June 3, 2024 / The backlash to America’s racial reckoning

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): Vox is turning ten.

*<CLIP> HAPPY BIRTHDAY ON ELECTRIC GUITAR*

SEAN: And in typical Vox fashion, we’re celebrating by explaining stuff.

*<CLIP> DAVID GUETTA GEORGE FLOYD / MLK REMIX*

SEAN: But not the regular stuff!  
  
We’re marking a decade of explaining the news by looking back at a decade of turning points – moments that changed everything, or at least felt like they were gonna.

On *Today, Explained*, we’re gonna talk about George Floyd.

*<CLIP> DAVID GUETTA: So, shout out to his family.*

FABIOLA CINEAS (Vox reporter): And so after all that happened, 2020 was supposed to be this major turning point for progress, because, of course people would see such a gruesome murder and say, ‘We have to change.’ But instead of that happening, it turned out to be a period of backlash instead.

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): The political and cultural backlash to America’s racial reckoning, coming up on the show.

GUETTA POSTS

[THEME]

SEAN: *Today, Explained* from Vox. And Vox’s Fabiola Cineas is here to remind us about 2020, in case you, you know, tried to banish it from the old memory bank.

FABIOLA: Yeah, it was, it was quite the year.

SCORING IN – Saturn’s rings are ice and dust, APM

FABIOLA: George Floyd was killed, outside of a store in Minneapolis. And the only reason why we knew about it was because a bystander, Darnella Frazier, who was a teen at the time, recorded this killing. So Derek Chauvin was kneeling on George Floyd's neck.

*<CLIP> DARNELLA FRAZIER COURT TESTIMONY: I heard George Floyd saying.. I can’t breathe, please.. Get offa me, I can’t breathe. He cried for his Mom. He was in pain.*

FABIOLA: And so she posts this video online. And then the next, by the next day, people are out in the streets.

*<CLIP> THE TELEGRAPH:*

*<<protest sounds>*

*Protestor: I’m tired of my Black men and my Black women being shot!! Being killed by the NYPD. I’m tired of it! I have three Black men in my home. I’m tired! I AM TIRED!*

FABIOLA: It really looked like for a moment there, there was going to be change. It started out with people recognizing that systemic injustice, systemic racism were real.

*<CLIP> DR. PHIL: I have benefited from white privilege all of my life. I’m an old white guy. I can go to the store and not get followed.*

FABIOLA: People started recognizing how the police carry out a lot of state violence, and so people started putting up black squares on their Instagram profiles because they wanted it to be a blackout. They were just like, industry needs to stop. Social media needs to stop because something so serious happened. And so that was everyone's, you know, collective way to say ‘I recognize what's happening and I want to be a part of the solution.’

*<CLIP> ITAKERESPONSIBILITY: Stanley Tucci: I will no longer allow an unchecked moment. I will no longer allow racist, hurtful words, jokes or stereotypes no matter how small, to be uttered in my presence.*

FABIOLA: We had anti-racism books flying off the shelves. So so folks like Robyn D'Angelo, Ibram X Kendi,

*TAPE SFX (PLAY)  
  
<CLIP> TODAY, EXPLAINED PODCAST:*

*Ibram X Kendi: You have racial disparities in the United States, in Canada, in other countries, and there’s only 2 causes of, you know, racial disparities. Either certain groups are better or worse than others and that’s why they have more, or, racist policy.*

*TAPE SFX (STOP)*

FABIOLA: Because they were leading the way and saying, hey, this is how you can be an anti-racist. This is how you can recognize your white privilege and be a part of, what needs to change in America.

*<CLIP> PROTESTOR: On behalf of caucasian people…*

FABIOLA: I remember seeing a video, or maybe even a photo of just like black people sitting in chairs, and there were white people kneeling on the floor washing their feet.

*<<Video posts>> PROTESTOR: Yes father, it’s our honor to stand here, on behalf of all white persons….*

SCORING OUT

SEAN: There was immediate backlash, right? There was an effort to characterize protests as riots, even if people weren't rioting, or especially if they were, there were people who were immediately backlashing against this, this moment.

