

The Racial Dialectic: President Barack Obama and the White Racial Frame

Adia Harvey Wingfield · Joe Feagin

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Abstract This paper introduces the concept of the “racial dialectic” to describe the ways racial dialogues and policies have transformed in the wake of Barack Obama’s historic election to the presidency of the United States of America. Using public statements and behaviors from elected officials, pundits, and Obama himself as case study data, we examine the tension between what we term the hard racial frame, the soft racial frame, and the racial counterframe in the public discourses. We conclude that these competing frames produce a dialectic that has transformed the way racial issues are discussed and interpreted in the wake of Obama’s election.

Keywords Racial dialectic · White racial frame · Barack Obama · Counterframe

The 2008 election of President Barack Obama sparked a major turning point in the history of U.S. racial relations. Widely considered the first African American with a “serious” chance at winning the Presidency, Obama ran what even political opponents considered a near-flawless 2008 electoral campaign and thereby won a decisive majority of the popular and electoral college votes. As is perhaps to be expected, however, Obama’s candidacy and subsequent win revived questions, concerns, and debates about the changing nature of racial matters in a United States that has dealt inadequately with its racial history.

On the one hand, many commentators argued that Obama’s win heralded the arrival of a “post-racial” period in the United States where racial background ceased to be a significant determining factor of one’s outcomes, opportunities, and life chances. Public figures like columnist Maureen Dowd and the editorial board of the *Wall Street Journal* offered various

A. H. Wingfield (✉)
Department of Sociology, Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA, USA
e-mail: aharvey@gsu.edu

J. Feagin
Department of Sociology, Texas A & M University, College Station, TX, USA
e-mail: feagin@tamu.edu

versions of the claim that Obama's election shepherded U.S. society past the point where issues of racism still mattered.¹ Yet these arguments coexist uneasily with a concurrent rise in openly and blatantly racist rhetoric, language, and imagery that has regularly mocked President Obama, his wife and daughters, and black Americans more broadly. A great many cartoons likening the President to a monkey, online comments describing Obama's children as "ghetto hoochies," and a sharp rise in hate group membership all have indicated that celebrations of post-racial America were quite premature. In 2010 a few openly white supremacist candidates - who attacked not only the Obamas but also undocumented immigrants and government antidiscrimination programs - ran for state and local political offices, including one who filed as a Republican to run for a New Hampshire House seat.² Recently too, the NAACP has prepared a strong statement condemning the racist commentaries on the Obamas expressed in segments of the "Tea Party" movement, an active arch-conservative segment of the Republican Party.³

In this article we use the theoretical concepts of "hard racial framing," "soft racial framing," and "counterframing" to explain and explore these varying points of view. We also contend that the increasing prevalence of open racial framing and counterframing indicates a "racial dialectic" central to society, one regularly shown in the tensions and conflicts between increasingly overt racist rhetoric, speech, and actions and challenging counterframes that critique that still-systemic racism.

The Racial Dialectic: Racial Framing and Counterframing

We use the concepts of *racial framing* and *racial dialectic* to understand and explain the post-election racial commentaries, discourse, and ideology, and the ways these vary markedly across different social groups. Racial framing refers to the racial perceptions, stereotypes, images, ideologies, narratives, and emotive reactions used to make sense of a given situation, experience, or issue involving racial matters, especially in the United States and other Western countries (Feagin 2006, 2010b). The dominant form of racial framing that typically comes through in the U.S. media, schools, and other social institutions is a very strong and well-legitimated *white racial frame*. With this term, we refer to a form of racial framing that allows whites to collude in or rationalize the systemic processes that facilitate and maintain ongoing racial privilege and inequality (Feagin 2006, 2010b). White racial framing typically obscures attention to the existence and consequences of these deep structural inequalities, and offers those who use it a convenient language, rationale, and perspective for maintaining everyday discrimination and related racist practices. For example, when school curricula teach that Christopher Columbus "discovered" America and make little mention of the concurrent genocide of Native Americans or the research that indicates that Africans visited the Americas prior to Columbus' visit (see Loewen 1995; van Sertima 1976), such institutionalized educational practices employ an old and normalized white racial framing of U.S. history and society. Today, as we will see, the use of this four-centuries-old white racial framing is not limited to whites. We use this term, white racial

¹ "President-Elect Obama: The Voters Rebuke Republicans for Economic Failure," *Wall Street Journal*, November 5, 2008, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122586244657800863.html> (accessed December 28, 2008); Dowd, Maureen. "Dark Dark Dark," *New York Times*, February 21, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/22/opinion/22dowd.html?_r=1&ref=opinion (accessed July 19, 2010)

² Nick Wing, "New Hampshire State House Candidate Running On White Supremacist Platform," http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/07/13/new-hampshire-state-house_n_644619.html (accessed July 14, 2010).

³ Heather Hollingsworth, "NAACP Condemns Racism in Tea Party

frame, in part to highlight the ways this type of aggressive racist framing reinforces whites' position of superior power and privilege in the U.S. racial hierarchy.

The confrontational white racial frame offers a convenient way for whites and others to interpret various racialized situations, events, and occurrences in society. This frame includes racial stereotypes, prejudices, commonsense assumptions, images, and sincere fictions that cast whites as more virtuous, intelligent, moral, and honest than members of other racial groups. For example, when white college students at elite universities assume that their black classmates' presence must be a consequence of affirmative action policies or sports scholarships, they are using white racial framing of blacks as less intelligent, qualified, and capable in order to make sense of their educational environment (Picca and Feagin 2007). These racial beliefs also intersect with gender and class ideals to shape the ways various groups are represented in the frame. Thus, within the dominant racial frame, Asian American women often become represented as sexualized "geishas," upper class black American women become "educated black bitches," and working class Latino men are rendered "gangbangers" or menial workers (see Collins 2004; Le Espiritu 2003).

In recent work (Harvey Wingfield and Feagin 2010), we have developed the concept of white racial framing more fully to account for its variations and complexity, especially in regard to political issues and events. We argue that white racial framing plays out in somewhat different versions, though all manifestations of the frame reinforce white dominance and the subordination of people of color. In everyday use this white-originated racial framing can involve a hard racial framing or a soft racial framing. Hard racial framing typically uses more explicit racist imagery and language, openly contextualizes people of color as racially inferior to whites, and involves emotional, "gut-level" responses of racial disgust, distaste, or discomfort directed toward people of color. Soft racial framing, in contrast, downplays the reality of structural racism, glorifies people of color who ignore the presence of institutionalized racism, and plays up a "colorblind" language, while avoiding the openly racist terminology (for example, the N-word) of the hard racial frame. These everyday frames are not mutually exclusive; particular individuals often transition back and forth between these common racial frames depending on the social context and the specific racial issue at hand. Ultimately, however, both versions of the white racial frame legitimate and reinforce the apparent normalcy of white privilege and structural advantages, and thus mask the extent to which other groups are actually disenfranchised and burdened by racial inequality in material terms.

