26 June 2023 / woke woke woke woke woke

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]  
[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): It's Today, Explained, I'm Sean Rameswaram and I'm standing outside the White House because a lot of people who are running to live in this house in 2024 are obsessed with the word woke. So I thought I'd come out here and ask people what exactly that word means.

Speaker 1: Being awake.

Speaker 2: Yeah, woke means, it's like you wake up.

Speaker 3: Or maybe somebody want to be attentive. Then you want to convey that message to woke up, buddy.

Speaker 4: People who are willing to recognize and convey the essential dignity of every human being.

Speaker 5: To signify, like, an awareness of racial issues, especially for black Americans.

Speaker 6: Someone who can see through the the facade of others.

Speaker 7: It's ironic. The people who are woke are the ones who are actually asleep.

Speaker 8: You've bought into an agenda that's being pushed by liberal, extreme leftism.

Speaker 9: It's all bullshit. It's all bullshit.

SEAN: Coming up on *Today, Explained* what woke means to just about everybody.

[THEME]

SEAN: When we wanted to talk to someone about the outsized presence the word “woke” has in the 2024 Republican primary, we thought of Astead Herndon. He’s the host of “The Run-Up” podcast at the *New York Times*.

SEAN: So you've surely noticed that. Instead of running against Joe Biden, it seems like a lot of Republicans are running against the word woke and the idea of wokeness.

ASTEAD: Absolutely. I mean, ever since Biden came into office, they've been trying to find a thing to stick to him. You know, he's a figure that was not as personally enraging as, you know, Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton, the villains they had in the past. And the Republican kind of ideological core has been to really find a way to invalidate the other side in that kind of villainous manner.

SCORING – GUM\_GUM\_7070\_00801\_Tracy\_s\_Dock\_APM

ASTEAD: And so I think you have Republicans searching for what that's going to be in the Joe Biden Democratic Party and wokeness has become the kind of catch all term to embody some of that. We hear it over and over on the campaign trail:

*<CLIP> FORMER AMBASSADOR NIKKI HALEY: Wokeness is a virus more dangerous than any pandemic hands down.*

*FORMER VICE PRESIDENT MIKE PENCE: Beyond All of those failed policies, one of the most troubling developments of the past two years has been the Biden Administration’s whole hearted embrace of the woke left’s all encompassing assault on culture and values.*

*FLORIDA GOV. RON DESANTIS: We are going to leave woke ideology in the dustbin of history where it belongs.*

[SCORING OUT]

ASTEAD: It makes it really clear that for the next year and a half, it may not be a campaign against the White House, its policies or the like, but just the idea that the White House represents a larger progressive ecosystem that is encroaching on the kind of cultural values of everyday Americans. That's the most generous understanding of what this term has come to mean. But it has basically means everything Republicans don't like.

SEAN: And I definitely know that Ron DeSantis is like the king of anti-wokeness. He says Florida is where woke goes to die. But it's not just him. It's Nikki Haley. It's Vivek on this show, actually:  
  
 TAPE SFX

*<CLIP> Vivek Ramaswamy on TEX: They're blowing woke smoke to deflect accountability from the questions that they would rather not answer to their customers or to their shareholders or the people who would actually scrutinize those businesses in other ways.*TAPE SFX OUT

ASTEAD: I mean, on our podcast, we talked to Nate Cohn, the *Times*’ chief polling expert, who tells us that when you look at the issues across the Republican base, there are very few that cut across each kind of sector. And one of them is this anti-wokeness. The Manhattan finance person who is a conservative and the evangelical in the South, who is a conservative, are both angry at this same kind of progressive push as they see it. And so I think that we can name this. I think a lot of this came after 2020 where I think there has been a backlash to what was a rising rhetoric of social justice and racial equity. And I think they've really capitalized on that feeling that that push that went too far in quotations.

SEAN: Does it differ amongst the other candidates who are running for the 2024 Republican nomination, or is it all sort of this DeSantis vein?

