



I remember going to Eric Garner’s funeral in the summer of 2014. And I remember the fights I had with conservative family members after it, screaming matches that left us bruised and unwilling to talk for months at a time.

They were the same fights we had over Michael Brown’s death and the Ferguson protests that followed, the same fights we had over Philando Castile and Tamir Rice. They just couldn’t see what I saw: the police brutality aimed again and again at Black men, the mass incarceration that destroyed communities, the dehumanization of being seen as a criminal before a person; the moral stain of a nation purportedly founded on freedom that denies equal treatment to its black citizens.

All that’s changed. Not police brutality targeting Black Americans, which persists to this day, but the denial that it happens. Now the same family members call and tell me how horrific George Floyd’s murder was. *How can you treat a human like an animal?* they ask. *They only did it to him because he was black,* they tell me.

It’s not just my family. Senator Lindsey Graham, the South Carolina Republican so close to President Trump, is seeking proposals to improve policing and combat “racial discrimination regarding the use of force” in the wake of Floyd’s murder.

“We are still wrestling with America’s original sin,” Republican Senate Majority leader Mitch McConnell told reporters last week. “It is perfectly clear we are a long way from the finish line.”

At a luncheon for Republican senators, Tom Cotton of Arkansas stood up and said, “Young black men have a very different experience with law enforcement in this nation than white people, and that’s their impression and experience, and we need to be sensitive to that and do all we can to change it.”

NEW. INSIDE Senate GOP lunch today, [@TomCottonAR](#) stood up & said:

Young black men have a very different experience with law enforcement in this nation than white people and that’s their impression and experience and we need to be sensitive to that and do all we can to change it— Jake Sherman

([@JakeSherman](#)) June 9, 2020

It’s nothing short of a sea-change, a reversal on the right about something that was so recently a staple of right/left culture wars. As Eli Steinberg, a Forward contributor, aptly put it, “We used to ignore these issues. We used to tell the left they were overreacting. We were wrong.”

“We” is right: 76% of Americans and 71% of white people now call racism “a big problem” in the U.S., up from 50% in 2015. More than two-thirds of Americans say that Floyd’s murder represents a broader problem within law enforcement, and 74% support the protests. That includes 76% of Independents and 53% of Republicans. It’s a seismic shift that sociologists attribute mainly to change among white conservatives.

The change is most visible since Floyd’s murder and the inspiring peaceful protests that have bloomed across the nation. But it is rooted in a much longer-term shift in public opinion. For a few decades now, Americans have been getting less racist, have been less willing to admit racist views themselves or defend them. George Floyd’s murder and the protests against police brutality it catalyzed may look like a very sudden wake-up call, but what they are is more like a tipping point for progress long in the works.

This is not to say that America is short of actual racists, people like Derek Chauvin, who kept his knee on George Floyd’s neck for nearly nine minutes. What America has become thankfully denuded of is people *willing to defend* Chauvin — unlike Michael Brown’s killer or Trayvon Martin’s or Tamir Rice’s or Eric

Garner's. There's a new consensus around Black Lives Matter, once a controversial banner and target for Republicans.

It's a blessed sight for a nation with our history and our current struggles to protect Black lives from police brutality. But with this shift in public opinion, a new theory of racism has become increasingly popular.

Two books in this vein topped last week's *New York Times* bestseller list: Ibrahim X. Kendi's "How to Be an Antiracist" and Robin DiAngelo's "White Fragility." Both articulate a new view of racism, defining it not as the belief that one race is superior to another, or that races should be treated differently, but as a failure to adequately compensate for racism — what Kendi calls being "antiracist."

Kendi argues that the term "racist" shouldn't be invoked as an insult, but rather as a description of anything or anyone not currently, actively fighting for racial equality. "The language of color blindness — like the language of 'not racist' — is a mask to hide racism," he writes.

DiAngelo takes things one step further, arguing that the defensiveness white people feel and display when accused of racism, their horror at being seen as purveyors of racial inequality, is itself racism. "White identity is inherently racist," DiAngelo writes, and white progressives — people who believe they are not racist — are most problematic of all. Hiding behind the well-wishes of white Americans finally anxious to address racial inequities and in the tears white people shed when accused of being racist, DiAngelo sees a deeper racism that presents the real threat: "I believe that white progressives cause the most daily damage to people of color."

