

The Devil You Know:
Dog-Whistle Politics, State Coercion, & the Construction of the BLM Folk Devil

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August, 2021

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the degree of Master of Arts

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Abstract: In the early summer of 2020, largely in response to the horrific murder of George Floyd by police, protests under the banner of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) swept across the United States. While paying lip service to the justness of the cause and of peaceful protest, the federal government under the Trump Administration met the movement with hostility and violence. Drawing on the dog-whistle politics literature, and on the seminal work of Hall et al. (1978), this paper explains the Administration's antagonistic rhetoric and behaviour towards BLM. I conduct a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of three high-profile physical and rhetorical engagements of BLM by the Trump Administration: the clearing of Lafayette Square of BLM protesters; the deployment of federal agents against activists in Portland; and the Republican National Convention (RNC). I identify three discursive themes which developed over the protest cycle: 1) The downplaying of race and racial dynamics; 2) the 'folk devilization' of BLM; and 3) the construction of a 'thin blue line' narrative. I argue that, together, these served to craft a narrative which downplayed acknowledgement of race and racism while cuing perceptions of racial threat in the white electorate. This became central to the Administration's election campaign as Trump's Democratic political rivals were associated with the BLM 'folk devil,' and the election was framed as a choice between law and order and American values, personified by Trump, and lawlessness and cultural change personified by the Democrats.

Résumé: Au début de l'été 2020, en grande partie en réponse au meurtre horrible de George Floyd par la police, des manifestations sous la bannière de Black Lives Matter (BLM) ont déferlé sur les États-Unis. Tout en faisant semblant de soutenir la justesse de la cause et des manifestations pacifiques, le gouvernement fédéral sous l'administration Trump a affronté le mouvement avec hostilité et violence. S'appuyant sur la littérature politique sur les sifflets de chien et sur les travaux fondateurs de Hall et al. (1978), cet article explique la rhétorique et le comportement antagonistes de l'Administration envers le BLM. Je mène une analyse critique du discours (CDA) de trois engagements physiques et rhétoriques très médiatisés du BLM par l'administration Trump: l'expulsion des manifestants du BLM de Lafayette Square; le déploiement d'agents fédéraux contre des militants à Portland; et la Convention nationale républicaine (RNC). J'identifie trois thèmes discursifs qui se sont développés au cours du cycle de protestation: 1) La minimisation de la race et de la dynamique raciale; 2) la 'diabolisation populaire' du BLM; et 3) la construction d'un récit 'fine ligne bleue.' Je soutiens que, ensemble, ceux-ci ont servi à élaborer un récit qui a minimisé la reconnaissance de la race et du racisme tout en mettant en évidence les perceptions de menace raciale dans l'électorat blanc. Cela est devenu au cœur de la campagne électorale de l'administration alors que les rivaux politiques démocrates de Trump étaient associés au 'diable populaire' du BLM et que l'élection était conçue comme un choix entre la loi et l'ordre et les valeurs américaines, personnifiées par Trump, et la criminalité accrue et le changement culturel personnifiés. par les démocrates.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Professor Debra Thompson, whose invaluable knowledge and guidance helped to shape this project from its earliest stages. To Daniel, for pulling each other through our doubts. To Kiara, for unconditional love and support. And, of course, to Pepper and Dee.

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In the last several years, high-profile incidents of the murder of unarmed black people by police in the United States spurred widespread mobilization of activists under the banner of Black Lives Matter (BLM) whose goal is to “eradicate white supremacy to build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes” (Black Lives Matter, 2020). While BLM mobilizations predate the Trump Administration, the latter portion of Trump’s mandate saw dramatic federal opposition to BLM, corresponding with both increased BLM protest due to the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor by police, and the runup to the 2020 presidential election. Reflecting the rage felt by many participants and anonymity provided by the large gatherings, violence and property crime occurred in many instances; however, data collected by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project has shown that the movement has been overwhelmingly peaceful, with no violence or destruction occurring at over 93% of demonstrations (Kishi & Jones, 2020). Despite this, the state mobilized forcefully against protesters, employing violence that observers argue violated the civil (Brown, 2020) and human (Amnesty International, 2020) rights of activists due to excessive force by law enforcement. This has been juxtaposed by the relative acceptance of (mostly white) far-right protests, many of which were heavily armed and/or engaged in violence. The extant scholarship on BLM overwhelmingly focuses on individual attitudes towards it and its goals, necessitating the study of the function and causes of state behaviour towards it, both in rhetoric and action.

