyer's question of seeking to define who the neighbor is, to evaluating the actions of the persons described in the parable. It no longer is a matter of who the "certain man" is to determine a neighbor, but an analysis on the actions of the priest, Levite, and Samaritan.

Green contends insightfully:

The lawyer's question would have focused on whether the wounded man possessed neighborly status, but the parable has failed to provide the grounds necessary for conjecture on this matter. It is a non-issue. Rephrased, Jesus' question presupposes the identification of "anyone" as a neighbor, then presses the point that such an identification opens wide the door of loving action.

By leaving aside the identity of the wounded man and by portraying the Samaritan traveler as one who performs the law (and so as one whose actions are consistent with an orientation to eternal life), Jesus has nullified the worldview that gives rise to such questions as, 'Who is my neighbor?' The purity-holiness matrix has been capsized.<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>345</sup> Green, *Luke*, 432.

<sup>346</sup> Green, *Luke*, 432.

In this Lukan account, Jesus offers a clear directive – that what one does matters. One cannot escape into a spiritual or religious abyss thinking that they could rid themselves of the necessity of practical ministry, or the exercise and demonstration of their Christian responsibility.

The lawyer who questioned Jesus seems to get the point. He responds saying that the who showed mercy, the Samaritan, is the one who acted neighborly (36). Said another way, the one who at first glance was deemed the stranger, is the one whom Jesus has shown is the most un-strange. Green continues, suggesting “Jesus’ exegesis of neighborly love subverts the world system shared by this lawyer and society-at-large.”<sup>347</sup> Still, this is only an invitation that Jesus extended to the lawyer, an invitation that he must follow to inherit eternal life.

The point of this pericope seems to be that what an individual does matters. Through the telling of the parable Jesus appears to exhort followers that love of God manifests itself in behavior, in praxis, in action. Anything otherwise would appear to be contradictory to Jesus’ core teachings as the Son of God.<sup>348</sup>

In this chapter, we have seen then based on Jesus’ own teaching in the parable of the Samaritan, that attributing the actions of Insurrection Day with Christianity and to the cause of Christ or Christianity, fosters deeper questioning and criticism. Indeed, when we consider the events of Insurrection Day considering this parable, a couple final notes warrant attention that collectively may help provide some clarification. First, those who stormed the Capitol may have thought they were acting neighborly in the sense of working to overturn the results of an election they claim was stolen from them. In this regard, they perhaps believed they were standing up for the 74 million people who voted for Trump in the 2020 election. This position has no merit

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<sup>347</sup> Green, *Luke*, 432.

<sup>348</sup> For reference, see “Sermon on the Mount,” in Matthew chapters 5-7; or “Sheep and the Goats” Matthew 25:31 – 46.

because, as the Department of Justice and federal officials overseeing the election results have found, no widespread voting fraud or irregularities were discovered.<sup>349</sup> The notion then of being robbed of a presidency has no merit. Second, the notion of justice, of correcting an ill, must be considered. As the Good Samaritan parable has pointed out, the man was beaten by robbers and thus a wrongful act was committed. Justice should be served. As in the case of those who stormed the Capitol acting as representatives of Christ, while they may have been told lies repeatedly by Trump and his supporters about the invalidity of the election results, 61 out of the 62 lawsuits filed in both state and federal courts challenging the election results failed.<sup>350</sup> Even appeals to the U.S. Supreme Court were turned down. Finally, on the issue of whether violence and love of neighbor are mutually exclusive from a Christian perspective. The purposes of this project are much narrower in scope than offering a rationale for exploring whether violence of any kind is ever justified. Our writing here concerns itself with the culmination of one individual's grievances over the course of his presidency, and his repeatedly debunked dispute of the 2020 presidential election results. Trump's rhetoric was used specifically to incite his followers into a violent riot of the U.S. Capitol, placing the lives of sitting congressional leaders in danger and causing injuries and deaths of capitol police officers and rioters. While some may believe that instances of great humanitarian concern – such as genocide and other atrocities – may warrant military actions which can be violent, those instances fail in comparison to the causes which led to Insurrection Day. Trying to present the extermination of Jews, as in the case of Hitler and the Nazis, is a much different conversation than trying to appease one person's ego.

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<sup>349</sup> Katie Benner and Michael Schmidt, "Barr Acknowledges Justice Dept. Has Found No Widespread Voter Fraud," *The New York Times*, December 1, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/01/us/politics/william-barr-voter-fraud.html>.

<sup>350</sup> William Cummings, Joey Garrison, and Jim Sergent, "By The Numbers."

Jesus emphasizes a type of neighborly love central to the Christian life and identity. It should be the kind of love mirrored by God and exemplified in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Anything less than this undermines the true teachings of Jesus. Hence, the question properly framed is not who is my neighbor, but rather, who acts neighborly with an abounding love for the humanity of others?

## **CONCLUSION**

Jesus' instruction to "go and do likewise" remains a clarion call for a more authentic expression of Christianity, and because it is a commandment, it is not optional. Christians are commanded to be like the one who demonstrates compassion, who cares for those in need, who can recognize that to whom much is given, much is required.<sup>351</sup> Seeking wisdom is the necessary first step toward "achieving" right action in all that we say and do, to living up to Jesus' command to "go" and "do." The next challenge is to find out in what areas the contemporary church can improve to embody the core teachings of Christ more fully.

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<sup>351</sup> Luke 12:48 NRSV

## Chapter VII – Unstrange

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.  
They send me to eat in the kitchen  
When company comes,  
    But I laugh,  
    And eat well,  
    And grow strong.

