

Kelly Brownell:

Hello and welcome to Policy 360. I'm Kelly Brownell, dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Today, it is my great pleasure to welcome Ian Haney Lopez to the program.

Ian is a thought leader on issues of race in this country, specifically how racial divisions in the United States have led to unprecedented economic disparities and to the rise of certain political positions and leaders. Professor Lopez is professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and is the author of a book entitled *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class*. Welcome.

Ian Haney Lopez:

Thank you very much. It's a-

Kelly Brownell:

I'm delighted to have you here. Your work has really led the way the field thinks about some of these issues, so it's a delight to be able to talk to you about these. First, so that we're on the same page, could you describe what you mean by dog whistle politics?

Ian Haney Lopez:

Absolutely. If you think of a literal dog whistle, it's a whistle that blows on such a high frequency that human ears can't hear it, but dogs can. So this is a metaphor that gestures towards political speech that's operating on two levels. On one level, silent and hidden, and on the other, delivering a strong message.

Now, I'm particularly concerned with racial dog whistles. So if you think about terms like welfare queen, illegal alien, thug, inner city. Or in contrast, if you think of terms like silent majority, the heartland, real Americans, tax-paying Americans, these are what I'd call racial dog whistles.

They're dog whistles in the sense that on one level on the surface, they're silent about race. None of these mentions race expressly. And yet, just underneath, strong racial imagery is associated with all of these terms.

Kelly Brownell:

So tell us how some of this played out in the most recent election, if you would.

Ian Haney Lopez:

The most recent election is actually a fairly tricky example of dog whistling in this sense. There were clear racial references that seemed, to many people, not to be coded, and yet I'd argue did function in code. So we need to make a distinction between different audiences that you might want to hide a racial message from.

Traditional dog whistling tried to hide the underlying racial imagery, both from critics and opponents, and also from the base that was to be activated. Donald Trump gave up on hiding the racial message from his critics and his opponents. Nevertheless, I'd say he continued to use racial messages or coded formats for his racial messages in ways that hid the racism of the underlying narrative from the base he was trying to mobilize.

To make this most clear, the easiest way to see this is to compare Donald Trump to David Duke. David Duke, the former Klan leader, ran for Senate in Louisiana. And when he did, in his opening

statement, he said, "I'm here to fight for the rights of Euro-Americans who are under threat." Okay, so even Duke in his sense is being oblique. He says Euro-Americans. He really means white. And yet what he's done is he's foregrounded the racial defense as the rationale for his campaign. No matter how egregious Donald Trump has been in the 2016 campaign and as president, he has never come out and said, "I'm here to defend white people," right? That would be to completely abandon the whistle, to be clear about what his underlying message is.

With respect to his base, he continues to use phrases like Islamic terrorism, Muslim extremists, illegal aliens, American carnage, crime and shootings in Chicago. His base can be convinced that these are real and legitimate fears, and that they are not motivated by a sense of racial anxiety or racial panic. Even as most of his critics, myself included, say when you turn to the language of Mexicans as drug dealers, as rapists, when you turn to this language of illegal aliens, you're trading in, you're stimulating racial fears.

Kelly Brownell:

How intentional do you think it is that these sort of strategies are used, and it doesn't matter how intentional they are?

Ian Haney Lopez:

We know that the strategies are fully intentional. It's a little bit trickier when we talk about particular candidates, but let's go back. Dog whistling starts in the South in the 1960s, and it's responding to the civil rights movement in two different ways. On the one hand, the civil rights movement is creating space for this sort of politics, because the very act of race relations changing is leading to anxiety among the white population, especially around integration of schools, of workplaces, of neighborhoods.

At the same time, the civil rights movement turns the mores of the country against expressed invocations of white solidarity and white supremacy. By the 1960s, for a politician to stand up and say, "I'm here to represent white people," which is something that politicians could say as recently as the '30s or the '40s, now was a marker of somebody who was morally stunted.

So on the one hand, politicians see that race is sort of an important concern among the white electorate. On the other hand, they're foreclosed from using expressly racial language. So they turn to thinking purposefully and strategically about how they can respond to racial concerns and yet do so through non-racial language.