This study explains the Trump Administration’s rhetoric and behaviour towards BLM through combining the framework of dog-whistle politics (Haney Lopez, 2015), which explains the form and function of contemporary American racism in political campaigns, with that of Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts (1978), who offer a framework through which to understand how governments in positions of precarity craft narratives that heighten a perceived

threat to society in the public, so to shore up government support. The Trump Administration has had an extremely contentious rule since 2016, and faced many challenges to their legitimacy, including the President's 2020 impeachment. The Administration's failure at handling the COVID-19 crisis and resulting damage to the economy, however, may have done the most damage to their legitimacy (Abramowitz, 2021; Bice, 2020; Clarke, Stewart, & Ho, 2021). These crises arose at an especially bad time for the President and his Administration, putting them on shaky ground during the runup to the 2020 election. As Clarke, Stewart, & Ho argue, prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, Trump had a narrow path to victory due to low approval and would have to rely on a "traditional political recipe of "peace and prosperity" to make his case for re-election," using a strong economy as the "lynchpin of this strategy" (2021, p. 3). COVID-19 rendered this tactic useless, both through the devastation of the economy and the focusing of public attention on the rising COVID-19 death toll, which was largely due to government incompetence. Furthermore, in early June, nationwide protests erupted in response to the police killing of unarmed black people, highlighting both systemic racism within the justice system and the Administration's racist policy and rhetoric.

With reliance on economic strength untenable, and public perceptions of Trump's handling of COVID-19 extremely negative (Abramowitz, 2021; Bice, 2020; Clarke, Stewart, & Ho, 2021), Trump faced what Hall et al. term a "crisis in political legitimacy" (1978, p. 319). In this electoral context of "deep partisan and ideological polarization, inflamed racial tensions, and widespread civil unrest" (Clarke, Stewart, & Ho, 2021, p. 1), Trump needed a strategy which would distract from his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and mobilize the GOP base. The Administration shifted to the well-worn Republican strategy of focusing on law-and-order issues, portraying themselves as necessary to keep Americans safe from crime and violence. This study

examines the Administration's interaction with Black Lives matter in this context. I conduct a critical discourse analysis (CDA), examining three high-profile physical and rhetorical engagements of BLM by the Trump Administration in the latter half of 2020: the clearing of Lafayette Square of BLM protesters; the deployment of federal agents against activists in Portland; and the Republican National Convention (RNC). This period corresponds with the runup to the 2020 election, heightened BLM activity, and heightened BLM-state conflict. The aim of this research is to examine what these three instances of the government-BLM interaction tell us about the Administration's orientation towards the movement narrowly, and racial discourses more broadly. Towards this end, it is crucial to understand why the Administration has been so hostile towards BLM specifically, and what they mean to achieve through this antagonism. We must also understand how the contemporary dynamics of American racism shape their behaviour and rhetoric.

In my analysis of the three events mentioned above, I find three discursive themes in the Administration's rhetoric, which developed over the protest cycle: 1) The downplaying of race and racial dynamics; 2) the 'folk devilization' of BLM; and 3) the construction of a 'thin blue line' narrative. Relatively widespread public support for BLM due to the visibility of horrifying police violence in the George Floyd video necessitated the discrediting of the movement. This was done through separating the protests and protesters from the goal of racial justice, the issue lending BLM sympathy and legitimacy. It was also done through conflating political and criminal deviance, and categorizing all BLM mobilization as the latter. As the narrative developed, more disparate groups were associated with this criminality, and BLM was constructed as a 'folk devil,' used to personify all political opposition to Trump. As the issue of racist police violence was central to BLM, deliberate effort was required to rehabilitate the image

of law enforcement. Police violence was therefore blamed on individual actors, not systemic issues, and police were framed as both the primary victims of the events surrounding Floyd's death and as heroes protecting the American citizenry from crime, putting police and policing practices beyond criticism. Furthermore, the Administration heightened understandings of police as the 'thin blue line,' drawing on longstanding American understandings of police as the only thing protecting them from crime, violence, and societal collapse.

Analyzing these discursive themes together, I find Administration deliberately crafted a narrative which, at once, downplayed acknowledgement of race and racism while cuing perceptions of racial threat in the white electorate. Using the lens of Hall et al. (1978), I argue that Administration officials' used BLM activists as a personification of social anxieties through which crime and political deviance were conflated and a wide variety of social ills and actors were linked as a single, overarching threat to society. This is the form and function of the 'folk devil.' This became central to the Administration's election campaign, as Trump's Democratic political rivals were associated with this BLM folk devil, and the election was framed as a choice between law and order and American values, personified by Trump, and lawlessness and cultural change personified by the Democrats. Using the scholarship on dog-whistle politics (drawing heavily on Haney Lopez, 2015), I explain the development of racism and electoral strategy in America, and demonstrate how, despite the downplaying of the racial grievances and dynamics of BLM, the Administration used the BLM folk devil to heighten perceptions of racial threat. Furthermore, I demonstrate how the Administration's mobilization against BLM was used to heighten conflict, and create imagery and discursive events that were used to further their narrative. The literature on dog-whistle politics has, to date, has largely overlooked the conjunction of rhetoric and action. This project improves our understanding of the Trump

Administration's interaction with BLM, narrowly, and racial discourses and ideologies, broadly, and advances our understanding of dog-whistle politics and strategic racism.