In some cases, people of color themselves utilize aspects of the dominant white racial frame to shape their everyday understandings. White racial framing is by no means exclusive to whites, though its adoption allows them to legitimize and justify the ways in which systemic-racism processes work to their advantage while unjustly disadvantaging members of other racial groups (Feagin 2010b). For example, in a study of Asian Americans, Chou and Feagin (2008) found that numerous members of this racial group, including recent immigrants, sometimes embrace racist stereotypes and other negative views of non-Asian groups, views that whites created and that remain core components of the dominant white racial framing. Feminist theorist bell hooks (1990) makes a similar argument, contending that stereotypes of black Americans are held by members of other racial minority groups as well as whites. Additionally, some black Americans, such as the academics Shelby Steele (1993) and John McWhorter (2001), as well as journalist Juan Williams (2007), have employed the soft racial framing to explain educational disparities, poor health outcomes, sentencing disparities, and other issues that disproportionately affect African Americans, although this is less common. Ultimately, however, using any version of the old white racial

framing is a self-defeating exercise for people of color, as that utilization generally reinforces the structural and interactional racial barriers they face in a racially stratified society.

While the dominant racial framing serves to legitimize and justify a very unequal status quo, overt *counterframing* serves the opposite function. Operating dialectically, these counterframes involve the perspectives, ideologies, and epistemologies that challenge the prevailing racial hierarchy and its legitimating white racial frame (Feagin 2010b). Though members of any racial group may use counterframing to the white racial frame, Feagin (2010b) shows that such antiracist counterframing in the United States has so far been most overtly and fully developed among black Americans. Over four centuries of brutal and sustained oppression, black Americans have developed and maintained a strong counterframe that has offered a critical analysis of and challenge to the many messages and emotions inherent in the dominant white racial framing.

As far back as the 19th century when the dominant white racial frame described black inferiority as a justification for slavery, legendary abolitionist Frederick Douglass evoked a counterframe that highlighted equality, black humanity, and the fallibility of a social structure that exploited black citizens. Douglass developed an extensive counterframe as a leading anti-slavery abolitionist and, later, opponent of Jim Crow segregation. For instance, in 1852 Douglass (1980) made an abolition-oriented Fourth of July weekend speech in Rochester: “What, to the American slave, is your Fourth of July? I answer: A day that reveals to him, more than all other days of the year, the gross injustices and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him your celebration is a sham” (556). In this counterframing Douglass emphasizes the hypocrisy of white liberty-and-justice rhetoric and the active counterframing of black Americans. This has persisted over the centuries to the present day. For example, recent research among black women entrepreneurs suggests that antiracist counterframing helps them to challenge gendered-racist ideas of the white racial frame through their everyday business endeavors (Gill 2010; Harvey Wingfield 2007).

Though less frequently, other U.S. racial groups employ some counterframing as well. For example, Eileen O’Brien’s (2008) research on Latino/as and Asian Americans—those she argues are part of the “racial middle”—reveals that a partial counterframing sometimes shapes their analyses of the ways that various racial groups are pitted against each other in an effort to draw attention away from whites’ dominant position in the racial hierarchy. Other studies show that a few antiracist whites periodically employ a meaningful liberty-and-justice counterframing in analyses of U.S. racial relations (Feagin and O’Brien 2003; O’Brien 2001), though most research on whites’ contemporary racial framing shows that this is relatively rare among whites (Bonilla-Silva 2001, 2003; Gallagher 2003; Picca and Feagin 2007).

In the back-and-forth struggles over various versions of the white frame, and especially between those versions and the counterframing of black Americans and other Americans of color, we see what we term a central “racial dialectic” in U.S. society. In assessing the dialectical ideas of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, many analysts (see, for example, Ollman 1976) have used the term “dialectical materialism” for their views of capitalistic societies. They highlighted the importance of the material reality of contending and changing capitalistic economic conditions, especially of the conflict of economic opposites, such as the classes of capital and labor. We do not wish to get into the many complexities of this dialectical materialism, which stresses economic matters, but only draw on the one important idea here of a *historical* dialectic involving *mutual penetration of polar social opposites*, which are played out in social contradictions over the course of historical events (Ollman 1976). In addition to the Western class struggles that dialectical materialism has accented, we suggest here the concept of the “racial dialectic,” which encompasses dialectical struggles

between dominant and subordinate racial groups in a highly racialized U.S. society. As with class struggles, racial struggles involve issues of group exploitation, intergroup alienation, and group struggle (for detailed analysis, see Feagin 2006). In North America self-named “whites” created the exploitative material and ideological reality of racial oppression: first in two and a half centuries of black enslavement, then in a century of near-slavery called legal segregation, and now in the large-scale patterns of contemporary racial discrimination. Over four centuries this system of oppression created contending and alienated racial groups, unjustly enriched white Americans on the one hand and unjustly impoverished black Americans and other Americans of color on the other. The struggles of these opposites have grown out of the material reality of oppression, a struggle over resources that has also generated a closely related ideological and framing struggle (for elaboration of the frame and counter-frame struggles, see Feagin 2010a).

In this paper, thus, we utilize this theoretical perspective and focus on the ideological and framing struggle that has been demonstrated thus far in the Barack Obama administration. Analyzing key moments that occurred within the first two years of Obama’s presidency as case study data, we examine the ways these racialized events demonstrate the use of both a hard racial framing and a soft racial framing of the prevailing racial reality, as well as the occasional (usually black) counterframing that signals important and dialectical resistance. We argue that since Obama’s election there has been a dramatic increase in public incidents, statements, and commentary that reflect a strong reliance on the old and hard racist framing. At the same time, occasionally Obama, other African Americans, and some whites, have publicly responded to such public racist events using either a soft racial framing or, relatively rarely, a black counterframing. We contend that because the (once again) increasingly visible hard racist framing is not met with an equally strong counterframing by African Americans and antiracist organizations; the resulting impact is often an increase in policies, language, and public discourse that use a soft, thinly veiled colorblind accent which remains a conventional white racial framing seeking to maintain racial privilege and power for whites and thus racial inequality in U.S. society.

Racial Framing in the Age of Obama

Ape Imagery and Calls to Violence

Many of the events immediately following Obama’s 2008 presidential victory are indicative of the ways politicians, media commentators, and everyday Americans often used a hard racist framing to make sense of this historic occurrence. Some clear examples of this can be found in the rise in hate group membership and the stark racist rhetoric they have used in public and on the Internet to describe members of the Obama family. White nationalist websites have described Obama as a “mulatto” who sought to “take over” the nation. They have contended that this sparks the need for a “new civil war” where whites can defend themselves against people of color and the “socialist, Muslim-sympathizing, gun-rights-hating, Mexican illegals embracing, abortion loving charmer POTUS⁴ (Harvey Wingfield and Feagin 2010, 216). Unsurprisingly, these websites have used graphic and blatantly racist language to make the case for Barack Obama’s unfitness for the presidency.

Comments on various websites have revealed similar language, though these include comments directed towards members of the First Family as well as Obama himself. In July

⁴ POTUS is an acronym for President of the United States.

