



TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

**DEMOCRATS – GET READY FOR THE INEVITABLE
REPUBLICAN COUNTERATTACK.
IT’S COMING, AND WE SHOULD BE PREPARED.**

BY

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In military strategy is it an axiom that after even the most dramatic and extensive advance the job is not over until one also prepares for the inevitable counterattack. In military history the failure to do so has very often “snatched defeat from the jaws of victory.”

There is no question that the scale of the current progressive advance against racism has been breathtaking. It has mobilized protesters on a far larger scale than the 1963 march on Washington and if its demands are translated into legislation its long-term effects could be as significant as well. It has inspired a vast range of white America, from sports leagues to major businesses to assert their support for the movement and in area after area racists have been put solidly on the defensive.

In article after article the term “a watershed moment” appears and there is a giddy optimism about a sea-change in American attitudes. The military expressed willingness to change the names of bases named after Confederate generals and cities debate whether to remove Confederate statues from public places. NASCAR banned Confederate flags at its races and HBO Max removed *Gone with the Wind* from its list of available films. Writers and editors have been fired for tweets and articles perceived as racist.

This is combined with substantial support for increasingly radical proposals and positions like “Abolish the Police.” While some try to define the goal more carefully, the authors of a NYT op-ed defiantly assert: “Yes, we mean literally abolishing the police.” In similar fashion some commentators reject any criticism of vandalism and looting. A Nation Magazine article argues: “*In Defense of Destroying Property: We Cannot Conflate the Destruction of Plate-Glass With the Violence That is Being Protested.*” In a similar vein, The New Republic publishes a piece titled “*The Limits and Dangers of a Fixation on Nonviolence.*”

But, looking at opinion data for the country as a whole, an important Washington Post article by Andrea Benjamin, an associate professor of African and African American studies at the University of Oklahoma notes that “polls show strong support for the protests [but] also how the police handled them.”

On the one hand, Benjamin notes the clear and undeniable advance that has occurred:

The new Post-Schar School poll found that a large majority of Americans, 74 percent, generally back the protests—a trend that extended even to Republicans, 53 percent of

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whom support them. Echoing other commentators, Slate said the polling suggested that the Black Lives Matter movement *“has made staggering gains in just two weeks.”*

But she continues, there are also clear limits to the extent of the change that has occurred:

These are reasons for optimism among those who, like me, believe strongly in curbing police violence, but we should also be cautious in interpreting the polls. Declarations of a revolution in American consciousness are premature.

For one thing, polls also reveal that a surprisingly high proportion of people thought that police behaved reasonably in response to the protests ...The split in the polls on whether the protests were violent or peaceful is striking. The Post-Schar School survey found that 43 percent believe that the protests were mostly violent and that an identical share think they were mostly peaceful. Opinions diverge sharply by ideology, with 70 percent of liberals saying they were mostly peaceful and 60 percent of conservatives concluding they were mostly violent. ...

Still, fully 50 percent of those polled say the police used an amount of force that was “about right” on peaceful protesters, compared with 44 percent who think they used too much. In the case of people who vandalized or looted, the public wanted the police to get tougher: 47 percent think more force was warranted. And in an ABC News-Ipsos poll, 52 percent agreed that the military should have been sent to cities that saw violence and looting.

Clearly, what seemed obvious to many people on the left and center-left—that the police greeted protests against violence with violence—was not apparent to all. The political polarization evident in the reactions is also significant: As the debates continue, Americans may gravitate further toward “their” side’s view; the president will certainly try to make that happen by hammering on his “law and order” message.¹

Greg Sargent cogently describes how the Trump/GOP counter-attack will unfold:

The broader pattern is plain. Again and again, Trump has made moves that appear designed to drive a wedge among white voters, pushing them to pick a side between him and the large, multiracial, multi-denominational movement demanding deep changes to the systemic racism and police brutality that continue to victimize African Americans.

...Trump instinctually believes he gains...if he can provoke elites into disapprovingly calling him a racist, because that will galvanize his largely white base...The game is to discredit the protests themselves, and to shut down the conversation about what they’re actually demanding, by converting their aim into an attack on white Americans’ cultural values.

...Historian Dan Carter noted that those who want to discredit protest movements have long employed such coding to disguise their real aim...The tactic is to “claim that any attempt on the part of demonstrators is not only a threat to law and order, but a

¹https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/polling-protests-police-protesters-opinion/2020/06/11/987259fe-ab5a-11ea-9063-e69bd6520940_story.html

challenge to the cultural values and beliefs of white working Americans," This has tended to take the form of casting the protesters themselves as elitists ("silver spooned brats," as George Wallace put it), or the protests as orchestrated by elites behind the curtain.²

With the election only four months ahead it is vital that progressives and Democrats prepare for this counterattack and consider how to most effectively respond.

One political strategy is to push "full speed ahead." Advocates of this approach argue that even if a backlash does develop, the increased political mobilization of the young black and youth vote will compensate for the mobilization of many white "middle American" voters. Even if Democrats lose in 2020, it is held, the long-term radicalization and mobilization of youth is ultimately a more important goal because it will guarantee a progressive future.

