

Rachel's Democracy & Health News #859, June 15, 2006

URL of this document: <http://tinyurl.com/mtk5l>

A PERSONAL REPORT FROM THE BALTIMORE PRECAUTION CONFERENCE

[Rachel's introduction: The Baltimore conference on precaution was a smashing success in more ways than one. The workshops were fabulous, the speakers were great. And our old nemesis [white privilege](#) reared its ancient head, giving us all one more opportunity to confront this familiar demon. Confronting and overcoming white privilege is a political imperative for our time. If we fail in this, we can never take back America.]

By Peter Montague

The precaution conference last weekend in Baltimore was a smashing success in more ways than one. Almost everyone who filled out an evaluation form began with "Great!" or something close. It was well-organized, well-run, and filled with good dialog and useful tools and information that people carried home to use in their own work.

With any luck, the conference laid the groundwork for much closer collaboration between groups that often don't talk to each other. We all owe huge thanks to the Center for Health, Environment and Justice (CHEJ) who attended to so many mechanical details of the conference so ably -- audio-visual equipment, lunch tickets (and lunches!), hotel rooms for everyone, and on and on and on -- with special thanks to Anne Rabe, Lynne Fessenden and Sharon Franklin.

But it was a wonderful conference for another reason as well. It illuminated once again the depths of misunderstanding, miscommunication and mistrust that have afflicted social justice movements as far back in U.S. history as you want to look. It may seem odd to view this as a plus, but it is. It's a huge plus and here's why: it offers us all a first-hand opportunity to examine the invisible forces that allow us to be divided and ruled by our adversaries. If we can't understand and overcome these divisive forces, our adversaries will drive a wedge of fear and suspicion between us. They have done it before. If we cannot learn to join together and work together and stay together, our adversaries will continue to corrupt the spirit of America for their own short-term profit and mean-spirited ends. That's what's happened in recent decades, and we all know it.

Here's the basic situation: those of us who want America to fulfill its promise -- who want it to be the land of the free and the home of the brave, with liberty and justice for all -- know that we can only achieve these goals if we have stable communities, a sound economy, and a healthy environment. If we're all fearful of losing our jobs, or if we all have to drive 2 hours each way each day to make ends meet, or if we've all got cancer, diabetes, and attention deficits, there's no way we can secure our liberties or gain justice for all. If our local economies are being Wal-Martized and the air and water make us sick, we're only headed for trouble and more trouble, without end.

So we've got to get America onto a new footing, a new path, so it can fulfill its promise. This means developing a huge coalition.

And we can do it. We've got what it takes. We outnumber our adversaries at least two to one, and often by far more than that.

But THEY have perfected the art of "divide and rule." In fact, divide and rule is the ONLY thing they've got going for them. If our adversaries fail to divide us, the game is over for them.

So what we can do is get together and stay together. If we can do that, we can prevail.

But it's oh-so-easy to divide people in America. It's way easier to divide them than it is to pull them together -- especially when you try to reach across the chasms of class and race.

That of course is the trick. If you believe that the [New Deal](#) programs of President Franklin Roosevelt were good for America, then you know what it takes to put American back on track -- it takes a righteous political coalition of underdogs -- workers, women, African-Americans, Hispanics, Indigenous People, Asians, the poor, the sick, the downtrodden, the disrespected, the marginalized, students, youth and others, in coalition with the millions of good-hearted liberal people of privilege who believe strongly in the promise of America. It takes a righteous political coalition of the people who know that the nation's strength is its diversity, its generosity of spirit, and its ethic of hard work, taking responsibility for your own deeds, and keeping on in the face of adversity. It takes a righteous coalition of the people who know that community is what counts.

So back to the Baltimore conference, which was about building a movement. The conference was awfully white. The U.S. today is 32% African-American, Hispanic, Indigenous People and Asian-Americans. But when you looked around at the 300 plus attendees in Baltimore, you didn't see the 100 faces you should have seen. You saw too many pale people.

Folks, this is privilege at work. As my friends at [smartMeme](#) pointed out, privilege is only visible to those who don't have it. Nobody planned it this way. No one said, "Let's keep this thing mainly white." On the contrary. I was a member of the steering committee for the conference, as were about 45 other people, quite a few of them not white. None of us set out to diminish diversity at the conference. But given the way things work in the U.S., unless you try really, really, really hard to get diverse participation, white people get the front row seats and everybody else goes to the back of the bus or they miss the bus completely. (The same thing is true of youth. The deck is seriously stacked against an equal footing for young people.)

So the Baltimore conference showed us [white privilege](#) at work. No one plotted or planned to make the conference predominantly white. Far from it. If you asked any individual member of the steering committee their preference, they'd have all said "Diversity is essential. We want to build a diverse, robust movement. We're sunk without diversity."

