

Nygaard Notes

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“The Rabid Loathing of Government”

Using all sorts of tactics like civil disobedience, nonviolent resistance, marches, protests, boycotts, “freedom rides,” and rallies, the Civil Rights Movement of the 20th Century scored numerous successes, from the 1948 presidential order desegregating the military to the 1954 *Brown vs Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling, to the passage of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

One of the reasons I think of the Civil Rights struggle as The Second Reconstruction is that, as with Reconstruction I in the 19th Century, the widespread challenge to the racial status quo eventually resulted in significant action by the federal government, action aimed at enforcing some newly-guaranteed rights and privileges. However short-lived and limited such action turned out to be, the violent backlash that ensued was powered in part by the very *idea* of the government saying, “No, you can’t have slaves. No, you can’t have segregation.” Such government action was called “tyranny” by slaveholders and, later, segregationists, and stoked a hatred of “the government,” a hatred that ebbs and flows but invariably surges forward at times of a perceived threat to systems of power.

The anti-government, anti-black backlash that arose in response to the Civil Rights movement was in full view by 1964, when an arch-conservative Republican ran for President in that year’s election. That arch-conservative was Arizona’s Barry Goldwater.

[I’m old enough to remember my Uncle Jack and his family coming to visit us in 1964. He brought with him a stack of bumper stickers reading “Goldwater: A Choice - Not an Echo.” I didn’t know then (I was 10 years old) and I don’t know now what that slogan was supposed to mean, but I slapped about two dozen of the non-removable stickers on the big white freezer in our basement, much to the chagrin of my parents. I didn’t know then, and I don’t know now, what I was thinking. But, enough about me...]

At about the same time as I was decorating the family freezer the Political Education Project of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) published a paper entitled “Goldwater and the White Backlash,” authored by student activist and organizer Tom Kahn.

Kahn explained the backlash by writing that “the rhetoric, ideology, and pressurized militance of the Negro movement have convinced some whites that the Negro is *pushing* too hard, by which they think he is *progressing* too fast. They think he is getting more and more of what he wants yet growing in appetite, and unreasonableness, and selfishness. Thus we see the white worker who feels that the Negro is not content with equal rights but interprets equal rights to mean displacing the white worker from his job.”

Igniting the Right

The website History.com notes that “Despite a landslide loss . . . Barry Goldwater Brought the Far Right to Center Stage in the 1964 Presidential Race” and “ignited his party’s ultra-conservative wing for decades to come.”

One of the first things to “ignite” was the entrance onto the national political stage of one George Wallace, a man who, after his campaign to be the Democratic nominee for President in 1964 fizzled out, went on to receive significant support in each of his next three campaigns for the U.S. Presidency (1968, 1972, and 1976). Wallace’s small-government rhetoric illuminates a key aspect of the racial backlash that was born in response to The Second Reconstruction.

In the New York Times Book review of January 8th of this year appeared a review of a book by Jefferson Cowie entitled “FREEDOM’S DOMINION: A Saga of White Resistance to Federal Power.” Reviewer Jeff Shesol writes that the

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Alabama-based case study “is essential reading for anyone who hopes to understand the unholy union, more than 200 years strong, between racism and the rabid loathing of government.”

Shesol notes that Cowie highlights one “peak period . . . in the conflict between white Alabamians and the federal government,” and that period was the period that featured “the attempts of Alabama Governor George Wallace and others to nullify the civil rights reforms of the 1950s and 1960s.”

The book reviewer notes that “When George Wallace struts onto the stage in the book’s closing act, he seems at first a parochial figure: unrefined, unrepentant, inveighing against ‘ungodly government’ and the persecution of whites. He carries the freight of his forebears with belligerent pride. But Wallace, as Cowie makes clear, had bigger ambitions. Instinctively, he knew that his brand of politics had an audience anywhere that white Americans were under strain and looking for someone to blame. Wallace became the sneering face of the backlash against the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, against any law or court ruling or social program that aimed to include Black Americans more fully in our national life. Racism was central to his appeal, yet its common note was grievance; the common enemies were elites, the press and the federal government.”

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson on July 2, 1964, and two days later, in a speech on July 4th, Wallace declared that the Act “is a fraud, a sham, and a hoax.” But he said much more than that, declaring, “This bill will live in infamy. To sign it into law at any time is tragic. To do so upon the eve of the celebration of our independence insults the intelligence of the American people.”

“Never before in the history of this nation,” said Wallace, “have so many human and property rights been destroyed by a single enactment of the Congress. It is an act of tyranny. It is the assassin’s knife stuck in the back of liberty.”