To state the strategy in its clearest form, Democrats should be as willing as Trump to draw the sharpest possible divisions, counting on the fact that even if Trump is allowed to successfully mobilize his coalition, Democrats will still be able to get 51 percent of a polarized electorate that is now increasingly progressive.

The alternative strategy is to resist Trump's attempt to generate polarization and to fight for the support of the non-bigoted white voters by casting Trump as an extremist outlier and presenting Democrats as the representatives of a broad American majority. This requires keeping the focus on the substantial areas where most Americans now agree with the protesters but rejecting demands and actions that are demonstrably unpopular.

The empirical case for this second strategy is the body of data that indicates that Biden's hope of victory rests substantially on his holding onto the support of two key groups that have dramatically shifted in his direction in recent months. Critically, both groups **vote in much larger numbers than white or black youth.**

As political analyst Ruy Teixeira notes about seniors, the first of the two groups.

As has been widely noted, Biden has greatly benefited from the movement of seniors, around 24 percent of 2016 voters, away from Trump and into the Democratic camp. This movement has been a massive shift from 2016 of 21 margin points. The great majority of this group is white, comprising 20 percent of all voters who have had a similarly sized shift toward the Democrats since 2016.

As a point of comparison, consider young (under 30) black voters where Biden has been underperforming relative to Clinton--by about 15 margin points according to the same data. But this group is only around 2 percent of voters.

What this means concretely is that the shift toward Biden among white seniors has added 4 margin points to his current lead. But underperformance among young black voters has only subtracted 3/10 of a percentage point from that lead. **This political arithmetic needs to be considered carefully when assessing the possible effects of backlash.**³

²<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/06/12/trumps-ugly-appeal-white-voters-pick-side/>

³<http://www.theoptimisticleftist.com/2020/04/its-older-voter-thing-you-wouldnt.html>

In another post Teixeira adds:

As I have been stressing the key difference between now and 2016 has very little to do with younger voters and everything to do with older voters. **When enjoying a 20 point shift relative to Clinton among voters 65 and over, losing a point or two (or gaining it) among young voters just doesn't matter that much. Holding that senior support on the other hand very much does. And that is what Democrats should be worrying about.**⁴

The second group that Teixeira highlights is the White Working Class. As he notes:

Trump's had a lot of bad polling news lately. But arguably the worst news of all for him is that he's losing ground among white noncollege voters. This is despite clearly targeting his campaign toward getting more of these voters than he did in 2016 to make up for his overwhelming disadvantage among nonwhite voters and a widening gap with white college voters. But he's not getting more of these voters, he's getting less. This is catastrophic for his campaign if it continues.

I'm not the only one to notice this. Nate Cohn in his latest New York Times analysis notes that:

"The decline in the president's standing has been particularly pronounced among white voters without a college degree, helping to explain why the Trump campaign has felt compelled to air advertisements in Ohio and Iowa, two mostly white working-class battleground states where Mr. Trump won by nearly 10 points four years ago.

In the most recent polls, white voters without a college degree back the president by 21 points, down from 31 points in March and April and down from the 29-point lead Mr. Trump held in the final polls of registered voters in 2016.

Mr. Trump didn't just lose support to the undecided column; Mr. Biden ticked up to an average of 37 percent among white voters without a degree. **The figure would be enough to assure Mr. Biden the presidency.**⁵

The debate between the two political strategies will not be settled by evaluating polls and forecasts alone because it also involves deeper issues of political principle and philosophy. For radicals, the benefit of encouraging an election based on increased political polarization is not only about the odds of winning but about the way in which victory is won. A victory based on appeals to the broad majority of Americans will not create the same foundation for radical change as would a victory based on winning an election based on a radical anti-racist platform. The latter would create the foundation for a more far-reaching change. To radicals, this seems appears a gamble worth taking.

In support of this view, among many there is an outright dismissal of the possibility that a backlash might actually result in Trump's reelection. As Chris Lehmann, editor of The New Republic argued:

⁴<http://www.theoptimisticleftist.com/2020/06/reconsidering-bidens-young-voter-problem.html>

⁵<http://www.theoptimisticleftist.com/2020/06/you-live-by-sword-you-die-by-sword.html>

As the wave of protests over George Floyd's death engulfed the country, many pundits assumed a familiar posture of sadder-but-wiser concern-trolling. ...yet again, they warned, Donald Trump could exploit white grievance politics as his ticket to a second term in the Oval Office. But here's the thing: There's no white backlash to exploit.

He quotes from an article in the current issue of the magazine:

America is already in the middle of a broad and electorally significant cultural backlash against radical politics. But it's a backlash against the right, not the left... Commentators whose political instincts were shaped decades ago might insist otherwise, but in the here and now, the right is losing the culture war and losing it decisively.

It is not hard to detect a distinct element of radical condescension in this view—the idea that backlash is a possibility that must be prepared for represents “concern trolling” from “commentators whose political instincts were shaped decades ago.”

But preparing for a counterattack after a major successful advance should never be dismissed as a failure of nerve or lack of boldness. In military strategy there is a saying that the correct term for forces that do not anticipate a counterattack after a successful advance is more often “the surrounded” and “the defeated” than it is “the victorious.” There is a profound difference between military and political strategy but in this case the parallel is valid.