2009, for instance, the mainstream conservative website Free Republic made headlines after commentators objected to a photo of Malia Obama, the president's then-11 year old daughter. Posters at that site described Malia Obama as “a common street whore” and “ghetto street trash” and went on to “wonder when she will get her first abortion.” Another commenter wrote: “They make me sick. The whole family... mammy, pappy, the free loadin’ mammy-in-law, the misguided chillin’, and especially ‘lil cuz... This is not the America I want representin’ my peeps.” Finally, one photo of a conversation between Malia and Michelle Obama was captioned, “To entertain her daughter, Michelle Obama loves to make monkey noises.”⁵

Notably, though Free Republic's comments are monitored by their site moderators, the comments on this site went unreported and remained in place for at least a day. After an onslaught of criticism, the comments were reviewed and deleted, but then were later reposted. With the reposting came a message from the site administrator that Malia and Sasha Obama did not pick their “American [sic] hating Marxist pig” of a father. The administrator then allowed additional comments, including one that “hope[d] they won't deal cocaine like the Kenyan” and another that claimed that “ghetto and Chicago thugs have taken over” the United States. Comments such as these can be found on numerous other conservative websites, indeed, even on mainstream television network websites (where they are not always deleted).

These comments signal an important shift—that of hard racist framing's move from the outer fringes of society into the conservative mainstream. Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2001, 2003) has argued that whites rarely make openly bigoted statements in the public sphere because it has become socially unacceptable to be seen as a racist. However, these numerous recent statements made by many whites on numerous conservative websites and at Tea Party events, as well as by white talk radio hosts like Rush Limbaugh and Don Imus (who once referred to black female college athletes as “nappy headed hoes”), are clear examples of the hard racist framing spreading widely into the public domain. Though the anonymity of the web provides cover for those who wish to use extremely graphic and overt racial slurs, it is significant that these sorts of comments not only appear on extremist sites, but can be found on sites like Free Republic that are generally considered rather *mainstream* conservative sites (Daniels 2009). Given the location of the strong racist comments, we argue that despite the anonymity of the posters, such views are now part of the conservative mainstream. In this sphere whites have used viscerally racist statements, imagery, and ideology to reinforce the idea of black Americans—and specifically, the Obamas—as subpar and subhuman. This type of racialized language is straight out of the hard racial framing that has historically been used to legitimate black Americans' unequal and discriminatory treatment (Harvey Wingfield and Feagin 2010).

The specific statements about the young Malia Obama reflect ways hard racial framing is specifically gendered as well. Questioning when an 11-year-old girl will get her first abortion reflects assumptions about black female hypersexuality and promiscuity that are also part of the hard racist framing created long ago by white Americans. Within this white frame, black women have long been cast as licentious and sexually aggressive, a controlling image that remains in contemporary media (see Collins 2000, 2004). By casting black women outside the bounds of the chaste, sexually decorous gender role considered appropriate for women, this white racial framing reinforces their inferior and

⁵ “Free Republic Pulls/Restores/Pulls Thread Bashing Malia Obama, FR Responds,” DailyKos, July 10, 2009, http://www.dailykos.com/storyonly/2009/7/10/752031/-*UPDATE-III*-Free-Republic-Pulls-Restores-Pulls-Thread-Bashing-Malia-Obama;-FR-Responds (accessed October 20, 2009)

subordinated role in society, including their highly disadvantaged position relative to white women.

Numerous other examples of this hard racist framing surfaced in the public sphere after Obama's win. In June 2009, Rusty DePass, a white Republican and former South Carolina government official, posted a statement on his Facebook page suggesting that a gorilla that recently escaped from the zoo was probably "just one of Michelle [Obama's] ancestors."⁶ Just prior to that event, a cartoon in the *New York Post* had depicted a chimpanzee being shot by two white police officers, and the cartoon's chimp was portrayed as the author of the recently passed, controversial economic stimulus bill—which was strongly identified in the media with Obama as the author. Defenders of the cartoon argued that it was only intended to represent the chimp that had been shot recently by police officers, but the "monkey" implications in regard to President Obama were clear and were pointed out immediately by black civil rights leaders.⁷

The widespread prevalence of cartoons, comments, and imagery likening the president and his family members to monkeys began prior to his election and has increased in frequency in public demonstrations and rallies, in the media, and on the Internet. Perhaps more importantly, these white depictions have become increasingly present in mainstream sectors. These types of representations of the Obamas as simian reflect an old theme in the hard racist framing of black Americans as subhuman and apelike (Feagin 2010b). For example, in the late 18th century, in the first book by a secular American intellectual, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, founding father Thomas Jefferson offered black women's implied bestiality as evidence of their subhuman nature. Jefferson asserted that even black Americans favor white beauty "as uniformly as is the preference of the Oranootan [Orangutan] for the black women over those of his own species" (1999, 147–148). By depicting black Americans as more like animals than human beings, the hard racial framing dehumanizes blacks and provides an ideological basis for condoning or perpetuating their unequal treatment by whites. This is evident in the *New York Post* cartoon, which implied an image of the President as an ape being shot by police officers, a particularly problematic representation given that unarmed black men are disproportionately likely to encounter fatal violence at the hands of police officers and that U.S. presidents have periodically been the targets of shooters.

Barack Obama as Hitler

Hard racial framing has also shaped the ways numerous members of the public and some high profile members of the media have chosen to depict Obama in regard to other political issues. In 2009, on April 15th and again on September 12th, overwhelmingly white protesters gathered to demonstrate against what they described as the spending excesses and government expansion of the Obama administration. Initially demonstrators modeled their protests after the Boston Tea Party and accessorized their events with tea bags, becoming known in the media as "tea baggers" or "tea party protestors." Though organizers purported that the attendees were nonpartisan protestors simply outraged by what they considered wasteful spending in the form of stimulus packages, tax increases for the top U.S. earners, and, later, proposed health care reforms, the numerous signs and rhetoric present at these

⁶ Hoover, Ben. "GOP Activist Says Escaped Gorilla Was 'Ancestor' of Michelle Obama," WISTV, June 19, 2009, <http://www.wistv.com/Global/story.asp?S=10526195> (accessed October 4, 2009)

⁷ "New York Post Political Cartoon Raises Concerns." NPR, February 19, 2009, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=100875822> (accessed October 20, 2009)

overwhelmingly white demonstrations sometimes indicated a white view of Obama shaped heavily by hard racist framing.⁸

Among the signs carried by protesters at the April 15 rally were those reading “Obama’s Plan: White Slavery,” “Obama=Hitler,” and “The American Taxpayers are the Jews for Obama’s Ovens.” Other signs carried images of Obama’s face superimposed with a Hitler mustache, or doctored representations of him in full Nazi regalia. The Hitler theme continued at the September 12 protests, with signs that read “Hitler Gave Good Speeches Too,” “Obama’s Civilian National Security Force is His Way of Making Us Pay For His Private Army,” “Stop the Obama Nation, Acorn=SS,” and similar images of Obama’s face on a picture of Hitler. As is evident, the theme of President Obama as Hitler or as determined to re-enact the mass genocide of the German Nazi regime was present among these white demonstrators. As at least one “White Slavery” sign implied, should Obama have his way whites would have become the victims of Obama’s perceived genocidal intent.⁹

While these members of the white public circulated the idea that Obama posed a threat to white people, some major media figures repeated this charge, particularly when assessing Obama’s responses to race-related issues. For instance, in the wake of Harvard University Professor Henry Louis Gates’ arrest for disorderly conduct in Cambridge, Massachusetts, President Obama did not immediately defend the white arresting officer’s behavior (discussed below). In response, conservative Fox television host Glenn Beck claimed that this action revealed a “deep seated hatred for white people or the white culture. . . . He has a problem. This guy is, I believe, a racist.”¹⁰ This statement generated much immediate attention and sparked a successful push by the civil rights group Color of Change to pressure many advertisers to pull commercials from Beck’s show.