But white privilege cuts like a sharp knife when nobody's looking. It starts before birth. You're born white so you're far less likely to grow up poor, you're far more likely to live in a family that owns a home which then serves as collateral for loans, which make it easier to start a business and/or get an education, which gives you a better job, which allows you to save and pass those savings and that education onto

your children. As time goes on the disparities grow wider and deeper. [Inequalities accumulate and multiply](#). Pathways to success are subtly blocked. Some people get angry and some who are angry express it. Who wants to work with them? Social exclusion hardens like prison walls. This is how privilege works, invisibly, inexorably. Until someone intervenes, there is no exit from this circle of isolation and injustice.

This is how privilege works when everyone is good-hearted and well-intentioned. But if your GOAL is to advance white supremacy, then things get far worse very fast. This is what the Republicans have been doing since at least 1964 when Barry Goldwater ran for president on a platform opposing the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Goldwater got trounced, but Alabama's George Wallace saw that Goldwater had begun to drive a wedge of race into the New Deal coalition and was peeling off white southerners from the Democratic Party. A new Republican "southern strategy" was being born, built on America's racist tendencies. [See sidebar: A winning politics built on racism.]

[Story continues below the sidebar.]

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SIDEBAR: A Winning Politics Built on Racism

After the civil rights marches, protests and battles of the early 1960s, the southern states were seething as an end to apartheid was forced on them by national guardsmen wielding bayonets. When Wallace ran an explicitly racist campaign for President he discovered to his surprise that he could draw huge crowds and a large voter turnout, even in some northern states -- for example, 30% in Michigan. "They all hate black people, all of them!" he is reported to have said. "Great God! That's it! They're all southern. The whole United States is southern!"[1,pg.6]

This was not quite true of course, but it was true that unspoken tendencies toward white supremacy were alive and well across America -- not a majority perspective except in the south, perhaps, but common enough to be readily exploitable by unprincipled politicians.

During his long career, in which he vowed never to be "out-niggered" by a white-supremacist political opponent, George Wallace went on to discover (some would say "invent") the politics of resentment and hate -- which every major Republican presidential candidate has used to advantage since, including Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, Pat Buchanan, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush. If you don't believe that this is true, I have four books to recommend:

1. Dan T. Carter, [From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963-1994](#) (1996; ISBN 0-8071-2366-8).
2. Thomas and Mary Edsall's [Chain Reaction; The Impact of Race, Rights and Taxes on American Politics](#) (1992; ISBN 0-393-30903-7)
3. Sara Diamond, [Roads to Dominion: Right Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States](#) (N.Y.: The Guilford Press, 1995); ISBN 0-89862-864-4.
4. Jean Hardisty, [Mobilizing Resentment](#) (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999); ISBN 0-

8070-4316-8).

With the historical evidence presented in these four books, I believe the case is closed. Republican strategists used -- and continue to use -- race to divide and then conquer the bottom-up New Deal coalition, which they have replaced with a top-down Republican coalition of plutocrats and radical Christian fundamentalists, which then allowed them to engineer the most accelerated upwards redistribution of wealth in the nation's history.

Racial resentments were carefully cultivated and manipulated, in combination with anger about "anti-Christian" court decisions outlawing prayer and Bible readings in public schools; street crime; "welfare queens;" law-flaunting anti-war protestors; women demanding liberation from lives of drudgery (and demanding the right to control their own reproduction, up to and including abortion if needed); "pointy-headed intellectuals" developing unpopular policies like busing kids across town to integrate the schools; and hippies thumbing their noses at the social conventions of sex and drugs. From 1965 onward, coded appeals to white supremacy became standard fare among Republican politicians (and among those members of the opposing party who became known as "Reagan Democrats").

As historian [Dan T. Carter](#) has concluded, race remains the driving wedge of conservative American politics -- it is the thing that most reliably divides the old New Deal coalition and thus allows Republicans to prevail. The Republicans maintain their tenuous hold on power through a fractious coalition of social conservatives, fiscal conservatives, world-empire-through-military-might conservatives, ethnic conservatives, and religious conservatives -- and the glue that holds the whole thing together is coded appeals to white supremacy. Think [Willy Horton](#), the convicted murder who committed another murder while on furlough from prison -- a furlough arranged by then- Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis. President George H.W. Bush's subtly but unmistakably racist Willy Horton TV ads sunk Michael Dukakis's chances of becoming president and in a very real sense began the Bush dynasty that rules America today.

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After 1972, Wallace's southern followers joined the Republican Party and the Republicans went on to build a new political majority on the solid foundation of the white supremacist south. It wasn't long before they were enticing Christian conservatives -- many of them avowed white supremacists (think Bob Jones University where President George W. Bush made an important campaign stop during the 2000 primary) -- into their coalition, and working to dismantle, or at least obstruct, desegregation and affirmative action policies. They could not openly embrace white supremacy, but they could -- and did -- work hard behind the scenes to see that blacks and Latinos were kept in their places.