FABIOLA: Yeah, there was certainly immediate backlash. We had the president, right, Donald Trump sending out so many tweets a day talking about how governors, mayors need to step up and calling the police or, you know, certain governors need to call in the National Guard to help control protesters.

*<CLIP> AP: PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: Today I have strongly recommended to every governor to deploy the National Guard in sufficient numbers that we dominate the streets. Mayor’s and governors must establish an overwhelming law enforcement presence until the violence has been quelled.*

SEAN: And that's all in reaction to the protests, whether they were, you know, peaceful or violent. We're not even talking about policy, but of course, this cultural moment leads to a bunch of policy proposals, too.

FABIOLA: Yeah. State legislatures trying to ban the use of no knock warrants, for example.

*<CLIP>NBC NEWS: Today Louisville's mayor signed Breanna’s Law, after the metro council unanimously banned the use of no knock warrants, a controversial practice that gives police authority to enter a home without announcing themselves.*

FABIOLA: We saw just a movement, a progressive movement to try to defund the police.

*<CLIP> ONE BROTHER TO ANOTHER: So we’ll take some funds that have been going to the militarization of police departments, all of these assault weapons, we’ll stop doing that, and we will bring in mental health professionals and psychologists, and counselors where there are people who are being treated as if they’re not ill – mentally ill and we know that they are, and policing cannot deal with what ails them.*

FABIOLA: And then we also saw just a movement, a cultural movement. So people were like, we need to remove statues, we need to change the name of schools, changed the names of various buildings and military bases. And then more broadly, we in schools and other institutions, we see and attention to just even talking about racism. So structural inequality and structural racism wasn't something that was a part of everyday vocabulary. And now we had surveys from Pew saying that white people were recognizing what these terms mean and that these things were real. And so the federal government in other places basically pledged to carry out diversity, equity and inclusion trainings to basically make sure that employees and students were were better versed on what all of this meant.

SEAN: There's a backlash to George Floyd and Black Lives Matter immediately, but then it sort of seems to grow significantly. How does it grow?

SCORING IN – CEZ\_MAG\_6017\_00501\_Dodekaeder\_APM

FABIOLA: I do want to mention, for example, like, Kyle Rittenhouse showed up to a protest in August 2020, killed two protesters and wounded another in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

*<CLIP> ABC7:*

*REPORTER: Rittenhouse was interviewed shortly before the shootings and was asked if he was using non lethal rounds*

*RITTENHOUSE: We don’t have non-lethal.*

*BYSTANDER: So you guys are full on ready to defend the property*

*RITTENHOUSE: Yes we are.*

FABIOLA: This was a huge moment because this is someone who was there, supposedly to carry out vigilante justice. A lot of people in the moment saw it as wrong. But then about a year later, in 2021, he was acquitted of of all charges. So he was able to just walk away. We see a movement to, to ban books across a number of states where Florida, they were like taping up, school books. And so when you look at the book bans, you see that a lot of the books that are being banned are books that are written by authors of color, or maybe they feature characters of color, or maybe they are, books that have LGBTQ themes. And so, book bans then carry us to the next thing:

*<CLIP> MSNBC’S MIKA BRZENZINSKI: Since the 2020 election, the Brennan Center for Justice has identified 177 bills introduced in state legislatures across the country that, the group says would make it harder for people to vote and for those votes to be counted fairly.*

FABIOLA: And so these laws basically limit, for example, the number of hours that voters have to vote. They limit where voters can go to vote. And so a lot of those methods that were limited, they were the methods that people of color, disabled voters, poor voters used to, vote in the 2020 election.