The sentiment that “Obama hates whites” and plans to enact a racially motivated genocide with whites as targets reflects several aspects of the hard white racial framing. For one, this argument relies on the centuries-old racist framing of black Americans as dangerous and threatening. More specifically, the idea that blacks have a deep seated hatred and malicious intent towards whites is steeped in hard racist framing that suggests blacks, if they advance to high ranking positions, pose a particular threat to whites’ dominance and thus to the existing racial order. Note that due to racialized practices, whites already maintain unearned advantage in most social spheres (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Brown et al. 2003). Thus, blacks’ advancement only becomes threatening and problematic if viewed through racial framing which suggests that whites’ dominance is natural and justified.

The idea that Obama is anti-white thus relies on hard framing that casts whites’ authority and position of power as natural, normative, and something to be maintained through aggressive, even violent, measures if necessary. Historically, this very old white framing has served to justify punitive, extremist policies intended to keep blacks “in their place” and to maintain whites’ systemic advantage in a racially stratified social structure (Feagin 2006). Beginning in the slavery era and continuing under Jim Crow, measures like legal segregation, mob lynchings, and other forms of pre-emptive violence were predicated upon racially framed stereotypes and images of blacks as uncivilized, uncultured, and, without the necessary efforts to keep them in line, threatening of whites’ “appropriate” superior position.

⁸ “Tea Party Washington DC Photos: Conservative Protestors Rally Against Big Government.” Huffington Post, September 12, 2009, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/09/12/taxpayer-March-on-washing_n_284477.html (accessed October 20, 2009)

⁹ “Ten Most Offensive Tea Party Signs,” Huffington Post, June 8, 2009, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/04/16/10-most-offensive-tea-par_n_187554.html (accessed October 20, 2009)

¹⁰ “Glenn Beck: Obama Is a Racist.” *Cbsnews.com*, July 29, 2009, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/07/29/politics/main5195604.shtml> (accessed July 29, 2009).

(The racialized, gendered image of black men as a threat to white women is a particular manifestation of this [Davis 1981].) As such, when white protesters have suggested that President Obama's goal is "white slavery," or when they have likened him to Adolf Hitler and implied that whites will be the target of his modern-day genocide, they have relied on a hard racial framing that suggests that if given the opportunity, blacks will "take over," and in doing so, upset whites' socially advantaged status.

The suggestion that Obama is a modern-day incarnation of Adolf Hitler also reflects a hard racial framing that minimizes the specific gravity and racist framing of the Holocaust. During his reign, Hitler attempted to exterminate Jewish people, but also sought to rid Germany of gays and lesbians, the disabled, and other people of color such as the Roma in his efforts to create the perfect "Aryan nation" (Kershaw 2010). Not only has Obama obviously not made any efforts to engage in such group extermination, but the policies about which the demonstrators complain have no imminent or latent possibility of replicating any of these Nazi goals. While some white protestors may view Obama's financial stimulus package (which only extended efforts of the previous Republican president), health care reform, and minimal tax increases for the wealthy as "government excesses," these government policies will in no way lead to the imprisonment or extermination of white people. Thus, when white protestors cast Obama as a new Hitler, they not only show their power to define him in extreme terms in the streets and in the compliant mainstream media, but also minimize the horror and severity of what actually occurred during the German Nazi regime's violent attacks on human groups considered to be racially inferior.

From the beginning of its creation by whites in the 17th century, the minimization of real racial oppression by whites has been a key component of the hard racist framing. By dismissing or downplaying the systemic-racism component of white attempts to ensure dominance in U.S. society, this contemporary white framing often tries to obscure the power dynamics inherent in maintaining a U.S. racial hierarchy. When white protesters suggest that Obama's efforts to reinvigorate a lagging economy and provide better health care are equivalent to the mass genocide of the Holocaust, they dramatically draw attention away from the ways whites, as a majority group, today engage in many discriminatory actions upholding whites' advantaged position in society at the expense of groups of color (see for instance Brown et al. 2003; Moore 2008; Shapiro 2004).

Framing Obama's Associates

Over the course of his presidency, the hard racial framing has not only been applied to President Obama and his family, but also been used to interpret some of his decisions while president, particularly when those decisions have racial undertones or implications. The uproar that accompanied Judge Sonia Sotomayor's nomination to the Supreme Court provides a telling example of this. Sotomayor attended Princeton University in the 1970s when the university first began to admit women and people of color and graduated *summa cum laude*. She then went on to earn her Juris Doctorate from Yale Law School, where she was editor of the prestigious Yale Law Review. Despite being raised in poverty, she excelled academically and rose through the ranks of the justice system, serving as a successful federal appeals court judge. Upon her confirmation, Judge Sotomayor became the first woman of color ever to sit on the Supreme Court in its long history.

Sotomayor's nomination generated controversy during the nomination and confirmation hearings for statements that she had made in the past about the value of diversity in the legal field. One of her oft-quoted statements came from a 2002 speech at the University of Berkeley law school. Sotomayor spoke at a symposium sponsored by Latino student groups, entitled

“Raising the Bar: Latino and Latina Presence in the Judiciary and the Struggle for Representation.” In her address Sotomayor sought to discuss, in keeping with the symposium theme, her “Latina identity, where it came from, and the influence I perceive it has on my presence on the bench.” She contended that racial and gender background influence the ways judges understand cases. In her view, having more racial and gender diversity on the bench could help add a broader, more multifaceted perspective to the process of U.S. judging. Arguing that socially disadvantaged groups have a particular and experienced perspective on issues of inequality that may elude most of those whites in a privileged position, Sotomayor remarked:

Whether born from experience or inherent physiological or cultural differences, a possibility I abhor less or discount less than my colleague Judge Cedarbaum, our gender and national origins may and will make a difference in our judging. Justice O’Connor has often been cited as saying that a wise old man and wise old woman will reach the same conclusion in deciding cases. I am not so sure Justice O’Connor is the author of that line since Professor Resnik attributes that line to Supreme Court Justice Coyle. I am also not so sure that I agree with the statement. First, as Professor Martha Minnow has noted, there can never be a universal definition of wise. Second, I would hope that a wise Latina woman with the richness of her experiences would more often than not reach a better conclusion than a white male who hasn’t lived that life.¹¹