    Tomorrow,  
    I'll be at the table  
When company comes.  
    Nobody'll dare  
    Say to me,  
    "Eat in the kitchen,"  
    Then.

    Besides,  
They'll see how beautiful I am  
    And be ashamed –

I, too, am America.

- Langston Hughes, "I Too"  
The Collected Works of Langston Hughes

*"For you were once strangers in a faraway land..."*

- Exodus 22:21

America is a strange land. Since its inception, America has found a way to exist within a hypocritical posture, two very different modes of being. On the one hand, America promises to offer freedom to all who yearn for it, yet on the other hand, it restricts those freedoms to those who are of a certain hue. One of the core aspects of America's democracy are the lofty words etched in the U.S. Constitution, but those same words are not borne out for many of America's citizens nor prospective newcomers. Many of America's most prominent leaders, as we have earlier noted, have been some of the vilest, abusing those who do not look like them, refusing

their humanity. America's efforts to prevent the spread of terrorism across the world are soberly met by efforts of some to promote terrorism from within, inciting its own insurrection, burning its own house. Whether written or spoken, the voices of prominent Americans exert a powerful influence over those who consider themselves partisan, cultural, or religious allies.

The American church finds itself firmly planted amid these varying dynamics. The current context surrounding the operations of the American church offers one of great challenge. Collectively, the contemporary church – spanning across all denominations, affiliations, and inclinations – is, like the dominant culture in which it resides, confronting its own forces of extreme polarization. In 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. opined, “The Sunday hour is the most segregated hour in America.” This was true in the 1960s, and sadly it remains true today. Although race still separates and divides the church on so many fronts, the church is also divided on matters of politics, violence, human rights, sexual orientation, doctrine, economic development, critical race theory, ordinances, as well as the approaches to community engagement, poverty, and social justice. Indeed, as a subculture of American life, one could argue that the church is as strange as the dominant culture in which it resides. The church has not escaped the world's influence, but rather, in many cases, it has added to it, providing it with cover, the cover of God's will. So the question to be explored in this chapter has to do mainly with what can be done to make the church a place where this American “strangeness” is condemned, not endorsed and supported. Can the church, in such a time as this, be expected to model much more fully and deeply the ministry of Jesus, the wisdom of the sages, the entirety of Scripture? Can it sever itself from its all too familiar affinity for violence and violent behavior? I argue in these concluding pages that for the church to become more effective at modeling Jesus Christ, it must deconstruct the role and place of stranger in order to eliminate strangeness both of

others and within ourselves, for strangeness not only effects those unwelcomed but also those welcomed. Strangeness detaches humanity from its truest self, distorting its soul, co-opting itself into another identity unknown to the universe, creating a strong detachment from the *Imago Dei*. To be strange is to be unrecognizable, to feel like Adam and Eve when they *knew* that they were naked. To be strange is to be in a place but displaced, at home yet homeless. God calls us home, but to get there, I suggest a process for us to detox, a process that I take liberty in describing as “unstrange.”

## **GLIMMERS OF HOPE**

Let us begin with this. While the current moment has presented great challenges for America and the world at large, there have been glimmers of hope to remind us of God’s continuing presence. One of the most significant moments occurred during the peaceful protests following the murder of George Floyd during the early summer months of 2020. In major U.S. cities like Detroit, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Houston, New York, Chicago, as well smaller suburban and rural areas, throngs of people stood up against police brutality and systemic injustice ingrained in the American establishment. Glancing at these marches, one noticed that people of all hues, from all walks of life, standing together harmoniously in an effort to call long overdue attention to the injustices still permeating throughout American society. The sheer multi-cultural portrait offered by these participants seemed to help awaken the conscience of many states, local and county governments, as some agencies and municipalities took concrete steps to combat racism and systemic discrimination in their ranks. These demonstrations, many of which were organized by the Black Lives Matter Movement, impacted corporate America as well, as some corporations made concerted efforts to improve their fair hiring practices,

evaluated discriminatory practices in their workspaces, and assessed inequalities in compensation and promotional opportunities. While leading organizations such as Nike were at the right side of the justice movement, exemplified with their support of Colin Kaepernick when he kneeled during the national anthem to protest police brutality, more organizations sought to join this effort. Sports teams and franchises were impacted by those summer protest as well. Some collegiate teams kneeled in solidarity before games. The National Football League made a few long overdue changes, starting with an apology to Colin Kaepernick for neither supporting nor recognizing the injustices of which he was protesting.<sup>352</sup> Soccer leagues followed suit, with many of their players and owners taking a stand against injustice. Most visibly, the National Basketball Association, led by Adam Silver, along with their players union, took the unprecedented step of etching “Black Lives Matter” on the parquet basketball floor throughout the duration of the resumption of their 2020 season. Importantly still, these peaceful marches expanded internationally, in Paris, London, Switzerland, Brazil, and Rome.<sup>353</sup>

Another glimpse of hope that we should take notice of came late in the evening of Insurrection Day once congressional leaders resumed their certification of the electoral college results. Senator Ben Sasse, a republican from the state of Nebraska, offered remarks<sup>354</sup> describing the events earlier in the day, exhorting the nation’s leaders not to surrender to hate. He says of the Insurrection: “That’s not who we are. America isn’t Hatfields and McCoys blood feud forever. America is a union.” Then, he proceeds to admit real issues in the country but

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<sup>352</sup> Nick Selbe, “Roger Goodell Offers Apology to Colin Kaepernick: ‘I Wish We Had Listened Earlier,’” *Sports Illustrated*, August 23, 2020, <https://www.si.com/nfl/2020/08/24/roger-goodell-apologizes-colin-kaepernick-national-anthem-protest>.