*<CLIP> AL-JAZEERA REPORTER: Civil rights groups and Democrats say it's a deliberate attempt to suppress black and brown voters.*

*GEORGIA STATE REPRESENTATIVE ERIC ALLEN: I will be damned if I let the fight of my forefathers, my ancestors looking at me, and I roll over and laid down and allow them to do this. Yes. So we will fight them here. Yeah. You fight out here? Yeah. We will win. Yeah…*

SCORING OUT

SEAN: I don't think it will come to surprise to like a lot of maybe progressive Americans or people who are ready to see reform in the wake of George Floyd's death, that, like Ron DeSantis, is going to try and backpedal for political points, for his own beliefs, whatever it might be. But then, like, just a few weeks ago, we had two schools in Virginia renaming themselves after Confederate generals.

*<CLIP> WUSA9 REPORTER: There's Stonewall Jackson High School that was renamed to Mountain View High School, and Ashby Lee Elementary School was renamed to Honey Run. A local advocacy group began pushing for the change back after it did a survey, finding most people there in the county preferred the old names. Now, critics also say the board rushed through the change in 2020.*

SEAN: What is going on there?

FABIOLA: Yeah, it's it's a scary reality, I think a lot of people definitely weren't surprised, because I think a lot of people recognize what our history is. People recognize that this backlash and these reversals are part of the American story. And so to hear that two schools are renaming, themselves after Confederate leaders is is it's to me, I was shocked, but at the same time, it's like… sad to to think that they held on to this, you know, for a couple of years until, you know, they waited until it was okay to come back out and say, actually, we want these names back. And they likely have so much support, which is why it was able to happen.

SEAN: So what does that mean? Does that mean that we shouldn't be surprised to see Virginia schools renaming themselves after Confederate generals? Does that mean that that we should expect there to be reversals?

FABIOLA: Yeah, I think it's okay to be surprised by it because it really is such a major move, especially with just all the things that we thought would happen in 2020. And so I think it's okay to be surprised.

SCORING IN

FABIOLA: Whether we should expect it? Sure, it just feels like this is a pattern that constantly happens. When progress happens, we get pushback. So I think it's also fair to expect it.

SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: Backlash is kinda hard to measure. But one way to do it is to take a look at the brands.

We’ll do so when *Today, Explained* returns.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

SEAN: *Today, Explained* has returned. I’m Sean Rameswaram and we are joined by Michael Serazio [sir AH zee o]. He’s a communications professor at Boston College.

MICHAEL SERAZIO (professor of communication, Boston College): Broadly speaking, I study how the media gets produced. So first book was about the advertising industry. Second book was about sports media. I just did a book, the most recent book, which is called *The Authenticity Industries*. It was all about how America is obsessed with authenticity and how that's manufactured for us and faked for us. In politics, in advertising, in entertainment.

SEAN: We asked Michael to remind us how brands went all in on racial justice in 2020.

MICHAEL: So you have a wide range of approaches. You have ads from Nike. They had an ad called “Don't Do It.” And it was basically ‘Don't turn your back on racism. Don't be silent about the inequities that, people of color face.’ You had an ad from Old Navy that had the title and theme, “We are we.”

*<CLIP> OLD NAVY COMMERCIAL: There’s a world of possibility that can’t exist with you vs. me. It will take work, that’s indisputable. But oh man it could be beautiful, this world where we are we.*

MICHAEL: Generic sort of pro diversity messaging. You had Ben and Jerry's launching a podcast that was all about America's long history of racial violence and discrimination.

SEAN: I think we produced it! <<laughs>>

MICHAEL: Oh, really? Okay.

*<CLIP> WHO WE ARE PODCAST: This is Who We Are. A podcast by Ben and Jerry’s and produced by Vox Creative. I’m Carvel Wallace...*

MICHAEL: You had Uber putting an ad out that said, delete our app if you tolerate racism. So, you got a really wide range of companies that are putting their messages out. You have a wide range of investment in that. By one tally, the *Washington Post* tallied $50 billion in corporate pledges toward racial equity causes at this time.

SEAN: Wow.