Sotomayor continued on to note that there have been cases—most notably, *Brown vs. Board of Education*—where white male judges were finally able to see past their backgrounds to consider the experiences and needs of litigants and citizens different from them. However, she further contended that achieving this level of understanding required energy and effort that some whites would be unwilling or unable to give. She concluded her speech by acknowledging that racial and gender characteristics influence ways judges perceive cases and challenged her audience to think more about the implications this reality would raise for them in their careers.¹²

Sotomayor’s statements were typically pared down just to the “wise Latina” comment, and were quickly and regularly misrepresented by white talk show hosts and many white Republicans through the lens of a hard racial framing. For instance, conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh described Judge Sotomayor as a “reverse racist” and stated that “she would bring a form of racism, bigotry, to the court.” Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich followed suit, writing on his Twitter page that any “White man racist nominee would be forced to withdraw. Latina woman racist should also withdraw.” (Gingrich later stated that perhaps his initial judgment had been too harsh, and he amended his statement to say that Sotomayor was a “racialist,” though he neglected to define this term and its difference from his original claim.) Conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer wrote that “her concern for certain ethnicities overrides justice.” Several Republican senators parroted these views during Sotomayor’s confirmation hearings and asked her to defend what they viewed as “egregious” statements that allegedly violated the presumption of blind justice.¹³

¹¹ “Lecture: ‘A Latina Judge’s Voice,’” NY Times, May 14, 2009 http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/15/us/politics/15judge.text.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all (accessed October 20, 2009)

¹² Ibid

¹³ Condon, Stephanie. “GOP Pushback Continues, with Limbaugh Calling Sotomayor a ‘Reverse Racist,’” CBS News, May 5, 2009, <http://www.cbsnews.com/blogs/2009/05/27/politics/politicalhotsheet/entry5043597.shtml> (accessed May 27, 2009); Froomkin, Dan. “Obama’s Real Life Justice,” Washington Post.com, May 26, 2009 http://voices.washingtonpost.com/white-house-watch/2009/05/obamas_real-life_justice/pf.html (accessed October 20, 2009)

Sotomayor was maligned more broadly for other perceived shortcomings. Republican strategist Karl Rove doubted how “intellectually strong” she was. In a column for *National Review online*, columnist Mark Krikorian complained that Sotomayor’s last name was difficult to pronounce. In an overtly race-tinged analyses, MSNBC commentator Pat Buchanan, well-known for nativistic commentary, argued that “the salient cause of her career has been advancing persons of color, over whites, based on race and national origin” and that:

Down the path Sotomayor would take us lies an America where Hispanic justices rule for Hispanics, black judges rule for blacks and white judges rule for white folks. It is an America where who gets admitted to the best colleges and universities is not decided on grades and academic excellence, but on race and ethnicity, where advancement in jobs and careers depends not on aptitude and ability, but on where your grandparents came from.

Buchanan concluded by questioning why “the white working man and woman [should] ever vote Republican again, as it is they who are the designated victims of the race-based justice of Sonia Sotomayor?”¹⁴

The backlash that greeted Obama’s Sotomayor nomination was steeped in a hard racist framing of people of color as less intelligent, moral, savvy, honest, and/or fair than whites. The suggestion that Sotomayor was not smart enough or qualified enough for the Supreme Court was belied by her stellar academic record and successful years of juridical experience (actually, more than any other current members of that Court). However, hard racial framing has long posited people of color as generally inferior to whites, and this perception of Judge Sotomayor as not smart enough or prepared enough for the court is consistent with this. During the primary season, then-candidate Obama himself faced similar hard racial framing that he was not truly qualified for the Presidency (Harvey Wingfield and Feagin 2010), a theme that has continued among white conservatives to the present day. Finally, as noted above, the suggestion that Sotomayor would mainly advance the interests of people of color over the presumably race-neutral interests of whites reflects the same hard racial framing that casts people of color in high-ranking positions as a dangerous threat to the status quo of white dominance.

In this case, the hard racist framing that led to suggestions that Sotomayor was unintelligent, unqualified, and a “reverse racist” indicated that by extension these qualities could be imputed to President Obama as well. When Rush Limbaugh contended that Sotomayor was a “reverse racist,” he also branded Obama “the greatest living example of a reverse racist.”¹⁵ Thus, hard racial framing of Sotomayor as someone who sought to unfairly advantage

¹⁴ Buchanan, Patrick J. “A Quota Queen for the Court,” VDare, June 1, 2009, http://www.vdare.com/buchanan/090601_sotomayor.htm (accessed June 1, 2009); Krikorian, Mark. “It Sticks in My Craw,” National Review Online, May 27, 2009 <http://corner.nationalreview.com/post/?q=MzkwYzY3ZTc4NTkwZjRiMjM3OGVlMzlmNTZjYmY2ZDI=> (accessed October 20, 2009); Terkel, Amanda. “Conservatives Blast Obama’s Hispanic SCOTUS Nominee as ‘Not the Smartest’ and an ‘Intellectual Lightweight’” Think Progress, May 26, 2009, <http://thinkprogress.org/2009/05/26/sotomayor-lightweight/> (accessed October 20, 2009)

¹⁵ Condon, Stephanie. “GOP Pushback Continues, with Limbaugh Calling Sotomayor a ‘Reverse Racist,’” CBS News, May 5, 2009, <http://www.cbsnews.com/blogs/2009/05/27/politics/politicalhotsheet/entry5043597.shtml> (accessed May 27, 2009). Limbaugh is not the only public figure to follow this line of argument. Sean Hannity also contended that Obama’s “radical associations” with Reverend Jeremiah Wright minimized Obama’s qualifications for the presidency. Similarly, Glenn Beck cited Van Jones as an example of one of Obama’s “radical appointments.” As with Justice Sotomayor, these arguments use these figures as a way of maligning President Obama.

Latinos through her position of power dovetailed with the broader hard framing of President Obama as a politician bent on oppressing whites and unduly aiding people of color, particularly black Americans. Again, note that this framing of Judge Sotomayor and President Obama came from high profile, mainstream members of the Republican party and conservative news commentators.

While it was certainly echoed among the more extreme white supremacist bloggers and blog posters, this strong racist framing of the President as an antiwhite proponent of a new racial order came from many members of the conservative political establishment. This societal reality marks an important shift in the open and overt way that the hard racist framing has come to shape contemporary debates about U.S. racial matters and political discourse. Over the 1970s–1990s this blatantly racist discourse and practice had appeared periodically (as in the famous Willie Horton ad campaign of the 1988 presidential election; see Feagin and Vera 1995), but it generally seemed to be moving to a heavy concentration in less public and more backstage areas populated only by whites.

In recent years, however, it has come fully “out of the closet” once again. The resurgence of this hard racial framing in public, especially its increasing presence in mainstream conservative circles involving millions of Americans, suggests an ongoing and dialectical racism in which the hard racial framing exists in tension with a soft racial framing, a variation of the white racial frame to which we now turn.