The food writer Alison Roman summed this view up nicely in a public apology she issued last month after she insulted the author-celebrities Chrissy Teigen and Marie Kondo: "The fact that it didn't occur to me that I had singled out two Asian women is one hundred percent a function of my privilege (being blind to racial insensitivities is a discriminatory luxury)." It was the fact that it *never occurred* to Roman that the two women she was criticizing were Asian that, rather than exculpating her, was proof of her culpability.

I've thought a lot this weekend about my interview and the things I said. I know this is a lengthy note (succinctness has never been my strong suit). I appreciate you taking the time to read. pic.twitter.com/3iGAYN3c9d— alison roman (@alisoneroman) May 11, 2020

No doubt, systemic racism exists independent of the intent of individual actors. It's also true that well-meaning white people often commit painful micro-aggressions — those small yet not insignificant affronts that weary people of color, and weary them all the more because they are unintended.

But what we're seeing today in the wake of the George Floyd protests is a systematic adoption of this new theory of racism across multiple industries; at a time when Americans have made a huge leap towards recognizing the great scourge of our nation and finally wanting to do something about it, this penchant for looking behind the mask of people who believe they hate racism to find malintent to harm minorities has become the new normal. And it's metastasizing into something dangerous, not on the streets where righteous Americans are protesting actual police brutality, but in the media and on Twitter, where we are experiencing a full-on moral panic.

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A moral panic is a form of mass hysteria, what happens when enough people come to believe that some hostile force is threatening the values and safety of their society. The threat is often masked: the lonely spinster who's secretly a witch, the grandmotherly day-care worker who's sexually abusing her 2-year-old charges, the outcast teens who are wielding immense Satanic power.

“Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight,” explained Stan Cohen, a South African sociologist who first wrote about moral panics in the 1970s. In their 1994 book “Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance,” two other sociologists who study the phenomenon, Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, added another insight: For a moral panic to take off, there has to be “a certain minimal measure of consensus” about society as a whole.

In other words, you can't have a moral panic about something a society is divided about; that's just a culture war. Moral panic only sets in when there is consensus about who can be cast as the evil other in a given society. At that point, Cohen wrote in 1972, "its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions."

Cohen found that the media played a key role in moral panics across history and geography, either inventing, exaggerating, or distorting the alleged malefactors who were the source of the hysteria. So it's not surprising that *The New York Times* should be playing an outsized role in today's moral panic. What is surprising is that it has turned its wrath on its own writers and editors.

Early this month, Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas, a deeply conservative, sometime-authoritarian Republican and favorite of President Trump, was invited by *The Times* to expand a tweet of his into an OpEd. The tweet suggested that the nation should have "zero tolerance" for looting and destruction in its cities. "No quarter for insurrectionists, anarchists, rioters, and looters," the Senator wrote. It was harsh language, possibly suggesting actions prohibited by the Lieber Code of 1863 ("It is against the usage of modern war to resolve, in hatred and revenge, to give no quarter. No body of troops has the right to declare that it will not give, and therefore will not expect, quarter."), though Cotton later implied he was speaking colloquially.

And, if necessary, the 10th Mountain, 82nd Airborne, 1st Cav, 3rd Infantry
—whatever it takes to restore order. No quarter for insurrectionists, anarchists,
rioters, and looters. <https://t.co/OnNJmnDrYM>— Tom Cotton (@TomCottonAR)
June 1, 2020

In the OpEd, which was given the ill-advised and easily screenshot headline "Send in the Troops," Cotton called out those who were defending the looting with what he called excuses "built on a revolting moral equivalence of rioters and looters to peaceful, law-abiding protesters." The majority "who seek to protest peacefully shouldn't be confused with bands of miscreants," he wrote. He then argued that the president should use the Insurrection Act to send U.S. troops to quell the rioting

and looting, a terrible suggestion that Trump was, unsurprisingly, already considering.

It wasn't a great OpEd. Senator Cotton referenced as fact allegations that have been dismissed as fabrication, of "cadres of left-wing radicals like antifa infiltrating protest marches," among other things. He also misquoted the Insurrection Act. Perhaps more importantly, the piece failed to address the concerns of the unconvinced in good faith. It did not make a serious effort to engage with the counterpoint — that the military would present another layer of weaponry in the messy business of policing protesters that could very well result in taking the lives of innocents, likely people of color. What Senator Cotton might have to say to that reasonable objection we can only guess; his OpEd was an act of expression rather than what an OpEd should be — an act of persuasion.