ASTEAD: It definitely differs. There's candidates like Vivek Ramaswamy, who's made a surprising push in the Republican nomination, going from a kind of an unknown to maybe one of the lower tier candidates, mid-tier candidates. He's really pushed himself as the, as a CEO who represents a push back against kind of wokeness in corporate culture. When we were at CPAC, this was the overwhelming topic of discussion:

*<CLIP> CPAC PANELIST: Woke culture attacks our values and faith. We’ll stay true.*

*TULSI GABBARD: Leaders who are driven by cowardly wokeness.*

*CPAC PANELIST: There is a union between Big Tech, government, Big Corporate, woke ESG America to silence dissenting views and they're all together in this regime that has really operated in opposition to the American people.*

*REP. LAUREN BOEBERT: Every diversity equity and inclusion program, every ESG rule, every woke initiative in our military must be uprooted and completely defunded.*

ASTEAD: You had people like Nikki Haley there who's kind of famous moment was taking down the Confederate flag in South Carolina. That would probably be labeled as a semi-woke action today.

SEAN: <laughs>   
  
ASTEAD: That shows you where the energy is on the Republican side right now. It's not to really pitch yourself as someone who is some racial uniter or like cultural mid-point of the of the left and the right. It's really to push yourself as a, as a champion of bringing what they view as American culture back to their side. The interesting thing here is that actually, Donald Trump is probably the candidate that talks about wokeness the least.

SEAN: He even said that he's sick of it and the, the word's getting overused. He doesn't know what it means anymore. <chuckles>

*<CLIP> FORMER PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: And I don’t like the term woke, because I hear ‘woke, woke, woke’ you know it’s just a term they use, half the people can’t even define it, they don’t know what it is.*

ASTEAD: It's a kind of classic Trump honesty moment when he says the thing out loud. I mean, wokeness is an articulation of Republican grievance that has built up over a long time, but they're using this word as a kind of vague catchall in this moment. Donald Trump has no problem naming the grievances that he has. What I think he is doing in terms of acknowledging the kind of vagueness of his opponents and saying that they're tiptoeing around grievances, that he's willing to name, that he and his supporters are willing to call out directly. And I think they think that's what's going to win them at the end of the day, is not to engage in this kind of elite back and forth about the meaning of wokeness, but actually to embody the frustration of the base conservative voter.

SEAN: Is this motivating and activating voters on the right?

ASTEAD: I mean, it depends on what voters we're talking about. If we're looking for the evidence we have as of now, it's not that this has really helped them win. I mean, Republicans are talking a whole bunch about wokeness in the last midterms, and that was one that went really poorly for them, at least relative to their expectations. We have seen it become a motivating factor going back to what Nate told me among the Republican electorate. So if you're thinking about the primary and the period that we're in now, it makes a lot of sense for them to be talking about this. The problem is there's no evidence that there's really a mass motivating issue in the general election for as much as they've targeted in a nonpresidential level – I'm thinking about states with gerrymandered state legislatures, I'm thinking about Nebraska or Wisconsin or things like that – it's really cause those folks to push anti-trans bills through the on the state level and really to legislate anti-wokeness into law. So it's having an impact. But if the question is, is it working on a national level or does it help the Republican nominee win the next presidential election? That is very much unclear.

SEAN: Do you think like the former president himself, Republican voters might eventually get tired of hearing about wokeness as the boogeyman?

ASTEAD: Totally. I think they could. Out of all those candidates making this their calling card, they haven't overtaken Donald Trump, you know? Like, Ron DeSantis might be the king of wokeness, but he's not the king of the primary, at least so far. Although this can be a kind of an issue that crosses across the Republican electorate. It's not clear that it makes it rise in priority past what voting for Donald Trump provides them. A Donald Trump is not going to be talking about wokeness left and right, but he will be talking about that underlying feeling that retribution: anti-deep state, dismantle DOJ and FBI. Like, I don't think these are disconnected things, but I don't think a Donald Trump led Republican Party is one that is more woke <laugh>, if we could use that phrasing for the Republican candidates who are using it has yet to show a full political value. But I also think that the whole party has become motivated by grievance. And if Donald Trump is the nominee, that will be felt by public and everyone around, no matter if he's talking about wokeness or not.

RIHANNA - “WORK” (Patrick Boyd parody)

SEAN: But if DeSantis is the nominee,

ASTEAD: Oh then this is the whole election’s about.   
  
SEAN: Running wokeness into, like, 2032.

ASTEAD: Everything will be about woke. It will be a referendum on wokeness.  
  