<sup>353</sup> “Protest Across the Globe After George Floyd’s Death,” *CNN*, Photo Gallery, June 13, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/06/world/gallery/intl-george-floyd-protests/index.html>.

<sup>354</sup> Ben Sasse, “America Can’t Do Big Things If We Hate Our Neighbors,” U.S. Senator For Nebraska, January 6, 2021, <https://www.sasse.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2021/1/sasse-america-can-t-do-big-things-if-we-hate-our-neighbors>.



compelling listeners to help address those issues, saying, “There’s a lot that's broken in this country but not anything that’s so big that the American people can't rebuild. That freedom and community and entrepreneurial effort and that neighborhoods can’t rebuild. Nothing that's broken is so big that we can't fix it.”<sup>355</sup> And then, what was most hopeful, he shifts the imagery from focusing on the events in the capital to events in neighborhoods across the country, using that as a springboard to describe what it means to be neighborly. He continues,

The center of America is not Washington, DC. The center of America is the neighborhoods where 330 million Americans are raising their kids and trying to put food on the table and trying to love their neighbor. That’s the center of America. We’re not supposed to be the most important people in America, we're supposed to be servant leaders who try to maintain a framework for ordered liberty so that there’s a structure back home where they live, they can get from the silver frame of structure and order to the golden apple at the center, as Washington would have said it, which is the things that they build together. The places where they coach little league, the places where they invite people to synagogue or church. Sometimes the big things we do together are governmental, like kicking Hitler’s ass or like going to the moon. Sometimes there is governmental stuff, but the heart of America is about places where moms and dads are raising kids, and we’re supposed to serve them by maintaining order and by rejecting violence.<sup>356</sup>

And then, Sasse remarks remind us of the actions of the Samaritan:

You can’t do big things like that if you hate your neighbors. You can’t do big things together as Americans if you think other Americans are the enemy.

Look, there’s a lot of uncertainty about the future, I get it. There’s a lot that does need to be rebuilt. But if you’re angry, I want to beg you – don’t let the screamers who monetize hate have the final word. Don’t let nihilists become your drug dealers. There are some who want to burn it all down. We met some of them today. But they aren’t going to win. Don’t let them be your prophets. Instead, organize, persuade, but most importantly, love your neighbor. Visit the widower down the street who’s lonely and didn’t want to tell anybody that his wife died and he doesn’t have a lot of friends. Shovel somebody’s driveway. You can’t hate somebody who just shoveled your driveway. The heart of life is about community and neighborhood, and we’re supposed to be servant leaders. The constitutional

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<sup>355</sup> Sasse, *Ibid.*

<sup>356</sup> Sasse, *Ibid.*

system is still the greatest order for any government ever, and it's our job to steward it and protect it.<sup>357</sup>

Sasse's remarks remind us that there remains some fundamental goodness across America, and it is incumbent upon the American church to latch on to the winds of such goodness.

## **BEING CHRISTIAN**

The church must offer a counter-narrative to contemporary society. As Christians, our words matter even more; our speech ever more potent, ever more significant. Our actions, our behavior, will follow our speech. Ellen Davis reminds us beautifully of the importance of our words, writing:

The widespread degradation of words in our culture points to the need to highlight clear biblical witness in this manner, if the church is itself to be a center of godly speech that gives life to its members....One contemporary theologian issues a profound and imaginative challenge to the church: to recognize itself as a 'guild of philologists,' literally 'word-lovers.' He challenges us not be better Scrabble players, but to engage in 'that word-caring, that meticulous and conscientious concern for the quality of conversation and the truthfulness of memory, which is the first casualty of sin.' Truthful words backed up with our lives, are all that we offer God in worship. Caring words are often all that we have to offer one another, the best salve that we have for healing wounds, the best mortar we have for building up the whole body of the church.<sup>358</sup>

The penetrating line in Davis' quote is "Truthful words backed up with our lives, are all that we offer God in worship." As a form of worship unto God, I argue that we must make the stranger our neighbor. Our words and behavior must do this. And in so doing, we hope to participate in a process of reimagining what it means to be the church.

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<sup>357</sup> Sasse, *Ibid.*

<sup>358</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 113.

## **CHURCH FORWARD: RE-IMAGINING CHRISTIAN PRAXIS IN A POLARIZED AMERICA**

This work has sought to offer an evaluation of several aspects of current affairs in America as well as explore parts of their historical origins, calling attention to their ties to certain expressions of Christianity. To properly do that required an attempt to rely on several different illustrations, events, and figures, most of whom identify as Christians. Central to this work also is an effort not just of reflection but action, which is to say, to move from the theoretical practice and historical observations, to how these aspects might ground theological practice. This is based on the belief that the contemporary church must simultaneously stand in awe of God and stand with God; it must hear from God to do God's work in the world. To this end, the following is an attempt to provide a framework for re-imagining Christian practice in an era of such extreme polarization.

### **REFLECTION**

The first step which may be helpful for Christians and the Christian church is to commit ourselves much more intently to regular periods of focused reflection. Reflection will allow us, individually and corporately, to sit silently before God, both aware and awakened to the Holy Spirit operating within us. In the hustle and bustle of daily lives, in the rush to prepare and execute Sunday worship experiences utilizing the latest forms of technological gadgets and infrastructure, in the chase, it seems, to see which churches and their leaders can have the most vibrant and glitzy social media platforms, what seems to be lacking is asking not what, but why. Content seems to flow liberally, but swiftness and continued availability does not equal holiness. Standing rightly before God – in words and thoughts and actions – require a level of theological

reflection and discipline uncommon for this time. Reflection demands sitting silently before God, without the need to utter words, allowing the Word to speak into us. Such reflection could be moments of prayer, of lament, of meditation, of celebration, of memory. They could be moments of stillness, allowing the “still small voice” of the God to continue the work of forming the spiritual foundation of our lives. Reflection forces us to look back and to see how far we have come, and how far we have still to go.