Soft Racial Framing

“A Nation of Cowards”: Chastising Eric Holder

For his own part, President Obama has chosen to walk a difficult tightrope in dealing with these and other racial matters. Since he began his serious presidential campaign in 2007, he has often relied on his own soft version of the old white racial framing as a way of distancing himself from both the extreme racial rhetoric of the hard racial framing, and from charges and observations of U.S. racism leveled by other black leaders and rank-and-file operating out of the black counterframe. As early as the Democratic primary, Obama faced the challenge of deflecting white opponents’ characterizations of him. Many of these characterizations relied on a hard racial framing of him as alternately unqualified, dangerous, and unpatriotic (Harvey Wingfield and Feagin 2010). Responding to these white depictions placed Obama in a predicament—if he forcefully addressed these critics and displayed any emotional veneer resembling frustration, irritation, or anger, he risked embodying the stereotype of the “angry black man,” a classic white-frame depiction of black masculinity that perpetuates an image of black men as frighteningly out of control (Harvey Wingfield 2007). Yet if he ignored these racialized characterizations, they could define him in ways that could cost him the presidential election. Obama thus responded by employing a savvy but subtly racialized and gendered self-definition of himself as a “cool black man,” a public self-representation that enabled him to challenge critics, communicate gendered criteria of self-control and decisiveness considered “presidential,” and avoid conforming to the negative racialized, gendered tropes of black masculinity of the hard racist frame. This self-representation allowed Obama to avoid directly confronting the hard racial frame’s imagery, while challenging it with a successful and resisting image.

In the wake of his 2008 election, Obama has continued to rely on the “cool black man” image. However, he has also enhanced it by relying on certain elements of a soft racial framing, particularly when faced with questions from mainstream media outlets about the

persistence of U.S. racism and various racist incidents. One particular case occurred early in Obama's presidency, when Attorney General Eric Holder memorably claimed in an address to the Justice Department that the U.S. had become a "nation of cowards" when it came to open discussion of racial matters. In context, Holder stated that:

Though this nation has proudly thought of itself as an ethnic melting pot, in things racial we have always been and continue to be, in too many ways, essentially a nation of cowards...[We] have done a pretty good job in melding the races in the workplace [but] certain subjects are off limits and that to explore them risks at best embarrassment and at worst the questioning of one's character...On Saturdays and Sundays, America in the year 2009 does not, in some ways, differ significantly from the country that existed some 50 years ago. This is truly sad.¹⁶

Holder's contention that forthright discussions about U.S. racism and racial differences are infrequent is accurate and borne out by much social science research (e.g., Picca and Feagin 2007; Bonilla-Silva 2001, 2003). So too are his arguments that informal racial segregation characterizes many aspects of social life; in fact, existing research suggests that workplaces are far less integrated than even Holder indicates (Browne and Misra 2003; Feagin 2010a; Tomaskovic-Devey 1993).

When pressed to give a response to Holder's comments, however, President Obama offered this tepid and backtracking statement:

I think it's fair to say that if I had been advising my attorney general, we would have used different language. I think the point that he was making is that we're oftentimes uncomfortable with talking about race until there's some sort of racial flare-up or conflict, and that we could probably be more constructive in facing up to the painful legacy of slavery and Jim Crow and discrimination. But what I would add to that is the fact that we've made enormous progress and we shouldn't lose sight of that. And I'm not somebody who believes that constantly talking about race somehow solves racial tensions. I think what solves racial tensions is fixing the economy, putting people to work, making sure that people have health care, ensuring that every kid is learning out here. I think if we do that, then we'll probably have more fruitful conversations.¹⁷

While this "progress" language might have been very comforting to whites invested in minimizing conversations and actions designed to eradicate ongoing racial inequalities, this rebuttal downplays the accurate analytical language Attorney General Holder used and also suggests that focusing on race-neutral solutions—economic reform, improved educational opportunities—will serve to eliminate and address underlying and ongoing racial disparities.

Furthermore, and more significantly, this type of language is consistent with a soft white racial framing generally preferred by moderate or liberal whites. Specifically, it downplays the role of current systemic racism in various U.S. institutions to suggest that these discriminatory mechanisms, noted as important in the past, are no longer central to maintaining ongoing racial inequalities. Though many studies have shown that various established practices maintain racial inequalities in public school systems (Feagin et al. 1996; Ferguson 2003; Feagin 2010b), the labor market (Kirschenman and Neckerman 2006; Pager

¹⁶ McPhee, Michelle and Sara Just. "Obama Criticizes Police in Henry Louis Gates Case," ABC News, July 22, 2009, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=8148986&page=1> (accessed October 20, 2009)

¹⁷ "Boston Cop Used Racial Slur in Gates Email," WCBV Boston, July 29, 2009, <http://www.thebostonchannel.com/news/20215609/detail.html> (accessed October 20, 2009); Weisman, Jonathan and Simmi Ajula. "Obama Scrambles to Defuse Race Flap," WSJ Online, July 25, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124844815302279253.html> (accessed October 20, 2009)

2003), and in the health industry (Brown et al. 2003), among other institutional arenas, the soft racial framing draws attention away from these well-documented discriminatory practices and resulting racial disparities to accent the “enormous progress” the country has made on racial matters. Thus, when President Obama calls for accenting progress and for race-neutral solutions in place of candid discussion about ongoing racial discrimination and inequality, he employs certain elements of a soft racial framing that is preferred by many white Americans.

This version of the soft racial framing signals the operation of a racial framing dialectic that is ongoing in U.S. society. The soft racial framing involves a partial reframing, a move away from the harsher aspects of the hard racial framing, but one still within the dominant white racial frame. Thus, as hard racial framing insists on the overtly and blatantly racist language, rhetoric, and actions cited above, the soft racial framing exists as a revisionist force. Obama’s desire to highlight racial progress, avoid explicit discussions about racism, and accent “why can’t we all get along” imagery, provide examples of a revisionist framing that counters the hard racist framing expressed through such conservative white arguments as those insisting that Obama hates whites and plans their destruction or enslavement. In the next section, we discuss the ways a more aggressive racial counterframing also operates to counter the hard white racial framing.

Rare Cases of Active Counterframing

The Arrest of a Harvard Professor

While soft racial framing has long characterized much of Obama’s discussions of racial matters, in extremely rare cases he has deviated from this white-oriented path to employ a moderate version of black counterframing that draws attention to the structural issues that maintain patterns of racial inequality. One example came during Obama’s brief remarks about the arrest of his friend, black Professor Henry Louis Gates, by a white police officer in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In this case Officer James Crowley responded to a 911 call at Gates’ house, but this encounter deteriorated into a heated exchange. Detailed accounts reveal that, after documenting that he was in fact the resident of the house, Gates requested Crowley’s badge number to report him. Rather than comply, Crowley asked Gates to follow him onto the porch, where he knew he could arrest Gates for “disorderly conduct.”