SEAN: <laughs>   
  
ASTEAD: <laughs> I imagine. I imagine if he, if he's the nominee, that's what it's going to be about, I imagine.

*PATRICK BOYD:   
 woke woke woke woke woke  
 DeSantis says it’s   
 woke woke woke woke woke  
 Anything you want is   
 woke woke woke woke woke  
 All the candidates say  
 woke woke woke woke woke  
 Say it with me now …*

SEAN: Astead Herndon hosts “The Run-Up” for the *New York Times*. If you can’t get enough 2024 election coverage even though it’s still like two July 4th and like two Halloweens away) this is probably the show for you.

More woke mind virus on *Today, Explained, when we’re back.*

[BREAK]  
[BUMPER]

*<CLIP> Siona: The definition of woke according to Merriam-Webster:*

*Woke: aware of and actively attentive to important societal facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice)*

*BUMPER TONE*

*Woke: politically liberal (as in matters of racial and social justice) especially in a way that is considered unreasonable or extreme.*

SEAN: *Today, Explained* is back. Woke clearly means a lot of things to a lotta people. To bring some clarity on the etymology, we reached out to Kathleen Newman-Bremang, who wrote about woke for Refinery29.

KATHLEEN: Most historians trace it back to Jamaican activists Marcus Garvey.

*<CLIP> MARCUS GARVEY: I Marcus MacArthur Garvey and the founder and first president general of the Universe of Negro Communities, leading an organization determined to unite all the Black people of the world into one great party, to establish the country to prevail.*

KATHLEEN: And his work in 1923 when he told his followers to wake up Ethiopia, wake up Africa. It was a sentiment aimed to inspire political consciousness and social activism in the wake of colonialism.

SEAN: It went all the way back to Marcus Garvey!

KATHLEEN: Yes.   
  
SEAN: Amazing!  
  
KATHLEEN: Yeah. And then it takes us to 1938 and a protest song by Huddie Ledbetter, a.k.a. Leadbelly.

*<CLIP> “Scottsboro Boys” - Lead Belly.*

KATHLEEN: Which included the actual phrase ‘Stay woke!’ And it's in a spoken word component to the song Scottsboro Boys, and it references the story of nine black boys and men who were falsely accused of raping two white women in Alabama in 1931.

*<CLIP> LEAD BELLY: So I advise everybody, be a little careful when you go through down there Alabama— best stay woke, keep their eyes open.”*

KATHLEEN: What is said to be the first official printed definition was published by the *New York Times* in 1962 by William Melville Kelly. And he mentions the word in this piece called “If You're Woke, You Dig It” And in the piece, he's going through the slang terms that the Negro community, as he calls it, uses in Harlem, for example, And the essay talks about black slang and its evolution and its appropriation by white people. fittingly. By 1965, Martin Luther King Jr essentially gave a speech on wokeness at Oberlin College. In the speech, he said, “The great challenge facing every individual graduating today is to remain awake through this social revolution.”

*<CLIP> Martin Luther King -1968 speech at the National Cathedral:  
We must all learn to live together as brothers or we will all perish together as fools. . . . We must see this, believe this, and live by it if we are to remain awake through a great revolution.*

SEAN: How do we go from this historic use of “awake” to this sort of contemporary use of “woke”? When exactly does that evolution happen?

KATHLEEN: It kind of goes away. It exists in academia, but outside of that, it starts to become more prevalent in pop culture in 2008, when Erykah Badu releases her song “Master Teacher:”

<soundbyte> Master Teacher - Erykah Badu

KATHLEEN: Which includes the refrain “I stay woke.”

*<CLIP> Master Teacher - Erykah Badu - I stay woke.*

KATHLEEN: And that term was included in a song by Georgia Anne Muldrow, who co-wrote the song.   
  
SEAN: Hm.   
  
KATHLEEN: And in an interview to Okay Player, she describes what she told Erykah Badu about the word woke. And I really think this kind of encapsulates what the original meaning is and how it kind of is used in culture by black folks.

SCORING OUT

KATHLEEN: So she said “‘woke’ is if someone put a burlap sack on your head, knocked you out and put you in a new location, and then you come to and understand where you are ain't home. And the people around you, your neighbors, they're not acting in a neighborly fashion. They're the ones who conked you on your head. You got kidnaped here and then you got punked out of your own language, everything. That's woke – understanding what your ancestors went through.’