For the white men who were Wallace’s audience, “liberty” had a certain meaning. They wanted, in the words of Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson, to be “free to brutalize,” free to “plunder and lay waste and call it peace, to rape and humiliate, to invade, conquer, uproot and degrade.” The most obvious—and the most powerful—obstacle standing in the way of white people exercising their “liberty” was, and is, the federal government, which Wallace refers to as “the federal force-cult.”

Wallace was leading a backlash not limited to his own state of Alabama, nor even to the larger region of the South. No, Wallace assured his audience on Independence Day 1964 that “Being a Southerner is no longer geographic. It’s a philosophy and an attitude.”

That “philosophy” was apparently shared by a Californian named Richard Nixon. The racial backlash symbolized by Wallace was advanced further by Mr. Nixon, whose exploitation of white fear—known euphemistically as the “Southern Strategy”—found electoral success, as the London Guardian says, by putting “a heavy emphasis on law and order and states’ rights to attract white voters concerned about racial integration.” (White voters in 1968 were far more than “concerned” about integration, but leave that alone for now.) This white supremacist strategy was repeatedly employed through the following decades as the Republican Party continued to find electoral success by evolving into a white people’s party, reminiscent of the Democratic Party of the 19th Century.

Wallace, Nixon, and other white political leaders hoped that the white voters to whom they appealed were united by a “grievance” against the philosophy of *equal rights for all* that gave the Civil Rights movement its power and that threatened the racial status quo. ◆

The Third, and Most Radical, Reconstruction

As I type these words, in the early years of the 21st Century, the news in this country is filled with reports on the rise of the right wing. There is a growing strain of right-wing populism in this country, symbolized by Trump and his MAGA fans. Reports appear almost daily of reactionary attempts to steer school curricula in a conservative direction, of ever-more intense attacks on voting rights, of white supremacists and anti-government extremists plotting attacks against government, racial, religious, and political targets in the United States, of attacks on abortion rights, of book bannings, of racialized police violence, of the scapegoating of dark-skinned immigrants, and more.

Yet, in spite of all this—no, actually, *because* of all this—I want to suggest that now, in the third decade of the 21st Century, we may be in the early stages of the most radical Reconstruction yet.

How can I say this?! Well, I'll tell you!

Learning from Backlash

A backlash, according to the dictionary, is “a strong and adverse reaction by a large number of people, especially to a social or political development.”

The backlashes of the 19th and 20th Centuries were reactions to concrete threats: the threat to a slave-holding society in the first case, and the threat to the Jim Crow system in the second case.

So, if we start by understanding that the period in which we are living—the early 21st Century—is a period of backlash, then we must be witnessing “a strong and adverse reaction by a large number of people to a social or political development.” And that gives rise to a question: *What developments are we seeing?*

History has given us the gift of two previous Reconstructions, two movements that upended and transcended the racist policies and systems of slavery and its successor, Jim Crow. But despite their dramatic successes, the idea that people of color are subhuman, less-than, or somehow “other” lives on in the present-day United States. So, perhaps the biggest gift bequeathed to us by those earlier struggles is the glimpse they offered of what life could be like if we were to change not only policies and

systems, but also *consciousness*.

And that starts with questioning the system that gave birth to the dehumanization that we call racism. That system is Capitalism.

“The Horizons of Property”

In his 1948 book “The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It,” historian Richard Hofstadter noted that “It is generally recognized that American politics has involved, among other things, a series of conflicts between special interests—between landed capital and financial or industrial capital, between old and new enterprises, large and small property—and that it has not shown, at least until recently, many signs of a struggle between the propertied and unpropertied classes. ... The fierceness of the political struggles has often been misleading; for the range of vision embraced by the primary contestants in the major parties has always been bounded by the horizons of property and enterprise.

“However much at odds on specific issues, the major political traditions have shared a belief in the rights of property, the philosophy of economic individualism, the value of competition; they have accepted the economic virtues of capitalist culture as necessary qualities of man.”

What Hofstadter was saying was that U.S. politics up to his time offered two choices to voters: Vote for one type of capitalist, or another type of capitalist. As was the case when Hofstadter was writing, so it is today: Any candidate who questions the nation’s core values, or first principles, of Individualism and Competition won’t get far in a U.S. election.

Although I had never read Hofstadter, I have been saying for years that the capitalist values of Individualism and Competition are at the core of the dominant ideology of the USA. And that a challenge to those values will require—and will result in—a change of consciousness, a transformation in the hearts and minds of the majority of the people living in these United States.