Some of that early language in the South is state's rights and freedom of association. Again, dog whistles. On their surface, they don't mention race, but just underneath, there are clearly direct references to the right of the Southern states to resist federal integration, the right of white business owners or white homeowners to refuse to deal with African Americans to continue to perpetuate whites only establishments. Completely purposeful, completely calculated.

We see it with Richard Nixon. We hear it from him in his own words, we hear it from his advisors. So we know. And then we hear it from different people who have been associated with the Reagan administration, with George W. Bush, with George H. W. Bush, with Fox News. We know this is a purposeful strategy.

Now, the rhetoric of dog whistling has become so pervasive that I think it's entirely possible some politicians don't realize they're engaged in dog whistling. They're just repeating familiar tropes about the dangers of the inner city and undeserving, lazy people on welfare, and the moral degeneracy associated with food stamps. I think it's entirely possible that some politicians have simply absorbed that message and may not themselves be purposeful and strategic, but the overall phenomenon is

purposeful and strategic. And to the extent that some politicians have absorbed it is simply a sad commentary on how pervasive this phenomenon has become.

Kelly Brownell:

You've spoken about the sender of what you refer to as dog whistles. What about the recipients of these? Do people respond to these on emotional levels? Do people realize that there's some coded racial things going on here? How do you think it affects the people who are hearing those messages?

Ian Haney Lopez:

Yeah. Such an important question. Let's make a distinction between two types of dog whistles, because I think there's some confusion here. A dog whistle can be like a secret handshake, right? So in that sense, a dog whistle is a politician speaking in code that he knows the intended audience will understand, but that he hopes will be unintelligible to most of the general audience, right?

This is George Bush, for example, when he talks about the wonder-working power. Now, for most people, it's an interesting alliteration, but it doesn't mean much. But for fundamentalist Christians, it was a way for him to signal, "I'm with you. I understand your world view. I represent it. I aim to enact it in government." That's dog whistle as a secret handshake.

Racial dog whistles are different than that. The point of a racial dog whistle is to hide from the intended audience the fact that they're being manipulated in terms of their racial fears. So a racial dog whistle is more like a Pavlov's bell, right? You ring the bell and it leads to an association with food and the dog starts salivating. I mean, I hate the imagery at a certain point because we're saying people are dogs and it's really an unfortunate aspect of this metaphor, but it's important to understand.

In fact, it's so important to understand this is an intentional effort to manipulate the Republican base, or in Democrats, Bill Clinton would do this too. This is an intentional effort to manipulate the base.

And here's what I want to stress. So often when people talk about race in American politics, they respond by saying, "We cannot believe that the vast majority of Americans, or that 60% of whites who vote for, for example, Donald Trump, are bigots. And therefore, we reject the idea that race has any role." And I want to be crystal clear. I'm not saying they're bigots, and I'm not saying that they understand that they're being appealed to in racial terms. In fact, I'm saying the reverse. I'm saying these are good, decent, hardworking folks who are struggling to make ends meet, feel tremendous anxiety about what's going on in society, both economically and demographically, and though they know themselves to be good people and though they're really genuinely committed to not being racist, nevertheless are receptive to messages that play to underlying racial fears.

These are the messages that say Sharia law is coming. There's a Muslim in the White House. Immigrants are committing violent, terrible crimes. There's no factual truth underlying any of those statements, but it's a powerful narrative that has a fierce hold on the imaginations of many Americans, and politicians are constantly playing to it and continually stoking and renewing it.

Kelly Brownell:

So because you're so interested in your own scholarship in the issues of race, you're talking about dog whistles in that context, and the particular politicians you mentioned were all Republicans. If somebody said, "The Democrats do the same thing, but perhaps wish to activate other sorts of emotions," how would you respond?