Literature Review

Largely due to the successes of the Civil Rights Movement, over the past several decades in the United States the expression of overt racism has become less socially acceptable. This has encouraged a shift to subtle forms of racism within politics and public discourse, whereby racial discrimination is denied, and racial disparities are blamed on the individual failings of persons and groups (Bobo & Smith, 1998). Bobo & Smith (1998) argue that the denial of structural barriers to equality allows politicians and the (white) public to disavow efforts and policies which challenge social and economic factors that maintain race-based inequality. In current American conservative ideology, inequality is explained through either the decisions of the individual, or the culture of the disadvantaged group (HoSang & Lowndes, 2019). Therefore, the lack of explicit race-based barriers to social equality, paired with underlaying racial biases “justify and explain the prevailing system of racial domination” (Bobo & Smith, 1998, p. 186). This ‘colourblind’ paradigm of racial understanding claims that the lack of formal barriers to social participation and economic and political success mean that social equality has been reached and racism is largely a problem of the past, while ignoring legacies of racial oppression and dramatically different outcomes along racial lines (Carr, 1997; Bonilla-Silva; 2006).

Race and racism are fluid, and their construction and application are shaped by prevailing sociohistorical circumstances (Omi & Winant, 1986). Crucially, they justify unequal power relations within a society at a given time and racial consciousness allows members of societies to make sense of the prevailing hierarchy (Omi & Winant, 1986; Winant, 2000). Sociohistorical changes necessitate a shift in the form of racism, however prejudicial racial understandings

remain to greater or lesser degrees throughout the populous. This allows for “strategic racism,” whereby “race or race consciousness” is manipulated by political actors for political ends (Flores, 2015, p. 236). In the United States since the 1960s, the Republican Party has “recognized and sought to take advantage of the existing bigotry in the voting public, bigotry which they did not create but which they stoked, legitimized, and encouraged” (Haney Lopez, 2015, p. 35) This has taken the form of dog-whistle politics.

Goodin and Saward define dog-whistle politics as “a way of sending a message to certain potential supporters in such a way as to make it inaudible to others whom it might alienate or deniable for still others who would find any explicit appeal along those lines offensive” (2005, p. 471). Haney Lopez explains that dog-whistle politics is a form of strategic racism where coded language is created to frame social phenomena in ways that “spark racial anxiety, while hiding the racism from their opponents, and, even more importantly, from their supporters” (2016, p. 16). Through ostensibly non-racial discourse, symbols and language which signify certain groups is used to cue racial animosity in ways that mobilize certain segments of the electorate. This has been used by both parties in the US, but overwhelmingly by the GOP, who have targeted resentful whites who perceive their status as declining in relation to other groups (Mendelberg, 2017; see also Jardina, 2019). Dog-whistle politics allow politicians to utilize latent racial resentment in the electorate, and allow individuals to support politicians signaling racist intentions in a society where overt racism is not socially acceptable.

The language and symbols employed as dog-whistles reflect the existing racial discourses of the society where they are used. To understand their operation in the US, it is necessary to give an overview of their development. The Civil Rights Movement challenged the narratives used to justify the racial subjugation, which relied on understandings of racial difference as inherent, and

meaning racial hierarchy had to be upheld through more socially acceptable narratives (Lasch, 2016, pp. 162-163). As Alexander notes, the preservation of racial hierarchy through transformation of discourse manifested as calls for “segregation forever” changing to calls for “law and order” (2012, p. 40). Examining how changes in discourse interact with electoral strategy, Murakawa highlights a speech given by Goldwater, accepting the GOP presidential nomination in 1964, in which he spoke of a “growing menace” “in our streets” “to personal safety, to life, to limb, and to property, in homes, in churches, on the playgrounds and places of business,” and stated that public officials must “keep streets safe from bullies and marauders” (2008, p. 234). Murakawa argues that Goldwater drew on white antipathy to black advancement by obliquely linking the Civil Rights Movement, and the social changes it represented, to crime.

Haney Lopez argues Goldwater’s campaign was the antecedent to Nixon’s ‘Southern Strategy’ and established a central pillar of the GOP’s electoral strategy going forward (2015, ch. 1). The Nixon campaign thought that the status threat experienced by whites reacting to “Negro enfranchisement and integration” would break the Democratic coalition, and the GOP could gain the support of middle and working class voters who would “abandon the Democratic party once it became identified with blacks” (Philips in Haney Lopez, 2015, p. 91). They focused on appealing to the “Silent Majority,” a term meant to signify ‘average’ Middle Americans, but which can be read as a dog-whistle, as Scammon and Wattenberg characterize it as signifying the “unyoung, unpoor, [and] unblack (in Macinnes, 1996, p. 122). The campaign avoided speaking of race directly, using coded language to associate blacks with criminality, and signaling Nixon’s intent to uphold the racial status-quo (Haney Lopez, 2015, pp. 88-114). Reflecting on the this, GOP strategist Lee Atwater illustrates how dog-whistles work by cuing racial animus through

seemingly race-neutral language, and how ostensibly race-neutral policies are associated with upholding racial power asymmetries:

“You start out in 1954 by saying, ‘Nigger, nigger, nigger.’ By 1968 you can’t say ‘nigger’—that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like forced busing, states’ rights and all that stuff. You’re getting so abstract now, you’re talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you’re talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is, blacks get hurt worse than whites. [...] obviously sitting around saying, ‘We want to cut taxes and we want to cut this,’ is much more abstract than even the busing thing, and a hell of a lot more abstract than ‘Nigger, nigger.’ So anyway you look at it, race is coming on the back burner.” (Quoted in Haney Lopez, 2015, p. 170-171)