At a press conference on health care the next day, *Chicago Sun Times* reporter Lynn Sweet asked Obama about his thoughts on the issue. He replied:

I don’t know, not having been there and not seeing all the facts, what role race played in that [Gates case]. But I think it's fair to say, number one, any of us would be pretty angry; number two, that the Cambridge police acted stupidly in arresting somebody when there was already proof that they were in their own home; and, number three, what I think we know separate and apart from this incident is that there's a long history in this country of African-Americans and Latinos being stopped by law enforcement disproportionately. That’s just a fact.¹⁸

¹⁸ ACLU, “Racial Profiling Alert,” <http://www.aclu.org/racialjustice/racialprofiling/index.html> (accessed May 15, 2009); David Harris, “Driving While Black: Racial Profiling on Our Nation’s Highways,” (New York: American Civil Liberties Union, 1999), as cited at http://www.lwvcincinnati.org/publications/Driving_While_Black.html (accessed February 2, 2006). See also Feagin forthcoming, *Racist America* 2nd edition, New York: Routledge.

This relatively mild but *critical* response immediately generated notable controversy and pushback, mainly from a great array of whites. Officer Crowley called Obama's response "disappointing," the white-controlled Massachusetts police union formally requested that Obama apologize to officers everywhere, and another white police officer was reprimanded for later circulating an email that referred to Professor Gates as a "jungle monkey." In fact, this event led conservative Fox news commentator Glenn Beck to condemn Obama as "a racist" and claim that it proved Obama's "deep seated hatred for white people." This openly hostile conservative view was echoed on many white blogs and was reflected in slipping poll numbers for Obama among whites, as well as in Obama's immediate attempts to backtrack on his counterframed comments. Obama later stated that his remarks could have been "calibrated more carefully" and had Professor Gates and Officer Crowley visit to the White House to share a beer and conversation. In effect, he retreated to a colorblind white-oriented framing that put the black victim and white victimizer on roughly the same level.¹⁹

This event is telling because it reveals how Obama's use of a rather mild black counterframing was met with shock, dismay, and concern, particularly from those whites heavily invested in using the hard and soft racial frames. Obama's assertion that "there's a long history in this country of African-Americans and Latinos being stopped by law enforcement disproportionately" is, as he stated, factually indisputable.²⁰ Similarly, although one may disagree with his choice of words in claiming that the police acted stupidly, the fact that all charges were *dropped* against Gates indicates the serious problems with the legitimacy of the police arrest. Furthermore, as all accounts of the case indicate that Gates was angry with Officer Crowley *within his home*, Gates' actions objectively failed to meet the legal standard for "disorderly conduct" in that city.

In pointing to the letter of the law and the history of blacks' and Latinos' troubled relationship with the criminal justice system, Obama engaged in a form of black counterframing that involved drawing attention away from the stereotypes, rationalizations, and sincere fictions that are a core part of the dominant white racial framing and that routinely rationalize racial inequality. Inasmuch as this white framing ultimately serves to offer a justification for ongoing white discrimination, use of this perspective legitimizes the often oppressive relationship between black citizens and white police officers. Thus, someone operating from the hard racial framing would likely argue that black men are "dangerous N-words" and thus predisposed to criminal behavior, so Officer Crowley was justified in arresting Professor Gates. However, someone operating from a soft racial framing would avoid such language and probably draw attention away from racialized police malpractice in the criminal justice system to suggest instead that Gates brought the arrest upon himself by behaving in an impolite and uncivil manner.

Indeed, both versions of the white racial frame were widely prevalent in the days immediately following the Gates' arrest. The counterframing of people of color, however, highlights the systemic malpractice that maintains racial inequality in policing practices and accents the ways that this discriminatory malpractice is manifested in various aspects of the criminal justice system. As such, when Obama points to the long history of police malpractice and racial profiling affecting communities of color, he engaged in a bit of black counterframing to explain both the event and Gates' subsequent anger and frustration. Yet the fact that Obama used a mild form of black counterframing to shape his interpretation of

¹⁹ "Joe Wilson," wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joe_Wilson_%28U.S._politician%29 (accessed September 21, 2009).

²⁰ "White House disputes Carter's analysis," MSNBC, September 16, 2009, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/32869276/ns/politics-capitol_hill/ (accessed September 21, 2009).

this racialized event proved a serious political liability, mainly with whites, and one that generated so much negative attention that he chose to backpedal and distance himself from it.

Republican Joe Wilson and Ex-president Jimmy Carter

In a September 2009 address to the U.S. Congress, President Obama thoroughly defended his proposals for health care reform. At one point in this speech where he accented that “illegal” immigrants would be explicitly excluded from access to health care covered by his proposed legislation, U.S. Representative Joe Wilson (Republican-South Carolina) broke with congressional decorum and practice and yelled out, “You lie!”²¹ Although Wilson apologized to the president the next day, his hostile outburst attracted attention across the national and global media, and got Wilson a formal condemnation by the U.S. House. A few days later, former president Jimmy Carter articulated to an NBC reporter what many Americans of color and antiracist whites had already said in their own circles: “I think an overwhelming portion of the intensely demonstrated animosity toward President Barack Obama is based on the fact that he is a black man, that he is African-American.” Carter also said to NBC that this type of “racism . . . still exists” and “has bubbled up to the surface because of a belief among many white people, not just in the south but around the country, that African-Americans are not qualified to lead this great country.” Carter also condemned the racialized comparisons of Obama to Hitler by white demonstrators.²²

Carter’s strong articulation of elements of a counterframe commonplace among black Americans and antiracist whites generated an enormous white reaction, both from white supremacists and extremists operating out of the hard racial framing and from moderate and liberal whites operating out of the colorblind soft racial framing. Once again, President Obama (and likely his mostly white advisors) responded to Carter’s and several black leaders’ (for example, Bill Cosby’s) public comments on Wilson’s and other whites’ racism with a soft racial framing. Immediately after Carter’s public comment, White House press secretary Robert Gibbs said that Obama “doesn’t think that criticism of his policies is ‘based on the color of his skin.’”²³

For his part, when asked directly a few days later if whites like Wilson who attacked his health care proposals were acting out of racist views, Obama again replied within the soft racial framing in several interviews he did with major networks, all broadcast on September 20, 2009. Several times he replied to questions about racism by explicitly denying that many white reactions to his programs or presidency were racially motivated. On CNN he said this: “Are there people out there who don’t like me because of race? I’m sure there are. That’s not the overriding issue

²¹ “KO Documents Racist Attacks on Obama,” firedoglake.com, <http://firedoglake.com/2009/09/17/early-morning-swim-ko-documents-racist-attacks-on-obama/comments> (accessed September 21, 2009); “White House disputes Carter’s analysis,” MSNBC, September 16, 2009, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/32869276/ns/politics-capitol_hill/ (accessed September 21, 2009).

²² “Obama Blames Media, Not Race,” cbs2.com, <http://cbs2.com/national/barack.obama.race.2.1194842.html> (accessed September 21, 2009); Stanley, Alessandra, “The TV Watch: For President, Five Programs, One Message,” *New York Times*, September 21, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/21/us/politics/21watch.html?_r=2 (accessed September 21, 2009).