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That's what we're fighting about, that is the root of the "polarization" that we hear about all the time: Is the United States to be a society based on Individualism and Competition, with its vision of *Everyone for Themselves*? Or dare we strive to be a society based on Social and Cooperative values, where the vision is everyone *Working Together for the Common Good*? Or, to put it more simply, is the United States of America to be a beacon of Capitalism? Or a beacon of Democracy?

The question is not a new one. In his 1935 book "Christianity and the Social Revolution," the economic anthropologist (I guess you'd call him!) Karl Polanyi wrote the following words, which are eerily relevant today:

"The mutual incompatibility of Democracy and Capitalism is almost generally accepted today as the background of the social crisis of our time. Basically there are two solutions: the extension of the democratic principle from politics to economics, or the abolition of the Democratic 'political sphere' altogether. The extension of the democratic principle to economics implies the abolition of the private property of the means of production, and hence the disappearance of a separate autonomous economic sphere: the democratic political sphere becomes the whole of society. This, essentially is Socialism. After abolition of the

democratic political sphere only economic life remains; capitalism as organised in the different branches of industry becomes the whole of society. This is the Fascist solution."

At the beginning of this essay, I noted the ample evidence of what I called the rise of the right wing. I suggest we see this also as evidence of a powerful backlash in this country. But... a backlash to what?

The backlashes of the 19th and 20th Centuries were reactions to concrete threats: the threat to a slave-holding society in the first case, and the threat to the Jim Crow system in the second case.

In contrast to those earlier backlashes, the current backlash is not a response to a particular institution or system. It's a response to a changing country, to a changing world. As activists pound on doors that have long been closed to them, time and demographics are making their demands more prominent, more visible.

The scholar Theo Spanos Dunfey tells us that "Social change is the way human interactions and relationships transform cultural and social institutions over time, having a profound impact on society." The backlash that is gripping the United States is built on fear. The social change that fuels that fear is built on hope. The ferocity of the current backlash is a hopeful sign. It tells us that change is coming, coming too fast for those at the top. Never fast enough for the rest of us. But it's coming. ♦

Update on The Big Crisis

I often cite the scholar and activist John A. Powell of the Othering & Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley, who tells us "When societies experience big and rapid change, a frequent response is for people to narrowly define who qualifies as a full member of society."

A key feature of the current right-wing backlash involves just that: a widespread effort to narrow the definition of who qualifies as a full member of society. The process, known as Othering, never stops, but the theory has it that it becomes more pronounced at times of big and rapid change.

Now, it may seem obvious that we are living in times of big and rapid change. After all, the United Nations

Development Programme says that "A new 'uncertainty complex' is emerging, never before seen in human history." Honestly, it's hard to argue with that, isn't it?

But, since I subscribe to the journalistic caution "Don't believe everything you think!", I'm always checking to see what sorts of "big and rapid changes" may be stimulating the current backlash. Sure, change is happening; it's always happening. But is it really big enough and rapid enough to provoke the modern-day Sons of the Soil—the straight, white, native-born Christian men who traditionally have the final say in these things—to step up their Othering efforts to the point where people are starting to worry that we are on the brink of a new Civil War in this country? ↗↗↗

→→ With that question in mind, I offer here an update to my list of seven broad areas of crisis—which, when combined, I refer to as The Big Crisis—where we see enormous changes happening, where enormous uncertainty rules the day. Big and rapid change, indeed!

Remember, as you read, that times of crisis are also times of possibility. If you think that these ideas are, in fact, just products of my imagination, write and tell me why.

Otherwise, remember to be kind to each other, and do what you can to help bring about transformative change.

Here's The Big Crisis, in Seven Parts. Add more parts if you like!

1. *Inequality and Resource Allocation*: The multinational business website *Insider*, previously named *Business Insider*, reported in September 2019, “Income inequality last year reached its highest level in more than half a century, as a record-long economic expansion continued to disproportionately benefit some of the wealthiest Americans. In February [2019], Federal Reserve Chairman Jay Powell said income inequality would be one of the biggest challenges for the US over the next decade.”

2. *The Decline of the U.S. Empire* I love to quote the historian Alfred McCoy, and here he is again, in an article published last month in *TomDispatch*, entitled “An American New Deal for An Entire Continent? The Fading of Washington's Global Dreams and the Coming of a New World”: “In this century, with its disastrous wars, Washington has already lost much of its influence in both the Greater Middle East and Central Asia, as once-close allies (Afghanistan, Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey) go their own ways. Meanwhile, China has gained significant control over Central Asia, while its recent ad-hoc alliance with an ever-more-battered Russia only fortifies its growing geopolitical power on the Eurasian continent.”