Of course, not everyone needed persuading. The majority of Americans — including a large share of Black Americans — agree with Cotton's core concept. According to a recent poll, 58% of voters and 37% of Black Americans not only supported the idea Cotton expressed in his OpEd but supported an even more extreme version of it; Cotton argued that the military should be called in to suppress rioters and looters, whereas almost six in 10 Americans said they should be brought in to "address protests and demonstrations" in "response to the death of George Floyd" full stop.

The apparent popularity of Cotton's call to bring in the troops did not extend to *The New York Times*' staff. *The Times* has social-media policies restricting its journalists from expressing political opinions or publicly denigrating colleagues' work. But in the wake of the Cotton OpEd, hundreds broke those rules and tweeted the same mantra over a screenshot of Cotton's headline: "Running this puts Black @NYTimes staff in danger." Watching on Twitter, one saw an avalanche of outrage from some of the highest-profile journalists in the country. Anyone who defended the Times' decision had their Twitter mentions fill up with brand-name writers angrily dissenting.

Running this puts Black @NYTimes staff in danger. pic.twitter.com/u3btzGTJzi—
Caity Weaver (@caityweaver) June 3, 2020

More than 800 *Times* employees signed a letter protesting the OpEd. Slack channels lit up with bulletins about how many people had canceled their subscriptions (the highest-ever number of editorial cancellations in a single hour ever, one news outlet gleefully reported), and the News Guild of New York weighed in. Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez demanded answers.

James Bennet, the editorial page editor of *The Times*, tried to explain the OpEd's publication on the grounds that "Times Opinion owes it to our readers to show them counter-arguments, particularly those made by people in a position to set policy." It was to no avail. By Friday night, a vast editor's note had been affixed to the top of Cotton's piece, and by Sunday evening, Bennet had resigned; his deputy, Jim Dao, who had overseen the publication of the Cotton piece, was removed from his masthead role.

It was a revolt the likes of which no one had ever seen, unfolding in real time on Twitter. And the message was a stark one: Run OpEds the left disagrees with at your own risk. Though six in 10 Americans may agree, though 37% of Black Americans may agree, if journalists on Twitter disagree and if they believe your choices cause harm, you may just find yourself out of a job.

Cotton may be closer to the person who ultimately decides whether or not the troops are sent in. But it is *Times* staff who now get to decide whether that view gets to be aired in what was once the paper of record.

Most crucially, it doesn't even matter if what has been published is racist, at least according to the traditional definition. The problem most critics had with *The Times*' decision to publish Cotton's OpEd was that beneath its race-blind call for the military was concealed an insufficiently anti-racist viewpoint that would *in effect* result in harming black *Times* reporters. They had a point, of course; Cotton — and Bennet — owed the OpEd's opponents a response to this important objection, and its omission was a big oversight. But those opposing the OpEd's publication weren't calling for explanations; they were calling for eliminating it from the public sphere entirely.

It's not Cotton who was harmed by *The Times*' capitulation to its staff. It was public debate, hashing it out rather than hiding from it, hearing how the six in 10 Americans you disagree with think and why. The harm was not to those with the dastardly opinion that the military should invade our cities but to the public sphere, and to its guardians — the journalists whose job it is to have the humility to submit to a multifaceted, fluctuating, self-contradictory and always evolving cornucopia of

information in the pursuit of fairness and truth. These values are crucial not just to journalism but to democracy, to freedom.

And they used to be the foundational values of *The New York Times*. Not anymore, apparently. The contretemps over Cotton's OpEd is ushering in a new era. A.G. Sulzberger, *The Times*' publisher, called Cotton's OpEd "contemptuous" and said it shouldn't have been published. He also vowed to "rethink Op-Eds, generally."

As if to drive home the point, *The Times*' own news article about the episode misstated the thesis of Cotton's OpEd, claiming he wished to send in the military "to suppress protests," rather than in cases where "the rioters still outnumber the police and Guard combine." (No correction has yet been issued.)

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Of course, some of this is not new. Examples of newsrooms and Twitter mobs revolting against journalists for entertaining differing opinions has become something of a mainstay of 21st century media. The idea of trying to hear from those you disagree with is now denounced as immature "debate club" or "both sidesism," cast as the crime of "faux-objectivity" and "an expensive illusion" which is often conflated with doing "harm to people of color," or even "anti-blackness." Mea culpas are now issued by journalists for falling on the wrong side of an issue. Roman was cast as a racist who "just can't stand seeing black and brown women thrive" – after which *The New York Times* put her column on hiatus, though Roman instantly, profusely, apologized (and hasn't stopped apologizing since). And since the protests, the frequency and intensity of such episodes has exploded.