MICHAEL: And a lot of that money was dedicated toward scholarships. A lot of that money was going toward funding, online creators, influencers. A lot of that money was trying to designate toward, improving disparities in the employment at these corporations themselves. So you had in this summer of 2020, when brands are trying to be relevant in the culture, they see what's happening in the culture. It's a protest moment around this cause and this issue, and they jump on it in full.

SEAN: And we spent a bunch of our time in the first half of the show talking about BLM. But what you're talking about here wasn't just about racial justice.

MICHAEL: No, the lead up to that was broadly a kind of brand politics that took hold during the Trump era. Racial justice was one component of that. But you had, a number of other causes that got wrapped up in that.

*SCORING IN, Rains of glass*

MICHAEL: Levi's and Delta aligning themselves with gun control.

*<CLIP> CBS NEWS: Chip Burgh the CEO of Levis Strauss and co. released a statement Wednesday saying the company does not want guns on any of its properties unless carried by a law enforcement official. It went on to say it boils down to this: You should not have to be concerned about your safety while shopping for clothes or trying on a pair of jeans.*

MICHAEL: Patagonia giving back its $10 million tax cut in response to what they deemed an irresponsible piece of legislation from the Trump administration, and the kind of kickoff for a lot of this, like brand activism was, was the inauguration of Trump in January 2017.

*<CLIP> INAUGURATION 2021, PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: AMERICA FIRST! AMERICA FIRST!*

MICHAEL: You had the Super Bowl that year, which is basically the time when America cares about advertising. Like most of the time, Americans are desperate to avoid advertising, but there's three hours every year that we actually pay attention to it. And it was at that moment that you had a series of ads that were kind of oriented toward immigration issues.

*<CLIP> BUDWEISER, SUPER BOWL 2021 COMMERCIAL:*

*IMMIGRANT: I want to brew a beer.*

*OFFICIAL: Welcome to America.*

*AMERICAN: You’re not wanted here! Go back home!*

MICHAEL: And that was, you know, one of the most kind of politicized Super Bowl ad moments, of all time. So what had been building throughout the late 20 tens with Trump crescendoed with, the Black Lives Matter advertising of 2020.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Could you tell us when brands started caring about racial justice?

MICHAEL: So you had the Black Lives Matter movement taking shape in the mid to late 2010s, and you would have occasional instances of brands trying to glom onto that in some way. Sometimes successful, sometimes unsuccessful. I think the successful ads would be ones like Proctor and Gamble did an ad called the Talk.

*<CLIP> PROCTOR AND GAMBLE: <<music>>*

*MOTHER: Now, when you get pulled over…*

*DAUGHTER: Mom! I’m a good driver, don’t worry!*

*MOTHER: Baby, this is not about you getting a ticket. This is about you not coming home.*

MICHAEL: Less successful during that kind of run up to 2020 would be ads like Pepsi's, Kendall Jenner, quasi protest ad …

*<CLIP> PEPSI AD: <<music plays>> <<pepsi can opens>> <<cheering>>*

MICHAEL: … within the ad industry trade press was considered by many to be the worst ad of all time.

SEAN: <<laughs>> That bad!

MICHAEL: Yeah. Yeah. And I remember reading in some of the trades, you know, just just how much it was panned. And they pulled it and they, you know, acknowledged it was very tone deaf. And there was, you know, lots of, blame to go around for that one. And then the other one would be, Starbucks, at one point in the mid to late 20, 2010s, did an initiative called ‘Race Together’, where they were trying to get baristas and customers to strike up a conversation about racial injustice …

SEAN: I remember that. Yikes.

MICHAEL: … which was, you know, again, I mean, it, it created similar to the Pepsi ad, an incredible amount of derision on the internet. It was perfect fodder for sarcasm on Twitter.

*<CLIP> CBS MORNING: Gayle King: And then there’s this one…”Not sure what Starbucks was thinking. I don’t have time to explain 400 years of oppression to you and still make my train.”*

SEAN: But the reason this is essential to our conversation is because, like all the backlash we talked about in the first half of the show, there is a brand backlash.