Haney Lopez argues that the Reagan campaigns of the 80s wedded dog-whistles politics to traditional conservatism and far-right policy, as “for Reagan, conservatism and racial resentment were inextricably fused” (2015, p. 173). Reagan mixed dog-whistles with economic conservative ideology, constructing an image of worthy American citizens (the ‘Silent Majority’) as self-reliant, productive, and unfairly burdened by taxation and regulation (Haney Lopez, 2015; HoSang & Lowndes, 2019). This American was portrayed in opposition to those benefiting from the redistributive policies of ‘big government,’ and these narratives were constructed in racial terms. HoSang and Lowndes argue that this draws on a longstanding narrative of American producerism that glamorizes the “virtuous, striving, and browbeaten producer [who] struggles to fend off the parasite, a dependent subject that consumes tax dollars and productive labour to subsidise a profligate and extravagant lifestyle” (2019, p. 19). Reagan repeatedly invoked “welfare queens,” attaching imagery associated with African American culture to social parasitism (HoSang & Lowndes, 2019, p. 19). Haney Lopez argues this juxtaposed whites to

blacks, where the former were “the workers, the tax payers, the persons playing by the rules and struggling to make ends meet while brazen minorities partied with their hard-earned tax dollars.” (2015, p. 176). Reagan used racial resentment to secure whites’ cross-class support for economic positions that challenged redistributive policies and cut social security (Haney Lopez, 2015).

In 1988, the Bush campaign employed a dog-whistle which drew on whites’ association between blacks and violent criminality: the Willie Horton advertisement, which accused Michael Dukakis of being soft on crime, supporting lenient crime policies which allowed Horton to commit further violence (Mendelberg, 2017, p. 169). The advertisement showed pictures of Horton, a black man, while describing his violent crimes, and while “kidnapping stabbing raping” appeared in text underneath the pictures (Willie Horton 1988 Attack Ad, 2008).

Mendelberg notes that “it was conveyed by the Republican party and by the media as a message about crime rather than race” (2017, p. 169). Importantly, as Haney Lopez explains “the campaign left the crucial racial element to be conveyed by images, but took great pains to never say expressly that Horton was black and his victims were white” (2015, p. 474). Mendleberg confirms the dog-whistle hypothesis through survey analysis, finding that “[w]hile all the talk was about crime and criminal justice policies, nearly all the impact was on race. The implicit phase of the Horton message activated whites’ racial resentment, not their worry about crime or their general conservatism” (2017, p. 183). She argues (1997, 2017) this harnessing of racial anxiety caused the electorate to favor bush over Dukakis.

During the 1992 Clinton campaign, democratic strategists understood that their losses to Republicans were largely due to their stances on crime and social welfare (Edsall & Edsall, 1991) and Clinton appealed to white resentment to win back traditionally Democratic white voters (Borquez, 2005). Clinton portrayed himself as “resistant to black concerns, tough on

crime, and hostile to welfare” (Haney Lopez, 2015, p. 303). This use of racial resentment resulted in law enforcement and social welfare policies more akin to Reagan’s than traditionally Democratic positions (Haney Lopez, 2015). In the period just after Clinton, the use of dog-whistle politics subsided somewhat, since Clinton demonstrated to the GOP they no longer held the dog-whistle advantage (Haney Lopez, 2015, pp. 222-223).

9/11 drastically shifted the environment back towards dog-whistles creating resentment towards those who appeared Arab, Muslim, or Middle Eastern, as these identities associated with Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism, and framed in opposition to ‘American’ identity (Haney Lopez, 2015, pp. 325-327; Volpp, 2002). The national security apparatus targeted these groups, and Haney Lopez contends that this campaign was a dog-whistle in that it “was profiling as public spectacle, a publicity campaign built around profiling geared to salve the nation’s thirst for action against a newly reviled group” (2015, p. 329; see also Bakalian & Bozorgmehr, 2009; Volpp, 2002). He continues that the wide-reaching nature of surveillance along racial lines gave “the impression that the United States faced a racial threat rather than merely an extremist one,” which fortified conceptions of a traditional (white) American identity associated with the state in opposition to the threatening other (2015, pp. 332-334; see also Said, 2003).

9/11 exacerbated resentment felt towards groups other than Middle Easterners as well, as perceived threat “coupled with exposure to nationalist themes, may have activated latent ascriptive beliefs regarding a white, Christian, native-born America” and this “more restricted conceptualization of American identity, coupled with a strengthened adherence to traditional values in a time of national crisis, provided the basis for amplified hostilities towards not only Muslims, but also Latinos” (Branton et al., 2011, p. 667, see also Tirman, 2006). Racial anxieties regarding demographic and economic change were personified and intensified by the

amplification of the “illegal alien” category (Haney Lopez, 2015, pp. 337-338; see also Ngai, 2014). As Pearson (2010) demonstrated, this framing heightens perceptions that groups associated with it are threatening, heightening racial prejudice. The use of ‘illegal alien’ to signify Latinos associates the group with inherent criminality, violence, and a parasitic nature, and therefore as an individual and systemic threat to America. Haney Lopez notes that “avoiding the language of race, [conservatives] draw on the ethnic turn in conservative racial discourse to emphasize a potentially country-killing clash of cultures” (2015, p. 340). This demonization is demonstrated in the 2005 recommendation of a GOP strategist that to better their electoral chances, Republicans should:

talk about the facts behind illegal immigrants. They do commit crimes. They are more likely to drive uninsured. More likely to clog up hospital waiting rooms. More likely to be involved in anti-social behavior because they have learned that breaking the law brings more benefit to them than abiding by it.” (in Haney Lopez, 2015, pp. 342-343)