It's not exactly like previous moral panics; witches don't exist, and the vast majority of the satanic ritual abuse convictions have been overturned, whereas there are real media malefactors: Bon Apétit's Adam Rapaport stepped down after it was revealed he was paying white employees for work that people of color were expected to do for free, and a picture of him in brownface was shared on social media. Greg Glassman, the chief executive of Crossfit, made disgusting remarks about George Floyd, whereupon he was forced to retire. Less extreme yet no less vital was Anna Wintour's apology for the treatment of black women at Vogue, long overdue.

But other situations are murkier. Stan Wischnowski, the top editor of The Philadelphia Inquirer, resigned after a very insensitive headline angered his colleagues. Christene Barberich, an editor at Refinery29, has stepped down after

she was accused on Twitter of racially insensitive behavior. Claudia Eller, editor-in-chief of Variety, wrote a column about her own failures to diversify Variety's newsroom ("I HAVE NOT DONE ENOUGH" she wrote in all caps). After another journalist tweeted about her unsuccessful attempts to push diversity with Eller, Eller tweeted back, "When someone cops to something why would you try to criticize them? You sound really bitter." She has since been placed on administrative leave. "Calling someone 'bitter' for addressing their POC experience online is like macing someone in the face with a protest sign out in the streets," another journalist with close to 100,000 followers tweeted at Eller.

The needed course-correction has quickly devolved into overcorrection, and from overcorrection into a full-blown moral panic that's affecting the media, academia, research analysts, and even poetry foundations.

Twitter mobs have always mounted campaigns against those falling afoul of the reigning orthodoxy of the day, on the right and the left; it's a perfect platform for fomenting hysteria. But Twitter outrage, once an ignorable annoyance, is now costing people their jobs, and the moral panic it's incited is changing American journalism. The gap between Twitter outrage and employment as a journalist or lecturer or analyst has not just shrunk; it's all but disappeared. This is what a moral panic looks like.

To acknowledge that this is a moral panic is not, God forbid, to deny racism in America, or police brutality against Black Americans, or the fact that journalists of color are underrepresented in our industry, especially in the highest profile roles at top outlets. These things are all true and inexcusable, and it's nothing short of thrilling to see the shift in public opinion towards recognizing and repairing these injustices. We can and must do more to help Black Americans achieve full equality in every sphere in this country that has denied them opportunity and fairness and even civil rights for so long.

It's thrilling that the nation as a whole has, for the first time, vowed to end the scourge of police brutality against Black men, and that other big, systemic problems — unequal access to healthcare, the racial income gap, the sickening segregation of public schools, worst in liberal bastions like New York — are being given attention. We can be excited about these developments without losing the skepticism necessary to make sure that the enthusiasm turns into real change.

But it's a fallacy that achieving the goal of equality exists in tension with hearing from those we disagree with, especially when our divisions on race are so rapidly dwindling.

What makes this a moral panic is not the magnificent peaceful protests happening in the streets but the battle on Twitter against a side that's no longer there and, absent actual racists to fight, has turned on people who want to know how others think, or who uncover facts that don't fit the narrative.

Some claim that the authoritarian or at least authoritarian-wannabe nature of the Trump presidency makes the desire to hear from his supporters or other conservatives not just wrong but dangerous; "There's no other side when the other side are Nazis" is a common refrain. And yet, the radical shift in how the right views racism is itself a refutation of this claim. If Cotton and his ilk's opinions are bad for harming people of color, surely the fact that Cotton is actually calling out the unequal treatment of Black men even as he calls for military involvement, earns him a place in civil debate over the precise means of solving the problems he has (finally) admitted exist? Certainly anyone worried about the sincerity of Republicans suddenly expressing deep concern for Black Americans could not do better than to be involved in a conversation with them?

What was the point of replacing the hegemony of white men in opinion pages and newsrooms if we are just going to institute a new one — the hegemony of a single sentence repeated thousands of times over?

Our collective rejection of racism should make us excited about the seismic changes to our laws that are possible now that we are in agreement to protect Black bodies from the brutality meted against them by those in law enforcement.

Whether that's the outcome of this moment — or whether it's used to find more and more people on the wrong side of a war that's already been won — will be up to America's crumbling newsrooms to determine.

Batya Ungar-Sargon is the opinion editor of the Forward. You can reach her at batya@forward.com