²³ Democrats Ramshield. “CNN’s Rick Sanchez in a startling video reports threats against President Obama are up 400%.” *Cnn.com*, September 12, 2009, <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2009/9/12/780953/-CNNs-Rick-Sanchez-in-a-startling-video-reports-threats-against-President-Obama-are-up-400-percent> (accessed on September 21, 2009).

here [in regard to health reform].” On another network, he said it was not race but the media that generated the protests: “I do think part of what’s different today is that the 24-hour news cycle and cable television and blogs and all this, they focus on the most extreme elements on both sides. They can’t get enough of conflict.” To another interviewer he added: “The media loves to have a conversation about race. This is catnip to, to the media because it is a running thread in American history that’s very powerful.”

Given the opportunity to address the U.S. public with at least a mild version of the black counter-frame, as he had briefly in the Gates case, Obama carefully backed away from the accurate comments of black leaders and of former president Jimmy Carter to assertively deny that whites’ racism had anything to do with motivating the organized protests against him that were growing across the country. In this manner he once again operated out of a soft white racial framing that seeks to find explanations for likely racist events in non-racist sources and reasons and that plays up the allegedly colorblind character and progress of the contemporary United States. While there are certainly some whites whose disagreements with Obama are grounded solely in policy or ideology, the hard racial framing present in many Tea Party protestors’ signs, media commentators’ viewpoints, and everyday citizens’ comments on blogs and web pages makes it disingenuous to pretend that racial framing is completely absent from much public white opposition.

In comparison with the modest revisions of the soft racial framing, the antiracist counter-framing comprises the strong historical countering of the hard white racial frame in the ongoing U.S. racial dialectic. This aggressive counterframe exists as an opposing force to the hard framing that underlies the overtly racist language and behaviors increasingly found in the public sphere. We see the soft racial framing that advocates colorblindness and avoidance of racial issues as weak in comparison with the admittedly infrequent attempts at aggressive counterframing which draw attention to the systemic-racism issues that regularly perpetuate racial inequalities. This counterframe constitutes a strong alternative to the dominant white racial frame.

Conclusion: The Racial Dialectic Persists

Events from the first two years of Obama’s presidency indicate that the use of centuries-old hard racial framing became more pronounced, visible, and overt among a great many whites as a way of making sense of various aspects of his presidency. When news cartoonists and mainstream conservative websites depict Obama and his family members as monkeys or gorillas, this is clearly indicative of hard racial framing of blacks as subhuman. When ordinary white citizens and powerful white media commentators openly claim that Obama hates whites and plans to re-enact Nazi genocide with whites as the target, they use a hard racial framing of black men as dangerous threats to whites’ “deserved” superior hierarchical position. When white Senators and political strategists openly say that Obama’s Latina Supreme Court nominee is dumb, unqualified, and will enact an agenda of favoring Latinos over other groups, this too relies substantially on a hard racial framing of people of color as less intelligent and objective than whites, and reinforces the idea that people of color in positions of power, including Obama himself, threaten whites’ appropriate high racial position.

While the hard racial framing has recently become more visible and mainstream, counterframing from the view of African Americans and other Americans of color has *not*. Obama’s use of such a counterframe is very sporadic and infrequent, and in the cases

where he has used a bit of counterframing, that has generated very significant white opposition and hostile criticism. There is also only a little sporadic counterframing coming from Congressional representatives, news commentators, and the general population in a way that would offer a strong counter to the increased hard racial framing seen since Obama's inauguration. This is not to say that such counterframing does not exist—it does online, especially on black commentators' websites, and occasionally from antiracist analysis by human rights advocates like Jimmy Carter—but it has not developed and infiltrated mainstream political or media circles in a way that comes close to matching or effectively counterbalancing the pervasive and pernicious influence of the old hard racial framing.

Quite revealing in the societal events centering on President Obama that we have chronicled here is the continuing centrality of whites' obsession with and hostility toward black Americans, a reality pointing up once again that white-on-black oppression is the central and foundational oppression among all the oppressive "racial formations" that criss-cross and shape this society. We also see in these and other racial events that the consequence of the deep and dialectical tension between the old hard white racial framing and the black counterframing is often an increase in policies, public discourse, and dialogue shaped primarily by a soft colorblind framing. In just the first two years of his presidency, this has been evident in many kinds of hostile responses to Obama's moderate policies and in the ways (especially white) news commentators, Congressional representatives, and other public figures address—or ignore—serious racial matters that have arisen during his presidency. For instance, a September 2009 CNN report revealed that violent threats against President Obama stood at record numbers for a U.S. president, and had in fact *increased 400% even since his inauguration*. Yet this troubling story got little media attention, and when it did it was typically presented without any analysis of the deep racial dynamics that were likely shaping this sharp increase in presidential threats. And certainly it was offered with no counterframing that addressed the fact that throughout U.S. history African Americans who rise to positions where they have power to change the status quo have faced heightened threats to their safety from whites.

Further, in the debates over health care reform during 2009 and 2010, President Obama's efforts to control costs and increase coverage neglected to use any counterframing to address the huge racial disparities in the U.S. health care system, and the fact that people of color are much less likely to receive preventative treatment and cancer screenings, but are more likely to suffer from preventative illnesses, receive amputations, and die from cancer (Brown et al. 2003). Instead, a soft racial framing that plays up colorblind "progress" and ignores the deep structural disparities perpetuated through the health care system has already been seen across numerous mainstream discussions about the new health care legislation.

It remains to be seen how Obama's presidency will continue to influence a new politics of race and racism. We have argued here that his presidency ushered in a dramatic uptick in hard racial framing, and that it brought this old white framing into the public sphere in ways that it had not been since the segregationist 1950s and 1960s. Given the absence of constant opposition in the form of strong counterframing to the white racial frame, we contend that the tension between a strong hard racial framing and a possible strong counterframing represents an oscillating racial dialectic where one major outcome will be an assertive soft racial framing. Ultimately, the irony of this is that soft framing still works to maintain racial hierarchies and inequality. As such, while the 2009 inauguration of the nation's first black president marked tremendous progress for race relations, the deep and persisting racial dialectic threatens to temper it.

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Adia Harvey Wingfield is the author of several books and articles that consider how intersections of race, gender, and class affect social processes in the workplace. Her research has been published in peer-reviewed journals like *Social Problems*, *Gender & Society*, and *Critical Sociology*. Her forthcoming book *No More Invisible Man: Race and Gender in Men's Work* examines the challenges and opportunities facing black professional men and will be available this fall from Temple University Press.

Joe Feagin is Ella C. McFadden Professor at Texas A & M University. Over more than four decades he has done much scholarly work on racism, sexism, and urban sociology issues. He has published 59 scholarly books and nearly 200 scholarly articles in these areas. His recent books include *Systemic Racism* (Routledge 2006); *Two Faced Racism: Whites in the Backstage and Frontstage*, with Leslie Picca (Routledge 2007); and *The White Racial Frame* (Routledge 2010). He has served as Scholar-in-Residence at the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and was the 1999-2000 president of the American Sociological Association.