The Obama Administration made less overt rhetorical opposition to Latinos and Middle Easterners, but continued hardline security and immigration policies, as strategists concluded “the party needed to take a “tougher” tone when discussing immigration reform” and to “show that the Democrats were serious about enforcement” (Haney Lopez, 2015, p. 346)

Donald Trump’s 2016 primary and general election campaigns used the same dog-whistle tactics as those before, but utilized racial resentment more overtly. Filimon calls this a move from the ‘dog-whistle’ to the ‘dog-scream,’ explaining: “an aggrieved electorate on the Republican side, spurned by 8 years of anti-Obama rhetoric, who for decades has been the recipient of a regime of veiled discriminatory discourses, resonated with Donald Trump’s brand of politics (2016, pp. 25-26). While Trump’s dog-whistles are less subtle, Filimon argues his

rhetoric relies on the same narratives and codes (2016, p. 26). It serves the same function of giving plausible deniability to Trump supporters, and as Konrad argues, support for Trump is associated with denial “of facts about his racist-tinged statements and actions, as well as the development of alternative explanations distancing his statements and actions from their racist implications and denial of responsibility for ameliorating racism” (2018, pp. 19-20; see also Subtirelu, 2017). Lasch (2016) argues accusations of racism against Trump were used to claim that the left-wing was using political correctness to silence conservative views.

Assessing Trump’s 2016 campaign from a linguistic perspective, Saul (2017) argues that Trump made use of what she terms ‘racial figleaves.’ She explains: “a figleaf gives an openly racist utterance just enough cover that an adherent to the Norm of Racial Equality can reassure themselves of the speaker’s, and their own, nonracism” (2017, p. 102). Unlike in classic dog whistles, race is made explicit, but only to provide deniability for statements that the speaker recognizes have the potential to be labeled racist. Figleaves can be provided in advance, during, or after the racist statement (Saul, 2017, p. 103). Saul examines Trump’s now infamous quote about Mexican Immigration that: “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. [...] They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with [them] ... They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.” (In Saul, 2017, p. 104). She explains that because the quote does not target *all* Mexicans (just the ones who are ‘sent’) and because of the caveat that some are (probably) good people, “those who feel drawn to somehow associate Mexicans and rape can nod along while not having to see themselves as racist” (Saul, 2017, p. 105). Saul argues that figleaves differ from dog whistles in that they allow for the announcement of policies that target particular racial groups.

Two central themes of the primary and presidential campaign were focusing on crimes committed by immigrants (which were framed as menacing to white Americans) and framing BLM protests as violent, carried out by criminals, and threatening to the American way of life (Lasch, 2016; Linnemann & Medley, 2017). Regarding the former, the stories usually didn't overtly invoke race, but cued racial understandings such as by linking the crimes to immigration policies (Lasch, 2016). Lasch argues that these narratives were linked law-and-order stances to immigration in a way where the "race-based narratives in each threatens to compound the problem of subordination" (2016, p. 164). Cuing racial threat via fears of demographic change and prejudice regarding the criminality of racialized groups pitted the American (read: white) way of life versus an influx of immigrant criminals (Lasch, 2016).

The framing of BLM protesters as criminals operated similarly. The Trump campaign focused on the criminality of the victims of police murder and juxtaposed them with white victims of violence by people of colour, in this way framing "whites [as] civilized victims, while non-whites are violent animals," and so deserving of police violence (Lasch, 2017, p. 182). BLM protesters were also portrayed as criminals, and one of the most prominent dog-whistles of Trump's rallies was reminiscing about a time when "protesters could be physically punished without legal consequences," in other words, when white supremacy could be violently enforced (Roland, 2017, p. 470). Violence towards police was framed as a central safety concern, with Republicans pushing a "War on Cops" narrative that depicted BLM as a racialized enemy in the form of roving "violent mobs" who threaten the current social and economic order, personified by police (Linnemann & Medley, 2017, p. 74). As Blumer (1958) demonstrated, support for law enforcement may stand in for support for the existing social and racial hierarchy, that is, the social, political, and economic standing of the dominant group relative to others in society.