### **RE-EDUCATION**

Another step in a potential effort to re-imagine Christian practice in this era is to pursue a well-crafted and well-grounded process to re-educate ourselves of American history. Since, as we have seen, American history is inextricably linked to Christian evangelism and American Christian identity, there must be an honest accounting of American history and its implications. Far too many citizens in the America republic do not have working knowledge of a substantial portion of American history, its primary actors, and its development of laws. Many, for instance, have no idea that black people were enslaved longer than they have been free, nor do they realize how critical the economic system of slavery has been in establishing the current foundations of the American Democracy. Many do not know that the current electoral college format emerged out of disagreement over slavery. Further still, many do not recognize that democracy in America prior to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s was, in fact, not truly a democracy at all, for it prohibited black people from voting. Some do not know the importance of nor celebrate the women’s suffrage movement. Even more do not realize the terrible error in glorifying confederate leaders who gave their own blood just for the right to enslave black people. A re-education such as this is necessary not just for those who may consider themselves un-religious,

but especially those who identify as Christians. Robert Jones, cited in the last chapter, invites us to ponder much deeper how white supremacy has clothed itself in Christianity, smoothly and unrecognizably, and how that dynamic continues to play out in various expressions of contemporary Christianity. If the church cannot ask itself how a confederate flag and a Christian flag could be carried proudly by the same individual in the rotunda of the United States capital, then the church, as portrayed in the New Testament, lacks a core component of its vitality and its history. It would be almost akin to the church forgetting its Founder because it has forgotten why its Founder has come.

### **RE-FORMING**

A potential next step in a process for re-imagining Christian practice in an era of great social divide is allowing ourselves and our institutions to be re-formed into a better image of Christ. To accomplish this task, is to first acknowledge that we are drastically deformed. This deformation was introduced in the Garden of Eden and over time it has grown in its irregularities and brokenness. The grace of God shown repeatedly to Israel and culminating in the Incarnation has not completely eradicated human frailty and sin. We continue to see through mirrors dimly, livid that the mirror has not automatically altered our reflection, choosing, as it may, to reveal our truest selves, our naked self, behind the fig leaves.

The second aspect of this re-forming process is to spend time, focused time, immersing ourselves in Scripture. For those engaged in the re-forming process, the daily devotion must now become a devotion of life; a quick search in the Bible App must grant permission for the Bible to search us. Instead of looking through Scripture, we must allow Scripture to look through us, determining who we are and where we need to be, providing us with a measuring distance for

which to strive for, to close the gap. There is glory in such a process, a holiness. Scripture reminds us of God's infallibility and our fallibility, God's eternity and our finitude. Scripture points us to Christ crucified. It reminds us of God's splendor. It challenges us to love each other as God loves us, despite us. While challenges will always remain, it is Scripture that exhorts us to hope, to set our sights on high, and our visions even higher. More than memory verses, more than popular biblical figures, more than naming the Ten Commandments; the church must allow Scripture to become us. "I'd rather see a sermon than hear a sermon any day," a wise preacher, Dr. Cecil L. Murray,<sup>359</sup> once said.

### **RE-ENGAGEMENT**

Genuine efforts at re-imagination for the church must also stretch beyond the spiritual, sacred realm and into the realm of human interaction, the spiritual meeting the social. There can hardly be any signs of spiritual growth if there is no clear and direct manifestation in the improvement of our social relationships. At this point, it is necessary for all people, all Christians, all churches, to take extraordinary steps to engage one another, to listen. While many churches have thus far engaged in various ministries and programs aimed at racial reconciliation, such efforts are tempered by fact that most churches have not. It is important too that we recognize, for proper engagement to take place, that in an effort to dismantle a long existing caste system, the dominate caste must be willing to lead the majority of the efforts to engage with those deemed lower caste. Far too often, in most cases, it is the lower castes of people

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<sup>359</sup> Dr. Cecil L. Murray serves as University Fellow for the University of Southern California's Center for Religion and Civic Culture. Most is known across most prominently as a former pastor of the esteemed First AME Church of Los Angeles. He has served as an exemplar to me in my work in ministry and has had in instrumental role in the shaping and forming of families work within the California region. More can be learned about him here <https://crcc.usc.edu/people/cecil-l-murray/>.

spurring action for racial reconciliation, calling for social justice and equality, for basic human rights and the ability for individuals to operate in their natural gifts. This fact is evidenced repeatedly in the contributions of figures spanning the gamut from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., W.E.B. Dubious, Mahatma Ghandi, Nelson Mandela, Thurgood Marshall, and a host of others. It is not to say that some belonging to the dominate caste have not made contributions in this arena; it is to suggest that much of the work here must be led by those considered dominant caste, as America remains majority white.

Engagement does not mean, simply, sitting down and praying together, conducting a joint worship service, and leaving after bidding goodbye, going back to separate lives. Engagement, as described here, goes deeper than that. It means the sharing of lives across races and cultural divides. Engagement does more listening than talking and it consists of a realized desire to welcome those outside of one's own family into their own family. Engagement of this kind is willing to sit by other races and cultures at the soccer game, willing to have pizza together afterwards, laughing at some human thing. It is sharing hopes and dreams and thoughts, without fear of disdain and judgement. It is to provide support and hope and love, outside of one's own natural inclination to retreat inside a familial bubble. Engagement means to deconstruct a sense of strangeness, of otherness, and to see in each person what we wish to see in ourselves – *the Imago Dei*.