MICHAEL: Yes. Or at least a retreat on the part of brands in the years since 2020. In the way that you can easily call to mind examples of brands doing Black Lives Matter related ads. It's very hard to call to mind brands having a take or doing advertising around the Dobbs decision that wound up reversing Roe v Wade. Brands have not had any interest whatsoever in getting themselves involved with the Israel-Palestine War. And there has been this reversal in some of the survey data around this, where American consumers increasingly say that they're not interested in brands taking political stands or opining on current events. So there's been this kind of reversal in consumer sentiment.

SEAN: Maybe everyone saw what happened to Bud Light.

SCORING IN – SON\_ROCK\_0174\_01401\_Beer\_Barrel\_Carol\_A\_APM

MICHAEL: Bud Light is the cautionary tale in this.

*<CLIP> DYLAN MULVANEY: Hi! Impressive carrying skills, right? I got some Bud Lights for us!*

MICHAEL: Bud Light is the ghost that haunts many a CMO is dreams.   
  
SEAN: <laughs>   
  
MICHAEL: To refresh, as part of a campaign for, for the beer, they wound up enlisting a trans influencer by the name of Dylan Mulvaney …

*DYLAN MULVANEY: This month I celebrated my day-365 of womanhood, and Bud Light sent me possibly the best gift ever… a can with my face on it!*

MICHAEL: … one of many influencers, by the way, this was not putting Dylan Mulvaney on a billboard in Times Square or buying a 3030 spot Super Bowl with Dylan Mulvaney. And it was a of many influencers who were engaged in this campaign and it was, a tremendous backlash to that, Kid Rock, among other sort of celebrities, took issue with the use of Mulvaney in this campaign.

*<CLIP> KIDROCK: Fuck Bud Light, and fuck Anheuser-Busch. Have a terrific day.*

MICHAEL: And it led to an enormous sales slide by, by one estimate, could have possibly cost Bud Light $1 billion. And it was it was, I think, at that moment where brands had been already sort of backing away from being highly political in their advertising that I think created even more caution. Whereas brands had been more willing to be risky in terms of taking a stand around culture war issues, cultural identity issues a few a few years prior.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Does it ultimately matter what the brands say or do? Ultimately, these companies want us to buy their stuff. Does it make a difference when they take a stand?

MICHAEL: I think that advertising is like many other types of media and pop culture. It reflects something about where we're at as a society. During the Floyd protest moment, there was lots of patting on the back, like advertisers patting themselves on the back for being brave, being daring, taking a stand, not, not being neutral, right? But like they were by and large, noticing what was happening in the culture, which is tens of thousands, millions of people filling the streets as part of this protest moment, and they were taking their cue and taking their initiative from that. So in the sense that, does it matter whether or not advertisers want to be political or brands want to take a stand on subjects of importance? I think it matters far less than what actual politicians feel about those issues. I think it matters far less than what everyday citizens think and feel about those issues. Because advertising doesn't lead, it reflects and in that sense, I think the reason that it matters is that it tells us something about where we're at in culture, tells us something about what issues matter.

SCORING IN – Dave the Mage - Begotten- instrumental (APM)

MICHAEL: Ads, of course, you're just trying to sell you product. They're just trying to sell you soap or beer or jeans. But they're also telegraphing something about where consensus is in society. And the absence of political ads right now, I think, speaks to some reluctance on the part of society to engage with these issues that were so prominent four years ago.   
  
 SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Michael Serazio. Boston College. He’s a communications professor over there. His latest book is *The Authenticity Industries: Keeping it "Real" in Media, Culture, and Politics*. Find it wherever you find your books.

Victoria Chamberlin produced our show today. We were edited by Amina Al-Sadi, fact checked by Laura Bullard, and mixed by David Herman and Andrea Kristinsdottir.

Vox is covering many more moments that changed or were supposed to change our country, and our culture – from self-care to the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan to a little podcast called *Serial*. Read all about ‘em at Vox dot com. Happy birthday, Vox dot com.

This is *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]