Linnemann and Medley argue that conservatives relied on the familiar image of the black rioter as the “longstanding and familiar form of the racial underclass, ungoverned and recalcitrant subjects who “kill each other,” “burn their own neighborhoods,” and “assassinate” the agents of order” to mobilize white voters (2017, p. 76). The ‘urban rioter’ was framed as a product of the “deteriorated “culture” of inner cities,” a dog-whistle portraying minority communities as inherently violent (Linnemann and Medley, 2017, pp. 71-72). BLM was also portrayed as inflicting violence on communities outside where they protested, as GOP and conservative commentators argued they hampered police effectiveness leading to increased crime throughout society (Linnemann & Medley, 2017). Trump promised “I will restore law and order to our country,” following the longstanding GOP strategy of using the police “symbolically in divisively partisan and racialized ways” (Drakulich et al., 2020, pp. 371-372). The creation of a narrative that pitted police and ‘law and order’ against an anarchic, racialized threat played an important role in Trump’s victory (Drakulich et al., 2020). Supporting the argument that the police represent the current racial hierarchy, the authors find that support for police *per se* was not an important motivation in voting for Trump, and was only a significant predictor of voting for Trump insofar as it was related to racial resentment and perceptions of “Black political threat” (2020, pp. 88-89). They conclude that stating support for the police is likely a “proxy for partisanship and concerns about threats to the racial status quo” (2020, p. 392).

Examining the development of dog-whistle politics maps the context in which they operate currently. It demonstrates the intimate linking of dog-whistle politics and advocacy for law-and-order policies and hardline stances on law enforcement. Law-and-order broadly, and the police specifically, act as a symbol for the existing social and racial hierarchy, and so support for law and order often reflects support of the existing racial hierarchy (Blumer, 1958; Drakulich et

al., 2020; Linnemann & Medley, 2017). The literature also demonstrates that, even though it has been used by both parties, dog-whistle politics is inextricably linked with conservative social and economic ideology and policies (Haney Lopez, 2015, p. 320). Perhaps most obviously, the scholarship demonstrates dog-whistle politics are fundamentally linked to identity in that in-group/out-group dynamics are constructed along racial lines. The codes employed to represent which groups are deserving of the rights and protections of citizens are deeply associated with white America. This group is juxtaposed to the out-group(s), those portrayed as parasitic and threatening, and deserving of regulation and repression. While the first group is relatively stable, the construction of the out-group is fluid, morphing to fit prevailing social anxieties. These out groups are constructed in opposition to the in-group, which is associated with the politician, party, and ideology of the person invoking the dog-whistle, and national identity and white racial identity are conflated. As during the post 9/11 climate, in times of heightened anxiety, dog-whistles are especially effective at cuing group identity by heightening these distinctions.

Given the prevalence of dog-whistles in American politics, much quantitative research has examined their effectiveness. On the whole, the literature finds that implicit racial appeals are effective at cuing racial resentment in a way that mobilizes whites for political purposes (Huchings & Jardina, 2009; Huddy & Feldman, 2009). Studies examining various issue areas and policies—for example, government spending, crime, health care, and welfare programs—have repeatedly found that subtly cuing racial prejudice is effective at shifting political opinions and policy stances (Domke, 2001; Mendleberg, 1997, 2017; Peffley et al., 1997; Valentino et al., 2002). Recently, Valentino et al. (2018) found evidence that the changing context of American politics has created a climate where people are no longer as averse to explicitly racist appeals and implicit racial appeals are no longer more effective. Wetts & Willer (2019) further test this,

finding Valentino's results hold for conservatives, but implicit appeals are still more effective at influencing the policy opinions of those with liberal views. While Trump's more overt rhetoric and the findings of Valentino et al. (2018) complicate the picture of dog-whistle politics, as Wetts and Willer note, the US remains a "political environment where whites continue to harbor negative racial stereotypes and varying degrees of anti-minority sentiment, but strong norms of colourblindness and egalitarianism mean such attitudes are inappropriate bases of judgement or action" (2019, p. 2). Dog-whistles have become more overt, but plausible deniability of racism is still required as America's self-conception is that of multi-culturalism and equal opportunity (HoSang & Lowndes, Ch. 1; Saul, 2017), and therefore coded appeals must still be utilized.

BLM is a relatively new movement and the literature examining it is scarce. Most of this scholarship examines the influences and effects of individual attitudes towards BLM (e.g. Cole, 2020; Corral, 2020; Drakulich, et al. 2020; Holt & Sweitzer, 2020; Ilchi & Frank, 2020; Kilgo & Mourão, 2018; Sawyer & Gampa, 2018; Updegrove et al., 2020). These studies help us understand the social and cognitive mechanisms that influence support or hostility towards BLM, and therefore support/hostility to state actions against the movement. This relates to dog-whistle politics, as it gives a sense of the emotions and attitudes which the government is appealing to through its hostile stance towards BLM. While older Republican and conservative men are the most likely to oppose it (Updegrove et al., 2020), conservative ideology *per se* is a relatively weak predictor of attitudes towards BLM (Ilchi and Frank, 2020). Ilchi and Frank (2020) find that the strongest predictors are: being white, being male, not seeing police misconduct as a frequent occurrence, and viewing the police as equivalent to soldiers. They also find that white respondents are far more likely to see BLM as promoting a 'war on cops,' arguing that taken

together this suggests symbolic racism and racial resentment are responsible for negative attitudes towards BLM and residents of ‘urban’ (implying minority) communities.