### **RECKONING**

If the Christian Church is to be re-imagined in contemporary times, it must also commit to securing justice for those who have been oppressed. First, for the Christian, there must be a realization that God is a God of justice. God, speaking through the prophet Amos, proclaims

“But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.”<sup>360</sup> The word justice conveys fairness, equality. On multiple occasions throughout the Scriptures, this word is used to communicate a sense of reordering or aligning events or relationships to their rightful place and position. In the case of the Christian Church and American Christians, there must be a renewed understanding of defining justice and exploring what it means precisely to pursue justice in our time. While the theme of justice has often been co-opted to think exclusively about ramifications for those facing some kind of legal battle, more reinvigorated attempts must be made within the church environment for discerning theological matters of injustice today.

Defining justice more fully might help to begin the process. Justice implies that there has been a wrong done to someone, by someone; that there was a certain action which caused a certain end, a concerted and coordinated effort to inflict damage on a population. When America is true to its history, it recognizes the error of robbing this land from indigenous populations, and, even more, the deliberate effort to exterminate them.<sup>361</sup> Further, the enslaving of black peoples for two and a half centuries, subjecting them to unimaginable brutality, along with the nearly century-long effort of Jim Crow to legally disenfranchise them, has placed black Americans at a considerable social, educational, political and economic disadvantage, akin to trying to swim to the other side of a pool while your ankles are tethered to heavy weights. While some black Americans have managed to rid themselves of one ankle weight, the other ankle weight remains, the daily burdens and fears carried by even the most well-off black Americans. Further still, as we have seen, the inhumane treatment of immigrants from Mexico and other Latin American countries, the stripping of their children, the cheerful glee at watching some of

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<sup>360</sup> Amos 5:24. NRSV.

<sup>361</sup> Jessica Wolf, “Revealing The History of Genocide Against California’s Native Americans,” *UCLA*, August 15, 2017, <https://newsroom.ucla.edu/stories/revealing-the-history-of-genocide-against-californias-native-americans>.



them lay prostrate, dead in the muddy rivers of the Rio Grande; the indifference so many feel watching them work for pennies on the dollar – as if that is what they deserve – should cause every conscientious Christian deep consternation. There must be forms of justice.

Both Isabel Wilkerson and Robert Jones are helpful in this regard. In Wilkerson’s book she recounted a recent trip she made to Germany, nearly eighty years after Hitler’s reign.

Touring several important sites, she tells the story of her arrival in the wide-open space of downtown, near the Brandenburg gate, a 4.7-acre site. She writes, recounting her arrival at the site:

Two thousand seven hundred eleven concrete rectangles, as if a field of chiseled coffins of varying heights, stand in formation, separated by just enough space for people to walk between them and to contemplate their meaning. The stones undulate and dip toward the center, where the ground hollows out, so that when a visitor reaches the interior, the traffic noise dies away, the air grows still, and you are trapped in shadow, isolated with the magnitude of what the stones represent. This is the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe who perished during the Holocaust.<sup>362</sup>

Germany has sought to reckon with their past, to provide a sense of justice. They have opted not to glorify parts of their history stained with hatred and bigotry. Those are parts they are not proud of, that they do not claim. Far from erasing those dark moments of their history, they have chosen to reckon with it, to overcome it, and they have made considerable efforts to do so.

Rather than build statues to confederate generals in the case of America, Wilkerson, quoting Susan Neiman, author of *Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil*, writes,

“Germany has no monuments that celebrate the Nazi armed forces, however many grandfathers fought or fell for them.”<sup>363</sup> Wilkerson tells of other measures Germany has taken to reckon with their past:

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<sup>362</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 343.

<sup>363</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 346.

In Germany, displaying the swastika is a crime punishable by up to the three years in prison....In Germany, there is no death penalty....In Germany, few people will proudly admit to having been related to Nazis or will openly defend the Nazi cause....In Germany, some of the Nazis who did not kill themselves were tracked down and forced to stand trial....In Germany, restitution has rightly been paid, and continues to be paid, to survivors of the Holocaust.<sup>364</sup>

In Germany, part of their process of national healing consists of national reckoning, of coming to terms with their past, finding ways to remember it, in all its tragic flaws; to properly account for the millions of lives lost, an effort to atone for sin. “They do not run from it. It has become part of who they are because it is a part of what they have been. They incorporate it into their identity because it is, in fact, them.”<sup>365</sup>

Robert Jones, in *White Too Long*, also helps us see how reckoning can potentially play out at the local church level in America. Importantly, however, he begins with defining more fully the idea of reckoning by examining its etymology. “Reckoning highlights two branches of historical meaning: one more narrative and one more transactional. On the Old English side, *reckoning* means to give a full verbal account of something, but its Dutch and German roots connote notions of economic justice, a fair settling of accounts,”<sup>366</sup> he contends.

Jones writes of two churches based in Macon, Georgia: First Baptist Church of Christ and First Baptist Church “on New Street.”<sup>367</sup> First Baptist Church of Christ is comprised of mostly white members, many of whom are from prominent families in the area. First Baptist Church “on New Street” has a largely African-American congregation. Both churches, with similar names, are literally adjacent to each other, “with their rear parking lots forming vectors that, if extended just a hundred yards or so, would intersect in a nearby park.”<sup>368</sup> These two churches have almost

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<sup>364</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 346-347.

<sup>365</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 348.

<sup>366</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 227.

<sup>367</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 199.