Ian Haney Lopez:

I would say first, it's important to understand that the Democrats themselves have been engaged in this sort of, I would say, despicable, race-based dog whistling. Look, the Democrats understood as early as 1970 that race could be used as a wedge issue to break apart a governing coalition of the white working class, African Americans, and Northern liberals. They thought though that the race, that was going to serve as a wedge issue, reflected a sort of a grassroots organic anxiety about race and that this would gradually dissipate. This was a terrible blunder, because they failed to recognize that as a conscious, purposeful strategy, the Republicans, from Richard Nixon, Barry Goldwater, Ronald Reagan, decided that they would throw logs onto that smoldering fire so that instead of dying out, the flames simply got larger. Okay.

They realized by 1992, after George H. W. Bush and the Willie Horton ad, they realized by 1992 that race isn't going away as a wedge issue, that they must confront it. How were they to do so? Bill Clinton makes a fateful decision that he's going to confront race by playing the same Republican game. He introduces himself as a new Democrat by which he means he's going to end welfare as a way of life, he's going to crack down on criminals, and he's going to cut the size of the federal government. Those were the Republican dog whistle themes. So Democrats have very much engaged in this game indeed.

If we want to understand some of the worst outcomes of dog whistling, like mass incarceration, we should understand that the incredible growth in our prison population reflects a competition between Republicans and Democrats to show who's tougher on crime, which is to say who's tougher on people of color, by continually ramping up the carceral state.

I think also though the question is, "Are there other sorts of dog whistles?" It's important to understand that the main impetus for dog whistling comes out of the South, it comes out of race, it comes out of a fear of African Americans, but it doesn't stay there. It quickly expands. So dog whistling is part of a larger complex of culture war politics, and that's occurring in terms of gender, in terms of families, in terms of abortion, in terms of sexual orientation, in terms of today, in terms of transgender bathrooms, also in terms of supposed disrespect of Christianity, protection of guns, right? So dog whistling about race is really part of a larger culture war politics.

Kelly Brownell:

Could you argue that there could be positive and constructive ways to use dog whistles that is to activate positive things without directly attacking the issue?

Ian Haney Lopez:

Yes, in the sense that we can understand dog whistling as one common form of political speech in which politicians are trying to talk to particular audiences. And I think this takes us back to dog whistling as secret handshake. And the idea that politicians would conduct a general campaign in which they're sending different messages to discrete audiences, that's completely routine. I don't see any problem with that. Really, that's not an issue. That's perfectly fine.

What I want us to see though is that the sort of dog whistling that's been going on is qualitatively different than that. The sort of dog whistling that we've had is politicians using the stump to communicate messages that they know the broad mass of the polity would repudiate as a threat to civil society as fundamentally un-American. They know that they are communicating a message that says to Americans, "Fear each other. Hate your neighbor. Act out of anger." That's what makes this sort of racial dog whistling or dog whistling around gender or sexual orientation so destructive socially and politically, because we have politicians who appealing to our worst selves, but hiding that from us as they seek to manipulate us.

Kelly Brownell:

Would you share your thoughts on how this phenomenon affects wealth disparities?

Ian Haney Lopez:

Absolutely. This is so important. So often when we talk about race, we think about harms to communities of color, and we don't realize that race is actually part of how we structure our economy and our society. It works particularly powerfully this way in terms of dog whistling, because dog whistling wasn't simply about winning votes, it was about changing people's orientation towards government. It was about communicating to people that the real enemy in their lives was not people of color, but it was government. Government that supposedly took hard-earned tax dollars from white Americans and gave it to undeserving blacks and browns. Government that refused to control dangerous blacks through lax criminal law. Or government today that refuses to protect whites by refusing to close the border or by inviting in refugees.

The idea of attacking government is a way of saying to white Americans, "Don't believe in government. Trust instead the marketplace. So cut taxes, even though that'll be taxes for the very rich, because they're the ones who will create jobs, not government. And also, cut these social programs that built the middle class, because they're not actually building the middle class when the government invests in welfare, and invests in education, and invests in job training, invests in cities. That's actually giveaways to undeserving minorities. Cut those programs. And finally, since you can't trust government, but you can trust the marketplace, let marketplace actors write their own rules. Get government out of the way in terms of regulation. Let the regulated industries regulate themselves."