The research of Drakulich et al. (2020) nuances these findings, directly examining the intersection of BLM and dog-whistle politics. The authors find that feelings of warmth towards police and negativity towards BLM made Republicans more likely to vote for Trump and to turnout to vote; however, support for police *per se* is not an important motivation of voting for Trump, as it was only significant in those who identified as Republican and had high racial resentment and/or perceptions of ‘black political threat.’ The authors argue that support for police is a “proxy for partisanship and concerns about threat to the racial status quo (2020, p. 392). They conclude that “a subset of Americans may be cloaking their concerns about the racial order behind a superficially nonracial support for the police” (2020, p. 394).

The literature on dog-whistle politics to date has not examined runup to the 2020 presidential election. This makes sense due to the recentness, but the dramatic nature of events and rhetoric surrounding the campaign, including widespread racial unrest and violent state actions against protesters, make understanding their relevance of critical importance. Furthermore, the extant scholarship on BLM has overwhelmingly examined attitudes towards the movement and its goals, and has largely ignored the functions and causes of state behaviour towards it. Examining events through the lens of dog-whistle politics allows us to understand why rhetoric manifests in the way it does by understanding the sociohistorical context of dog-whistle politics in the US. It also helps us understand the function that the Administration’s rhetoric and behaviour serve. I contend, however, that the overwhelming focus of dog-whistle politics literature on discourse qua rhetoric, and its infrequent examination of state behaviour leaves a gap in our understanding of the government’s interaction with race, specifically

regarding the symbolic function of conflict. While some studies, like Haney Lopez's (2015) analysis of "profiling as public spectacle" post 9/11, have examined how state actions can act as dog-whistles, I believe a more in-depth analysis of this phenomena is important, especially in light of recent violent state actions against BLM and its supporters. To study this through the dog-whistle politics lens requires close examination of the conjunction of rhetoric and action, so to give a holistic understanding of how narratives are shaped and discourses are constructed.

Although it examines events and occurring in England around a half-century ago, the work of Hall et al. (1978) offers insights into the contemporary situation in the United States, and can be used in conjunction with the dog-whistle politics framework. Examining the perceived increase of muggings in the UK during the 70s, the authors examine how governments in positions of precarity can harness social anxieties to retain popular support. They contend that the British government was experiencing a "crisis in political legitimacy" where economic conditions led to declines in employment, living standards, and general social welfare (1978, p. 319). Related to these conditions, other manifestations of social discontent were ascendent, especially violence in Northern Ireland, militant student and black power activism, and widespread labour strikes. The authors argue these interrelated crises caused the government to lose public support, as economic conditions worsened and hostility to the government could not be contained (1978, p. 319). The authors argue that in these situations "ideological mechanisms work [...] full throttle to conjure up out of the air a "national interest"" behind which to gather public support (1978, p. 320). Since in democracies consent is the state's "only basis of legitimacy," the government manipulated public opinion through its privileged position as a generator of knowledge and expertise, therefore constructing this consent (1978, p. 214).

Hall et al. (1978) build on Cohen's (1972) work on folk devils and moral panics, examining how the government constructed these phenomena to draw on social anxieties and racial resentment, garnering support for the state as the embodiment of law and order. Moral panics are the acute manifestations of social anxieties within a society under specific historical circumstances. Crucially, while moral panics draw on latent anxieties, they "tend to operate from top to bottom," meaning institutions play an interpretive role, shaping the public's understanding through rhetoric and behaviour that suggest certain interpretations of events (1978, p. 222). By influencing how crises are understood moral panics are one of the "ideological forms in which a historical crisis is experienced and fought out," and thereby a means by which crises are "managed and contained" (Hall et al., 1978, p. 221). Using their privileged position of knowledge production, the state signifies events in a way that escalates their perceived threat to society, associates them with other social ills, and prophesizes further escalation if strong actions by the state are not taken, what the authors term a "signification spiral" (1978 p. 223).

Key to this is linking disparate events or social problems, as well as the groups which are related to these phenomena, together so that the public draws parallels between them or understands them as a larger "underlying problem," amplifying the "threat potential for society" (1978, p. 223). Signification spirals may represent some real connections, but often "mystify by exaggerating the nature or degree of the convergence, or may produce altogether spurious identities" (1978, p. 224). This conflates political and criminal issues, allowing the state to relate violent events and groups to other issues and events (1978, p. 224). Conflating these groups and events and escalating their threat justifies a coercive state response, rather than engagement with the underlying causes of the problems, obfuscating the government's responsibility (Hall et al., 1978). In the UK, increased social anxiety existed due to changing social circumstances and

worsening economic conditions. The state and media, taking cues from the state, focused on a more specific menace, mugging, as a “threat to British life by black immigrants, rising crime, antic social youth, etc.” (Hall et al., 1978, p. 321). These institutions diagnosed the cause of this threat much more broadly as the “permissiveness of [modern] social life,” and associated it with politically dissentious groups like strikers, protesters, and unions, using the anxiety and animus it helped to shape to justify taking a harder line with these groups (Hall et al., 1978, p. 321). The state appealed to the law-and-order sensibilities of the public, portraying itself as in a “campaign against the ‘extremes’ on behalf of the majority” (1978, p. 321).