<sup>368</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 199.

a shared location, but more importantly, they have a shared history. In 1826, Jones writes, First Baptist Church of Christ was founded by white charter members who were slaveowners, “owning between eight and twenty slaves each. For the first two decades of its existence, as was common in the South, whites and blacks worshipped together, with white slave owners sitting toward the front and enslaved people sitting separately in the back.”<sup>369</sup> During the 1840’s, tensions began running high over the issue of the slavery, as the church’s black congregants began to outnumber its white members. To ease tensions, the church’s white leadership structure decided a new arrangement was warranted. They leased a section of land and a building to the black members so they could form their own black church, but still under the governing authority of the parent white church. A new name was given to the black church: First Baptist Church New Street, and it was pastored by a white pastor up until the civil war.<sup>370</sup> Over the course of the next one hundred and twenty-eight years, both churches remained separate, only a “tacit acknowledgement of their shared history but no meaningful contact between the two congregations.” It seems – as it had always seemed – there was a God for white people, and a God for black people.

But, as Jones recounts, a reckoning began to take place. In 2014, the pastors of both churches decided to meet, Pastor Scott Dickson of the “white church,” and Pastor James Goolsby of the “black church.” They began honest conversations about their shared history, their common humanity, and what it really means to be the Body of Christ. They both invited and encouraged their respective congregations to participate in forums and joint worship services and arranged for other fellowship opportunities between the churches. In October 2018, members of both churches took a bus trip to visit the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery,

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<sup>369</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 201.

<sup>370</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 201.

Alabama, something they had been planning to do for four years together.<sup>371</sup> Such engagement has not been easy, and there has indeed been bumps along the way with both congregations, recent events such as the tragedy at Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina compelling deeper dialogue. But these two churches with a shared history have maintained the course, both being strengthened by the Holy Spirit, and each other, along the way.

It is important too, notes Jones, not to confuse nor coningle reckoning with reconciliation. The latter, he argues, is sort of an easy way out, a pursuit which often eases the conscience of white Christians but fails to address the broader and deeper economic injustices which have occurred. Pastor Dickson, the pastor of the white church, offers this assessment of his work thus far partnering with his neighboring church:

I've stopped using the word *reconciliation*...for what we're doing. I've started using *justice work* more, not saying racial reconciliation, but really talking about racial justice. When we throw around the word reconciliation, especially as white Christians, white people, we're betraying our desire to just kind of move through all of the hard stuff to get to the happy stuff. So, when we're talking about justice work, for me we're getting into these much stickier questions of what has been lost, what is owed.<sup>372</sup>

The work of these churches to date serves as a model for what it means for the church to reckon within itself. The church, this sort of redeemed church, must be vocal and seek methods for concrete and urgent activism. Reckoning acknowledges the mistakes and sins of the past and fights vigorously to make things right, to make things just. The greater the sin, the greater the act necessary for atonement. For the Christian, this is most perfectly evidenced in Christ.

## **RENEWAL**

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<sup>371</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 199.

<sup>372</sup> Jones, *White Too Long*, 228.

When the word renewal is used within church settings, it often conveys a sense of revival. In the black church tradition, in fact, one becomes familiar with the emphasis placed on annual revivals, taken place during spring and summer, or any time a leader feels called to stir up congregants in the work of the Lord. The purpose here does not conflate renewal with revival. Renewal, as noted here, suggests a manner of going about the work of ministry and the church with a greater level of intentionality as it relates to our preaching and teaching. While revival certainly calls for and bids the arrival of the Holy Spirit, so too does renewal. Renewal calls for an passionate revamping of homiletics. It seeks to offer a greater sense of urgency with God's word in the world, calling forth the Kingdom of God on earth. As we have explored the role and purpose of rhetoric and how it influences behavior, preaching and teaching within and without the corridors of the church must take on new meaning. Each week, pastors and Christian leaders are called to appear before God's people and bring a hopeful, lifegiving message to a hurting world. They are called, as Lischer notes in *The End of Words*,<sup>373</sup> to help people conform to the image of Jesus. Although faced with various temptations, distractions, and trepidation, from challenging texts such as imprecatory Psalms to feeling like they have nothing to say, Lischer reminds readers of the significance and necessity of language in the life of God's people and the world. The preacher's task has never been more important. Renewal of this kind invites us to fall in love again with the power of proclamation.

Renewal of this kind also consists of acknowledging that we, as a church, have not always been right. Our efforts have not always been pure. In fact, as Jones has pointed out, the church has been at the forefront of many of this country's most disturbing atrocities. A false sense of holiness has often fostered and led to heinous acts. A walk down memory lane reveals a

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<sup>373</sup> Richard Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005).

church that at one time disallowed black parishioners and refused to serve them Communion – as if Jesus’ own blood saw something so arbitrary as race a vital factor in salvation. Leaders of the church sat by idle while black people were lynched at the stake, treated ridiculously by the criminal justice system, unfairly targeted. Dr. King, in his “Letter From The Birmingham Jail,” spoke of such hypocrisies with penetrating acuity:

In deep disappointment, I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love....But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and fear of being nonconformists....There was a time when the church was very powerful....Things are different now. The contemporary church is often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch-supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church’s silent and often vocal sanction of the things as they are.<sup>374</sup>

Mostly optimistic, King continued to express serious doubts about whether enough churches and clergymen would help make the church better, make it what it ought to be. And that remains the pressing task of the contemporary church at the dawning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Indeed, how the church understands itself as the Body of Christ on earth necessitates renewal.