SEAN: Wow! Wow! Why isn’t that in Merriam Webster?! Merriam Webster take note!

KATHLEEN: <laughs> Right?!

SEAN: That is a definition.

KATHLEEN: Right?! So that song really struck a chord. And then we started to see woke pop up more in music and TV. Childish Gambino releases “Redbone.”

*<CLIP> “Redbone” - Childish Gambino: Stay woke!*

KATHLEEN: The TV series *Woke* comes out on Hulu about a black cartoonist having an awakening after experiencing police violence.

*<CLIP> WOKE:   
GUY: What's in the bag?   
OTHER GUY: It's just a stapler.   
GUY: He's got a weapon.   
OTHER GUY: No, no, no! It's a stapler! You’ve got the wrong guy!*

KATHLEEN: And I think, you know, around the 2010s leading to 2020, it's used to capture an idea of questioning power and of radical politics, But also it's being taken less seriously, I would say in Black vernacular. It's also used as, as a joke.

SEAN: So wait, so so Erykah Badu and potentially Childish Gambino. And this series on Hulu, they are sincerely using this term woke. But you're saying in black vernacular, it's a bit of a joke?   
  
KATHLEEN: I mean, it's a bit of both. So Childish Gambino is referencing like staying woke as far as getting cheated on in that song.

*<CLIP> Redbone by Childish Gambino  
They gon' find you.   
Gon' catch you sleepin',   
Ooooooo!  
Now stay woke!*

KATHLEEN: And that I think is something in Black vernacular people were saying.  
  
SEAN: Hm.  
  
KATHLEEN: Like, whoa, whoa, stay woke, stay woke, in reference to like making sure your eyes are wide open in your relationship.  
  
SEAN: Yeah.

SCORING OUT   
  
KATHLEEN: And then in the Hulu show *Woke* they do kind of use it in a comedic sense at times to make fun of people who are always eager to point out all the issues within our society who are kind of pretentious with their knowledge of social issues. And there is a critique, I think, to be made of that kind of performative caricature of a woke person.

*<CLIP> NIGHT SCHOOL: For me I first got woke when I seen Terminator. And I realize it wasn't just a movie, it was prophecy. First identified by the 3.5 percenters. But that's another conversation.*

*<CLIP> BLACK LADY SKETCH SHOW: DOC: I'm Dr. Hadassha Olayinka Ali-Youngman, pre-PHD. OTHER PERSON: Say good morning, children.  
STUDENTS: Good morning.  
DOC: Good mourning. Whose in mourning? See, see, see, see the white man will have you speak death into the top of your day. Try to kill your dreams just like they killed UPN.*

KATHLEEN: But overall, I think it had a positive connotation and it was something to strive for. You know, the term ‘woke bae’ was a way that you would describe men in Hollywood or in your life who were politically aware, and it was seen as a positive thing in a partner.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWVB1QJKGSw&t=80s)*> Refinery29: We’re gonna celebrate a famous dude for being super hot super smart and affecting positive change in the world. Hence the name ‘woke bae!*

KATHLEEN: It was a trait that you wanted to look for, like somebody who was woke.

SEAN: And then what happens between it being used in Black vernacular as something of a joke and it becoming a political cudgel.

KATHLEEN: In 2020, after George Floyd's murder, you know, where there was this open conversation about race in a way that I hadn't seen in my lifetime. And I think that the white discomfort that came from that summer is when the word woke was twisted into a political tool and became the buzzword of the push against progressiveness that we see now.

SCORING IN – HARD\_HARD\_0140\_01301\_Deeper\_-\_Full\_instrumental\_APM-03

KATHLEEN: That summer, white people were finally talking out loud about the ways in which structural racism shows up in our everyday lives.