These are the policy prescriptions that are perfect for creating a new plutocracy. They're perfect for transferring wealth from the working class and the middle class to the very rich. This is what's happened to us over the last 40 years. We now have levels of wealth inequality we haven't seen in a century. We understand the policies. If you talk to Robert Reich, if you talk to Joe Stiglitz, if you talk to Paul Krugman. We understand the policies that got us here. What we've been less clear on is the way in which these policies, essentially of distrusting government and trusting instead the marketplace, have been sold to us through a politics of racial resentment.

Kelly Brownell:

So how would you go about counteracting the dog whistle politics that occurs?

Ian Haney Lopez:

I think that we need to connect up two conversations, which not only have been separated, but have been seen as antithetical among liberals. We have one conversation that's about racial justice. We have another conversation that's about economics. The people who are saying we should talk about economics are saying to us, "We can't talk about race, because race divides us." And the people who are talking about race says, "Race is the first issue we have to confront because it's the most fundamental."

We need a unified single message that both camps can embrace. It's a message that says racism is a divide and conquer weapon that has been used to turn us against each other and to hijack our government and our economy. If you want racial justice, you need to understand how it's divide and conquer politics that's producing the worst outcomes in communities of color, from mass incarceration to mass deportation. And if you want economic justice, you have to understand that depends on government working for everybody and not for the very rich, and that depends on everybody truly meaning everybody. Because it's the extent to which rights have disinvested from a sense of a public

sphere in which they have a deep interest that we've allowed government to be taken over by the corporations and the very rich. In other words, here's the simple single message, race and economic inequality for everybody are inseparable in the United States, and whatever issue you want to prioritize, you have to focus on both simultaneously.

Kelly Brownell:

Do you see any positive signs?

Ian Haney Lopez:

I see a positive sign perversely in the dire circumstances under which we find ourselves today and in this sense, we have been trying to create fusion movements that are rooted in cross-racial solidarity for centuries in the United States. And at every turn, some whites have joined. They've joined understanding that racism, it brutalizes, it dehumanizes people, that it's a terrible, moral wrong. But at every turn, the majority of whites, consciously or unconsciously, have felt comfortable saying to themselves, "Racism's okay by me. I have my workplace, I have my school, I have my job, I have a future for my children that I think is in some ways dependent on segregation, reflective of continued white dominance."

In 2017, for the first time in the history of the country, that is no longer true. For the first time, it's possible, I think, to communicate and to convince, perhaps even a majority of whites, that racism is the single most destructive force in their lives. That it's racial fear in the electorate that helped to elect a person who is an unstable narcissist who is bringing the country to the brink of calamity. Not just in terms of levels of corruption that I think we haven't seen in a long time, not just in terms of traditional dog whistle politics in which that we campaign to protect whites from Mexicans and Muslims, he will rule to the benefit of billionaires, allowing Wall Street to rewrite its rules, allowing extractive industries to rewrite the rules.

But more fundamentally, I think with Donald Trump, we have to seriously confront the prospect of new wars of aggression designed to push the idea of an essential conflict between the Christian West and the infidel East. I think we have to worry about climate collapse. We have a president who not only is undoing the timid steps that have been taken so far, but he actually wants to double down on the sorts of economic activity that actually drives climate collapse.

I think that we have a chance to say to most whites, "Take a hard look at where you are and realize that in terms of your own economics, in terms of your own healthcare, in terms of security that you might want in your own age, in terms of a future for your child, your best hope lies with recapturing government and making sure that government works for you and not for the very rich. That in turn requires that you see that racism has been the primary divide and conquer weapon that has allowed government to slip out of the hands of the people and into the hands of the corporations."

Kelly Brownell:

So one of the arguments you would make to the whites you're referring to, that economic disparities is against everyone's interest, including your own, and then dealing with race issues can be a consequence of that discussion.

Ian Haney Lopez:

That's right. So it's both a moral argument and a pragmatic argument. The pragmatism comes first. The pragmatism is this, people will join a multiracial coalition, some out of morality, more out of a sense that

it's in their self-interest. And we need to say to whites, "It is in your self-interest to fight against racism." And what is that self-interest? That self-interest is getting government back onto your side, back onto the side of the people and not the corporations.