3. *U.S. Democracy in Crisis* Just before Christmas, National Public Radio reported on a survey they had just completed which “finds that more than 8 in 10 Americans believe there is a serious threat to democracy.” A couple of months earlier, the New York Times conducted its own poll, which found that “Seventy-one percent of all voters said democracy was at risk — but just 7 percent identified that as the most important problem facing the country.”

4. *Capitalism in Crisis* The incompatibility of democracy and capitalism presents us with an ever-present choice: Strengthen democracy, which would weaken capitalism, or strengthen capitalism, which would weaken democracy. This conflict plays out every day in our media/political systems, although it is virtually never labeled as such.

5. *The Rainbow Transformation and Demophobia* It's now projected that 2044 is the year that white people go from being the majority in the United States to being the minority. I call this inevitable demographic reality The Rainbow Transformation. But many white people are terrified at the prospect of losing their status as the racial majority. I have referred to the fear of this on the part of white people as Demophobia. The magic date is now 21 years away.

6. *Global Climate Disruption* In January 2021 the London Guardian put it this way: “The planet is facing a ‘ghastly future of mass extinction, declining health and climate-disruption upheavals’ that threaten human survival because of ignorance and inaction, according to an international group of scientists, who warn people still haven't grasped the urgency of the biodiversity and climate crises.” The report commented that “scientists from Mexico, Australia and the US, say the planet is in a much worse state than most people – even scientists – understood.”

7. *Declining Social Health* See this week's “Quote” of the Week, and add this excerpt from the United Nations *Human Development Report*:

“In the wake of the pandemic, and for the first time ever, the global Human Development Index (HDI) value declined—for two years straight. Many countries experienced ongoing declines on the HDI in 2021. Even before the pandemic, feelings of insecurity were on the rise nearly everywhere. Many people feel alienated from their political systems, and in another reversal, democratic backsliding has worsened.

“There is peril in new uncertainties, in the insecurity, polarization and demagoguery that grip many countries. But there is promise, too—an opportunity to reimagine our futures, to renew and adapt our institutions and to craft new stories about who we are and what we value. This is the hopeful path forward, the path to follow if we wish to thrive in a world in flux.” ♦

Greetings,

My recent obsession with the U.S. Civil War and the Reconstruction era that followed that war has mostly subsided. But my research into that period of our history sticks with me, more so than my typically-obsessive research usually does. I expect it will affect my understanding of whatever the future may bring. It should, I guess. That's why I study history, after all.

In the previous Nygaard Notes I said I would, in this edition, be talking about concepts such as loss aversion, linguistic pragmatics, stochastic terrorism, racial backlash, and more. Well, I don't really talk about much of that in this issue after all, except for racial backlash. The rest will have to wait until NN #698, or whenever I get to it. I keep forgetting that Nygaard Notes often sort-of writes itself, so I keep thinking I can tell you what's next. I rarely can.

These are tough times in which we are living. Yet I remain, for the most part, optimistic. I think you'll see why as you read this current issue. Maybe it will boost your spirits, too. I hope so.

Optimistically yours,
Nygaard

“Quote” of the Week: “A New ‘Uncertainty Complex’ Is Emerging”

This week's “Quote” comes from the most recent Human Development Report, released by the United Nations Development Programme this past September 8th. You'll see the term “Anthropocene,” which is a geological term that was conceived as a new time in Earth history, in which human action drives changes in Earth's dynamics comparable to those driven by natural forces. Here's a tiny excerpt from the 2022 Report:

“We live in a world of worry. The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, having driven reversals in human development in almost every country, continues to spin off variants unpredictably. War in Ukraine and elsewhere has created more human suffering. Record-breaking temperatures, fires, storms and floods sound the alarm of planetary systems increasingly out of whack. Together, they are fueling a cost-of-living crisis felt around the world, painting a picture of uncertain times and unsettled lives.

“Uncertainty is not new, but its dimensions are taking ominous new forms today. A new ‘uncertainty complex’ is emerging, never before seen in human history. Constituting it are three volatile and interacting strands: the destabilizing planetary pressures and inequalities of the Anthropocene, the pursuit of sweeping societal transformations to ease those pressures and the widespread and intensifying polarization.”

Read the entire Report here: <https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-2021-22>

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P.O. Box 6103

Minneapolis, MN 55406

E-mail: nygaard@nygaardnotes.org

Web: www.nygaardnotes.org