<CLIP> Celebrities reacting to George Floyd:  
*SOPHIA BUSH: I take responsibility for every unchecked moment.  
KRISTEN BELL: For every time it was easier to ignore than to call it out for what it was.  
JUSTIN THEROUX: Every not so funny joke. Every unfair stereotype.  
DEBRA MESSING: Every blatant injustice, no matter how big or small.*

KATHLEEN: You know, they were talking about privilege and unconscious bias and microaggressions and things that are real, but frankly, make white people very uncomfortable – certain white people – and I think that that shift in culture and the fact that real change looks like it was slowly and incrementally on the way, I think that scared conservatives. Taking the word woke, which signals progress and demonizing it, was a way of shutting down any progress and any attempts to push social activism and racial equality forward. And so you started hearing politicians refer to the “woke mob.”

*<CLIP> SEN. JOSH HAWLEY [R-MO]: The elite media, the woke mob, they don't like these people and they want the rest of America to dislike them too.”*

KATHLEEN: I think that the backlash to the MeToo movement comes into play here as well, because all of a sudden, the worst thing you could possibly do was to get canceled. Another word that comes from black vernacular that has been twisted and co-opted, and then the people doing the canceling, according to the right, was the woke mob.

*<CLIP> Gov. DeSantis acceptance speech: We fight the woke in the schools. We fight the woke in the corporations. We will never, ever surrender to the woke mob. Florida is where woke goes to die.*

SCORING OUT

KATHLEEN: There's polls that back this up that people do not know what the word woke means. I think this was in USA Today, an Ipsos poll, and it was 56% of Americans said when they could define it, they defined it in the positive sense. So when people can define it, which I don't think is often they are not using it in the same, you know, really divisive way that I think how it has been used now as a political tool to divide and to weaponize this like cultural fear of progress. I also think when you hear the term in regards to there being black actors playing *The Little Mermaid*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PhmiOhFBt_M)*> Salty Canuck: The Ariel that my girls and daughters grew up with is now gone. Because of these woke people. Over at the entertainment industry. I just hope that Disney collapses and burns. What a woke, horrible company.*

KATHLEEN: And you hear people saying, Oh, I don't like that there are woke bandages. Now, this was a tweet that went viral from a woman who was at her local drugstore and there were different colors of Band-Aids, one of them being brown, and she called them woke bandages.  
  
SEAN: <laughs>   
  
KATHLEEN: When you hear that, like, it's really hard to understand what they actually mean when they say the word woke. Because in that case, I think it's just a stand in for Black people or a stand in for anything that's not white. In that case, I think it honestly, it's bent into a slur.

SEAN: Do you think this is the final chapter of this word, or do you think it finds a way to have significant meaning again after this particular experience as, as the thing that everyone hates?

KATHLEEN: I mean, it's hard because I think as soon as you see a white politician say any sort of slang word, we lost it. Khiara M Bridges, she's a professor of law at UC Berkeley, called it a double violation. She said, you know, slang amongst black people is a love language. And then it's frustrating when that slang becomes appropriated and the meaning morphs into something else. And then what we do, though, is we always create and black folks always find new language to describe our specific plight and, and what we're going through. So I think that, you know, when it comes to whether I'm going to use it anymore, I think the only way I use woke is in this context, Sean. Like, it's in this context of being mad at how it's changed and talking about the frustration over how it's been co-opted. But in my everyday life and in conversation, I don't really use it anymore. And when I hear it, it's used in a context that, you know, is someone from the far right screaming at me for being too woke in my DMs or in my email. And in that case, I take it as a, as a compliment.

RIHANNA - “WORK” (Patrick Boyd parody)

SEAN: Kathleen Newman-Bremang [bruh-MANG] is the deputy director global at Refinery29 Unbothered. You can find her piece on “woke” at Refinery29 dot com. Thanks as well to Dr. Kelly Wright and Dr. Tracy Weldon – two linguists who helped us better understand the word woke. Our show today was produced by Siona Peterous. We were edited by Amina Al-Sadi, fact checked by Laura Bullard, and mixed by Patrick Boyd who, in his spare time, sings about being woke.

*<CLIP> PATRICK BOYD:   
  
 woke woke woke woke woke  
 DeSantis says it’s   
 woke woke woke woke woke  
 Anything you want is   
 woke woke woke woke woke  
 All the candidates say  
 woke woke woke woke woke  
 Say it with me now …  
 woke woke woke woke woke  
 Your pink shirt is   
 woke woke woke woke woke  
 You want cheese with that   
 woke woke woke woke woke  
 Socks and sandals now that’s   
 woke woke woke woke woke*

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]