### **RIGHTEOUS RESISTANCE**

Finally, a potential next step in re-imagining the church and Christian practice in a time of extreme polarization is to embody and assume a posture of righteous resistance. Resistance generally conveys as direct refusal to obey what are perceived to be unjust laws, actions and behavior by a dominant caste or majority rule. However, resistance can also be co-opted by those who wish to resort to violence to assuage perceived grievances. Resistance perverted can manifest itself as extreme violence. It can unleash the worst in humanity, defeating all efforts to

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<sup>374</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., *Essential Writings*, 299-300.

call attention to matters perceived to afflict them. Thankfully, there has unfolded in history another way to express resistance, a way known as non-violent resistance. This way, the way embraced by Mahatma Ghandi, Martin Luther King Jr., and others, is a form of refusing to resort to violence even in the face of violence.

Perhaps no other figure in recent memory can remind us of righteous resistance than the recently passed civil rights icon: John Lewis. After a life duly committed to serving humankind, John Lewis transitioned July 17, 2020. What we learn from individuals such as John Lewis is that there remains an ongoing fight for justice, equality, and freedom in America. Lewis recognized that for America to become a better nation for all – realizing the promises of its creed – requires courage, conviction, enlightenment, and a willingness to stand unapologetically during this fight. John Lewis dedicated his entire life to standing up for justice, freedom, equality, and basic human rights for all peoples. Sharing the spirit, nerve, and audacity of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Lewis engaged in what he commonly referred to as “good trouble,” as he sought to stir the conscience of America and redeem America from its original sins. Good trouble is righteous resistance. It is non-violent activism. And, most importantly, it is the kind of activism to which Jesus Christ himself endorsed and embodied.

Righteous resistance within the current church environments looks like peacefully protesting unjust immigration laws which separate nursing mothers from their children. It looks like being on the forefront of solving hunger in American cities, working to address an ever-deepening homeless crisis, and addressing and correcting racist stereotypes. In our churches, righteous resistance means standing against forms of misogyny, bigotry, and division. And yes, righteous resistance means standing up for the rights of those who are not Christian, who belong to other religious affiliations, or those who may not have any religious affiliation at all.

Righteous resistance means not being indifferent about recent protest following the violent murder of George Floyd, the killing of Breonna Taylor, and the subsequent acquittal of the officers, and the millions more of black and brown people in America who are racially profiled daily, assumed guilty merely by the color of their skin. Righteous resistance means that the church must finally see what Dr. King tried to help it see: that what affects one affect all, that “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”<sup>375</sup>

Good trouble is righteous trouble, rooted in civil disobedience and grounded in Christian love, respect for humankind, and common decency. If the American church is to weather the headwinds it currently faces, in some cases emerging from a sleeping slumber and ways of disillusionment, it must discover how to get into “good trouble” on behalf of a good God.

## **STRANGERS NO MORE**

Accounting for all which has been noted above, the primary metric that should be used to evaluate Christian rhetoric and behavior in the contemporary church should be whether it could be considered wise from the perspective of the sages and in line with the way of Jesus Christ. Using something as artificial as race, as in the case of a caste system, is fundamentally flawed and fosters a fictional understanding of oneself. As we have seen, the writer of Proverbs offers deep wisdom that should inform all rhetoric, and Jesus, in the narrative of the Good Samaritan, demonstrates the call to welcome the stranger, to put ourselves in another person’s shoes. In fact, Jesus embodies the wisdom found in Proverbs in his own speech. As Jesus interacts with the lawyer in the telling of the parable, Jesus is also engaged in the process of using rhetoric to persuade, to influence, to teach and guide towards a noble end. Jesus is “doing” that which He is

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<sup>375</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., *Essential Writings*, 290.



advising us to “do” in the treatment of our neighbors. Equipped with the wisdom found in Proverbs, Jesus embodies and exhorts us to mirror Him.

In his work *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Desmond Tutu offers a memorable line when he recites a heartbreaking discovery from the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. During a trip to an unmarked gravesite, a man comes forth and says, “This is my brother. I know those shoes.”<sup>376</sup> It is this sense of empathy and compassion which should undergird the efforts of every Christian. It is to understand that all of humanity is God’s family and that all deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. All deserve to become all that God has designed them to be. This is the way of wisdom, and the way of Christ. We must operate in a sense of humility and a sense of honor, an honor for one another, for ourselves and of God.

To be strange is to be deemed unhuman. To be strange is to be unwelcomed, to have no home, no place where your soul can rest. To be strange is to be ostracized from society, restricted in movement and opportunity, placed in cages, caves, and communities underfunded and unkept. To be strange is to feel the stares of questionable eyes that have already decided your guilt, because they have decided beforehand about your humanity – your lack of humanity. To be strange is to be one of those migrant mothers whose nursing babies were stripped from them for the simple cause of wanting freedom, of wanting what America itself promised. To be strange is to be one of those nursing babies, placed in an unending matrix of the messiness of the homeland security system, shuffled from state to state, tossed to and fro, still at this very hour, yearning for those hands that once fed you, once held you, once loved you.

