# Trump’s race-based patriotism damages patriotism itself

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Over the last two weeks, President Trump has ramped up an important theme of his political career, namely the inextricable tie between patriotism and race. He has made persistent and aggressive appeals to an exclusionary ethnonationalism and to a racialized version of patriotism as an antidote to despair among white, working-class voters.  
  
Both signal the president’s authoritarian tendencies, and both do damage to patriotism itself, turning it from a unifying force to a tool of divisive, race-based hostility. In the end, the president’s kind of patriotism makes it into what the political theorist George Kateb rightly calls an “enormous moral perversity.”  
  
From the moment he embraced “birtherism” as a tool to discredit President Barack Obama and jump-start his political career, Trump has claimed to speak for people shunted aside by leaders more interested in fostering multiculturalism and globalization than in protecting the well-being of white Americans. He has used exaggerated images of a nation under attack from sinister forces to stoke his supporters’ fears. And he has offered himself as the nation’s sole protector.  
  
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As he put it in his 2016 acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention: “Our convention occurs at a moment of crisis for our nation. The attacks on our police, and the terrorism in our cities, threaten our very way of life. Any politician who does not grasp this danger is not fit to lead our country.”  
  
Familiar as these themes have been since, the president’s linkage of whiteness and patriotism intensified in a Constitution Day celebration on Sept. 17 when he announced the formation of the “1776 Commission.” This commission, he explained, would foster “patriotic education …. It will encourage our educators to teach our children about the miracle of American history and make plans to honor the 250th anniversary of our founding.”  
  
In that announcement, Trump took aim at the left’s supposed defilement of “the American story,” in particular what he described as “the New York Times’s totally discredited 1619 Project,” which he claimed “rewrites American history to teach our children that we were founded on the principle of oppression, not freedom.” That project’s inquiry into the role the mistreatment of African Americans has played in our history, Trump suggested, could not be reconciled with a genuine love for, and appreciation of, the American story and this country’s as-yet-incomplete quest to achieve equality for all its citizens.  
  
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Leaving nothing about the linkage of race and patriotism to his audience’s imagination, he railed against “critical race theory,” describing it in ways that have little to do with the actual forms of sociological inquiry to which the term originally applied. That theory, Trump warned, “is being forced into our children’s schools, it’s being imposed into workplace trainings, and it’s being deployed to rip apart friends, neighbor and families … Critical race theory, the 1619 Project, and the crusade against American history … will destroy our country.”  
  
At a campaign rally on Sept. 21, the president again put his racialized patriotism on display. Looking out at the nearly all-white crowd in Bemidji, Minn., a predominantly white city in an overwhelmingly white state, he drew on what a CNN report labeled “the history of eugenics.”  
  
In a version of the rambling remarks and weird use of metaphors that typify the president’s speaking style, out of the blue he praised Minnesotans’ genetic endowments. “You have good genes — you know that, right?” Trump told his audience. “You have good genes. A lot of it is about the genes, isn’t it, don’t you believe? The racehorse theory. You think we’re so different? You have good genes in Minnesota.”  
  
Again making the link of race and patriotism explicit, the president noted how happy he was to be with a group of “hard-working American patriots,” while warning them that if former vice president Joe Biden is elected president, “sleepy Joe will turn Minnesota into a refugee camp.”  
  
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The next day, Trump twice used patriotic appeals to cast himself as what the New York Times recently called “the defender of white America.” First, he upped the ante on his previous directive blocking federal agencies from using diversity training programs that teach about “white privilege” and critical race theory. He signed an executive order expanding that ban to cover anyone doing business with the federal government.  
  
In a pair of tweets following the order, Trump drew heavily on his version of patriotism, which suggests that love of country is the exclusive prerogative of white people. “A few weeks ago, I BANNED efforts to indoctrinate government employees with divisive and harmful sex and race-based ideologies. Today I’ve expanded that ban to people and companies that,” Trump tweeted in a barely disguised appeal to racial patriotism, “do business with our Country, the United States Military, Government Contractors, and Grantees. Americans should be taught to take PRIDE in our Great Country, and if you don’t, there’s nothing in it for you!”  
  
After issuing his executive order, Trump traveled to Pittsburgh, where he launched yet another tirade against people he sees as racial outsiders.  
  
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There the president revived attacks he made last year on several women of color who serve in the House of Representatives, the “Squad.” Trump, again using his own unique brand of presidential verbiage, mocked Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.), who, he said, was “not a good student, not good at anything.”  
  
He then went after Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-Minn.), whose family came to the United States from Somalia. He questioned her right to speak about what he referred to as “our country.”  
  
“How about Omar of Minnesota?” Trump asked. “We’re going to win the state of Minnesota because of her, they say. She’s telling us how to run our country. How did you do where you came from? How’s your country doing? She’s going to tell us — she’s telling us how to run our country …. We don't need socialists, and we don't need communists telling us how to run our country.”  
  
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According to this line of thinking, people of color who immigrate to the United States and became citizens, seemingly do not belong in “our” country, even if they are members of Congress. Neither their citizenship nor their public service can erase the boundaries of racial difference that Trump’s patriotic appeals insist must be maintained if America is to survive. Those appeals exclude from the national collective whole categories of people whose origin stories and ways of life do not fit into Trump’s cramped version of the American story.  
  
Yet, far from inspiring patriotic attachment to America and its ideals, Trump’s use of patriotism to play on racial fear diminishes it. Instead of bringing Americans together to take on the serious, common challenges this nation is facing, his kind of patriotism turns people against one another and diminishes our national strength. Trump’s consistent use of race-based appeals to patriotism as a distraction and a cover for his incompetence and misbehavior should remind us of the admonition of Samuel Johnson, a celebrated 18th-century British man of letters, who said that patriotism is often “the last refuge of the scoundrel.”  
  
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