As [Frank Peterman](#) pointed out at the Baltimore conference, **U.S. public schools are as segregated now as they were on May 17, 1954, when the Supreme Court ordered them desegregated.**

If we want to take back America, we must build (or rebuild) an nation-wide interracial coalition. This is a political imperative for our time. If can't do this, then nothing else will matter politically. The racists will triumph. The racists are at work now in Congress, demonizing immigrants who have been driven off their land at

home by [NAFTA](#), forced to abandon their villages and trek northward in the night, making a dangerous passage to a place where they know they will be despised, reviled, treated like cattle, often with no more rights than slaves. Encouraging illegal immigrants, then periodically rounding them up, criminalizing them, and deporting them is a brutal [pattern in U.S. history](#). We're seeing it again now. Want to slow illegal immigration? Fix NAFTA. Read more about NAFTA and how it drives illegal immigration [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

Back to the conference in Baltimore.

By late Saturday, people had had a chance to look around and see that white people were dominant in the audience and on many discussion panels. It made some of them angry. Here were their friends and colleagues going about their business oblivious to the privilege that diminished the voices of color and of youth.

Two young women decided they had to blow the whistle -- never an easy task to take on. In a plenary session, Felicia Eaves chided us from the podium that we had not paid one whit of attention to our fallen brother and leader, [Damu Smith](#). Damu had died May 5th of cancer at age 54, leaving behind a 13-year-old daughter, Asha Moore Smith. It seems likely that Damu's death stemmed from his work against the toxic juggernauts of the Gulf Coast where he spent so many of his last years. Damu had been a relentless advocate for justice and peace throughout his life and everyone who knew him loved and respected him, and benefited from his gentle guiding hand. Felicia Eaves had taken charge of raising money for Damu in his final year to help defray his enormous medical bills, worrying about what was going to happen to his daughter, communicating with his friends, keeping hope alive. You can send a contribution to a trust fund for Asha Moore Smith at this address:

Asha Moore Smith Trust c/o The Praxis Project 1750 Columbia Road, NW -- 2nd Floor Washington, DC 20009

The second chiding was more sweeping. From the podium, Martha Dina Arguello pointed out, with regret, that we had failed to make the conference racially and ethnically representative. Through tears, Martha apologized for being the one who had to tell us this truth -- but thank God she had the courage to tell it, is all I can say.

These are hard, hard lessons. It's embarrassing and humiliating to have your failings pointed out to you not once but twice in short order. The tendency is to say, "Yes, but..." and to offer some good explanation for why things turned out as they did.

But the point is that things DID turn out as they did. All of us -- every last good-hearted one of us -- failed our brothers and sisters of color. We failed our youth.

But it gets worse. That evening at the awards ceremony, we did not give a "Pioneers of Precaution" award to some of our most deserving and truest Pioneers of Precaution -- among them, the courageous Martha Dina Arguello.

It was Martha Dina who instigated and organized the first grass-roots workshop on precaution in Los Angeles in 2001. This in turn led to the formation of the Cal/EPA [California Environmental Protection Agency] Advisory Committee on Environmental Justice, which in turn led to the adoption of environmental justice and a "[precautionary](#)" approach as key goals for all Cal/EPA programs. These are huge,

unprecedented successes. Martha Dina and her organization in Los Angeles, Physicians for Social Responsibility, helped develop the specific language that drove precaution into the pest management policies of the Los Angeles Unified School District, which has subsequently been emulated in dozens, perhaps hundreds, of school districts all across the nation, including a state-wide policy in New Jersey. Martha Dina Arguello has done hugely important pioneering work on precaution -- as has Joe Lyou of the [California Environmental Rights Alliance](#). Through a series of mixups, misunderstandings, misdirected emails, and other errors, neither was recognized for their pioneering work at the Baltimore conference. It was a stupendous, hurtful failure.

So we've got some humble and humbling work to do, friends. We are blind. We need help learning to see. To reach out. To respect. To remember. To ask forgiveness for our many failings, all of us. To resolve to do better. To resolve to make this succeed, because if we can't learn to make interracial coalitions work, we're sunk, all of us, and our adversaries will carry the day. It is so easy to divide us, and it is so terribly important to not let it happen.

No one is saying it will be easy. We are all carrying 500 years of brutal history in our hearts whether we know it or not, whether we acknowledge it or not. It is in the air we breathe. It affects everything we do in America. The harsh truth is, we are a nation born of genocide, founded on the unspeakable cruelties of slavery and forced labor. As a nation, we bear that legacy like a cross of shame. Slavery is written into our Constitution. Go read it for yourself. Our history of white supremacy and brutal exploitation hangs like a deafening silence that envelops the room whenever whites and non- whites come together. We can get [anti-racism training](#), all of us, to try to understand white supremacy and white privilege. No doubt such training can help.

But even then we will have to continue to struggle with this. It is the one essential piece of work that we can never put aside, never ignore, never let go. It will determine whether we succeed or fail in helping America live up to its promise.

What could be more important than that?

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[1] Dan T. Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963-1994* (1996; ISBN 0-8071-2366-8).