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<sup>376</sup> Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday Publishing, 1999), 192.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out in *Not In God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*,<sup>377</sup> that one of the Hebrew Bible's core lessons is for us to engage the stranger – that we must enter into the “humanness of the other” and “love each other.” The first way we do this is by remembering that we were once strangers ourselves. Sacks invites us to hear the words God gave to the Israelites in Exodus 22: 21, “Do not wrong or oppress the stranger, for *you yourselves were once strangers* in the land of Egypt;” and, in Exodus 23: 9, “Do not oppress a stranger, for you know what it feels like to be a stranger, for *you yourselves were once strangers* in the land of Egypt.” There is something clear that God wants us to know: to be reminded of where we once were, and how we felt while we were there. In the case of the Israelites, they needed to remember their time in exile and slavery – how vicious and un-glorious it was – as necessary for their future. Even in their suffering, it seems, there was a sense of sanctification, a holy beauty being bestowed upon and within them even as it was at the time unrecognizable. Their affliction was part of their anointing. Sacks offers here that “care for the stranger is why the Israelites had to experience exile and slavery before they could enter the Promised Land and build their own society and state.”<sup>378</sup>

It is important, Sacks helps us see, to remember what it feels like to be a stranger, so that as God carries us forth, we may better empathize and exhibit compassion for the stranger. Sacks continues:

You will not succeed in caring for the stranger, implies God, until you yourselves know in your very bones and sinews what it feels like to be a stranger. And lest you forget, I have already commanded you to remind yourselves and your children of the taste of affliction and bitterness every year on Pesach. Those who forget what it feels like to be a stranger eventually come to oppress strangers, and

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<sup>377</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (New York: Schocken Books, 2015), 184.

<sup>378</sup> Sacks, *Violence*, 184.

if the children of Abraham oppress strangers, why did I make them my covenantal partners?<sup>379</sup>

Walking in covenant with God, Sacks may argue, is to eliminate the feeling of strangeness others may feel because one recognizes with acute familiarity what it was once like to be strange themselves. The contemporary church must do all in its power to recognize that not only does strangeness exist, but that one of the mechanisms for which strangeness is upheld is the church itself.

Let us together pray we witness the day when God's Church and Christians of all expressions engage those whom we do not know – or those whom we have been taught not to know – with rhetoric which has been informed with the wisdom of the sages accompanied by behavior conformed to the neighborly love social ethos of Jesus Christ. Indeed, let us make strange, strange.

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<sup>379</sup> Sacks, *Violence*, 184.

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

Steven Dewayne Johnson II is a pastor, theologian, and activist. His ministry demonstrates a teaching and preaching proclamation which seeks to be biblically and exegetically sound, socially conscious, culturally relevant, and applicable to contemporary hearers. Steven Johnson's work focuses specifically on inspiring individual success by empowering people to live out their God-ordained destiny, developing themselves educationally, exposing themselves socially and enriching themselves culturally. Believing that at its best efficacious ministry is done both inside and outside the walls of the church, Pastor Johnson encourages social and political activism, community development, innovation, and entrepreneurship.

Stemming from a rich family heritage of pastors, preachers, evangelists and missionaries, Steven is a fourth-generation pastor who has a genuine love for people. He relishes opportunities to build relationships with individuals and families across all backgrounds and enjoys interacting with all generations – young, old and in between. He loves everything about the many contours, complexities, and challenges of ministry – from moments of joy, triumph, and celebration, to standing in prayer with his parishioners during times of crisis and great travail. Further, he believes that the church is undoubtedly one of the best places to promote community, heal racial and cultural divides, work towards social justice, promote education and entrepreneurship, and help people live up to their full potential in Christ.

Not only is Steven called to ministry, but he is also uniquely called to business. He is unapologetically a bi-vocational pastor who has amassed a meaningful and productive career in real estate development and finance. As a highly experienced professional, he has helped manage high impact public infrastructure projects, multifamily developments, industrial warehouses, and

commercial centers. He has handled due diligence, entitlements, financing, proformas, and construction of projects of various scopes for both single and joint ventures.

Placing a significant premium on higher education and academic achievement, Steven graduated Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Business Finance and Economics from Morehouse College, a world renowned historically black college. He attended seminary at Duke University where he graduated with a Master of Divinity degree with a focus in homiletics and pastoral care. Never completely resting on his academic achievements, while both pastoring and working full-time, he earned his MBA degree in Finance from the University of Redlands, graduating Summa Cum Laude and has recently been awarded the Doctor of Ministry degree in Spring 2021.

An additional unique experience for Steven has been his exposure and upbringing in various mainline protestant denominations. Although his late grandfather – Hardy Johnson Sr. – was an elder in the Church of God in Christ, one of the largest black denominations in North America, Steven (by way of his own father Rev. Steven D. Johnson) also served under the leadership, guidance and mentorship of Rev. Dr. Cecil L. Murray, the famed pastor of First AME Church, Los Angeles. Adding to this melting pot of various religious expressions and traditions, Steven attended Duke University Divinity School – a United Methodist seminary – and counts among his exemplars Rev. Dr. William C. Turner, pastor of Mt. Level Missionary Baptist Church in Durham, NC. Such a wealth of diversified denominational experience and exposure has served to provide Steven with a well-rounded ministry perspective and burgeoning Christian theology which places a premium on pneumatology and praxis, holiness and methodism, progressivism and conservatism.

Many noteworthy honors and recognitions have been bestowed on Steven throughout his educational and professional career. As a student at Morehouse, he was named a Benjamin Elijah Mays Scholar, an Otis Moss Jr.'s Oratorical Contest Winner, and an E.B. Williams Honor Recipient. At Duke University, he received the prestigious Martin Luther King's Jr. Scholarship and the renowned Jameson Jones Preaching Award. He has traveled internationally for ministerial work and has interned at churches across America and the world – from Cashiers, North Carolina to Johannesburg, South Africa.

On a personal level, Steven enjoys reading, traveling, RVing, fishing, and riding Harley Davidson motorcycles. He is blessed with the love of his life, Jennifer Johnson, and together they are the proud parents of two gorgeous and precocious daughters, Saraiya Elise and Jordynn Rae, and their handsome son, Steven Dewayne Johnson III.