At the same time that it's a pragmatic argument, and I think that the pragmatism is a crucial component to this, I don't want to let go of the idea that it's also a moral argument. Because it's a moral argument that draws on a set of values that are deeply a part of our country. They're the moral values that say we are all created equal. We all have rights that inhere in us by virtue of being human and not by anything the state grants us. We all can look to and draw upon our differences. Differences in our faces, in our religions, in our languages, in our heritage. And out of all of these differences, draw the strength to create a new people capable of governing ourselves for ourselves and for our own broadly shared prosperity. That is it's the morality of the American revolution which suggests the way forward.

We have lost control over our government and our economy and our lives to the extent that we have distanced ourselves from the ideals of the American revolution. And the way forward is truly a moral way forward. Come together as we the people. Come together and really mean we the people as everyone undivided by race, by color, by gender, by religion, by sexual orientation, convinced instead of our shared humanity and of our ability to together create a more perfect society for all of us.

Kelly Brownell:

Yesterday, at the same time you were on campus, filmmaker Carlos Sandoval was here. He's made some very powerful films, documentary films about immigration. He was talking about the power of storytelling and the importance of letting people know that there are human consequences to these otherwise abstract policy discussions. You see some of that playing out now in the context of the immigration reform. People are saying, "I support getting rid of illegal immigrants," and then all of a sudden, it's somebody who's from their community they know. And I wonder, as more and more of those human stories begin to be told, whether people will sense that there really is an unjust activity going on and unfairness occurring, and that these human stories will lead to a shift in the way people are thinking about some of these policies.

Ian Haney Lopez:

I think the human stories are incredibly important. By the way, I know Carlos. I've helped with some of his documentaries. I think he's fabulous. But I think these human stories are incredibly important. They're responding to a purposeful effort to de-humanize and to demonize others. That's really what's happened in our country with respect to this category of an illegal alien.

We all in our lives move. We make an effort to pursue opportunities, to move to the place that's going to be best for us, best for our children, best for our future. And immigration really is a story of people having the courage and the tenacity and the fierceness of spirit to move and to join with a new community and build a new life. These illegal aliens, they're us, but even more courageous, even more willing to sacrifice themselves for their children. They are the best of us. And what we see as politicians telling us, not only are they not the best of us, they're not even really human.

So on one of these narratives, those humanizing narratives are so important. On another level, I don't know if it's enough. I don't know if it's enough, because we've got to tell stories about shared humanity against right now a president who is dedicated to developing narratives of threat.

Donald Trump is proposing to create an office specifically geared to spreading messages of people who've been victimized by undocumented immigrants. I don't mean to disparage their pain and their suffering. That's real. But we also know that as a matter of human empathy, when you... There are

bad people in every community. Bad things happen. But when you begin to attribute crime and violence to a class of people, you dehumanize them and you subject them to hatred.

So we need stories to combat that, but there's a different story that I think we also need to tell. This is a story, it comes back to this idea that we're all in this together. We need more whites standing up and saying, "Here's my story. I'm hardworking. I'm trying to make ends meet. And all I hear from my political leaders is to point my finger at brown people or at black people. But let me tell you, they haven't hurt me. The people who've hurt me are the corporation that shipped my job overseas. The people that hurt me are the politicians who impose taxes on me and pass tax cuts for the very rich." Right?

So we don't just need stories in which we try and humanize people of color. We need stories from whites who are saying, "I am white, but I realize more than anything else, I'm human. And to be white is not to be under threat. To be white is to be subject to manipulation by the scheming politicians. And I'd rather affirm my humanity with other poor and working people, and point my finger at the bad guy, not the brown guy."

Kelly Brownell:

Well, thank you so much for joining us. It's been an absolutely fascinating discussion.

Ian Haney Lopez:

Thank you so much. Very glad to be here with you.

Kelly Brownell:

Ian Haney Lopez is the John H. Boalt professor of law at the University of California, Berkeley, and is author most recently of *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class*. He has been on the Duke University campus to give the Robert R. Wilson Distinguished Lecture on dog whistle politics, race policy, and economic inequality. Until next time, I'm Kelly Brownell.