For this tactic to be successful, a group must symbolize the anxieties of the public. The authors refer to this group as a ‘folk devil.’ Moral panics confound disparate social groups, issues, and crises into one underlying problem in the minds of the public. The role of the folk devil is to personify these things, serving to both distract from the deeper issues causing social problems and act as an ‘other’ within society that can be blamed for social ills. Hall et al. argue that folk devils make tangible the “myths, fears, and speculations” of publics and tie them to the “experienced reality of ordinary people” by attaching them to an observable group (1978, p. 322). Labeling by elites and institutions is central to this, and the employment of culturally resonant symbolism is key to shaping specific understandings of social problems and ensuring blame is directed at the folk devil (Hall et al., 1978, p. 190). The folk devil represents social deviance, generally, and criminality, specifically, and is a vessel by which ideological deviance, political conflict, and criminality are conflated (Hall et al., p. 190).

Hall et al. explain that in the British context:

The ‘mugger’ was such a Folk Devil; his form and shape accurately reflected the content of the fears and anxieties of those who first imagined, and then actually discovered him:

young, black, bred in, or arising from the ‘breakdown of social order in the city; threatening the traditional peace of the streets, the security of movement of the ordinary respectable citizen [...] an inevitable result of the weakening of moral fibre in family and society, and the general collapse of respect for discipline and authority. (1978, pp. 161-162)

As with dog-whistle politics in the US, the appeals to racial resentment central to the construction of the folk devil employ coded language, such as reference to ‘ghetto areas’ to conjure a racial conception of the folk devil (Hall et al., 1978, p. 328). The authors explain that the narrative repeated by the state and media was one where the “victims are middle-aged whites; attackers are black; [and the] venues are specified parts of South London [associated with minority communities],” framing problems as based on social conflict and racial tension, not failures of the government or system (1978, p. 331). Focusing attention on populations and areas associated with the mugger folk devil, anti-mugging policing led to arrests in these communities for these crimes, creating the phenomena it claimed to be reacting to (Hall et al., 1978).

A core traits of the folk devil that makes it a distinct from ‘othered’ or demonized groups, is its simultaneous specificity and amorphousness. The mugger is the image of a specific person (young, black, urban), but at the same time encapsulates other deviant social groups and social problems, which, in the British context, resulted in the perception of domestic terrorism, the black power movement, strikes and protests, mugging, and other social deviance as “different parts of the same slippery slope” (Hall et al., 1978, p. 310). Hall and his colleagues explain that “on the surface” folk devils encapsulate a “concrete set of fears, because here social anxiety can cite a specific enemy, name names. But, in fact, this naming of names is deceptive. For the enemy is lurking everywhere. He (or, increasingly, she) is ‘behind everything’” (1978, p. 323).

As seen in the dog-whistle politics literature, and the scholarship on the construction of race and application of racism, racial narratives serve a function and are constructed based on sociohistorical circumstances. The dog-whistle politics scholarship shows that appealing to certain understandings of race and elevating narratives which cue racial resentment in the dominant social group—in the US, especially by highlighting narratives of meritocracy, where the white producer is portrayed as the worthy political subject, and contrasted to unworthy, parasitic racialized groups—is used by political actors for political ends. In Hall et al. (1978), we see how the state can use racial understandings to shape narratives for political purposes outside of the electoral context. Hall et al. (1978) also demonstrate that these tactics have special utility in situations where the government is losing public support. A moral panic is a phenomenon spurred by the intensification of social anxieties which existed previously, but that have been amplified in a situation of crisis. Hall et al. stress that the state can use its privileged position to shape how the public perceive the crises, making them “carefully organized public hysteria” (1978, p. 275). In the UK, the state portrayed social crises in such a way that the “themes of protest, conflict, permissiveness, and crime begin to run together into one great, undifferentiated threat [where] nothing more nor less than the foundations of Social Order itself are at issue” (Hall et al. 1978, p. 248). The construction of the folk devil to symbolize the threat to the social order is key to this, allowing the government to position itself as society’s protector from this demonized group and defender of the social order, as the embodiment of law and order.

In this context, the state portrayed society as fundamentally divided into “two camps: authority and its enemies,” the former symbolized by the state, and the latter encompassing the amorphous threat to society symbolized by the folk devil (Hall et al. 1978, p. 251). This framing served multiple functions related to maintaining the government’s authority. The conflation of all

social crises and dissidence into one violent threat to society obscures the failures of the system and the state as its representative. Hall et al. explain that the framing of the state in opposition to violence “has the ideological value of appearing quite simple, straightforward, and clear cut [as] what ‘we’ are all, ultimately, against—all the many varieties of dissent and conflict can be reduced to it [violence]” (1978, p. 300). As explained above, the folk devil acts as a tangible target that can be policed, making the solution to crisis law-and-order policies, and the government indispensable as the agent of law and order. The amplification of the threat’s extent increases support for coercive actions to protect society. The state uses social support for law and order vaguely to mobilize against wide-ranging dissident groups—such as protesters, criminals, squatters, drug users, ‘disorderly minorities,’ and the working class—not just the ‘mugger’ folk devil (Hall et al., 1978, p. 278). Hall and his collaborators argue that “[t]he mobilization of legal instruments against labour, political dissent and alternative lifestyles, all seemed to be aimed at the same general purpose: to bring about by fiat what could no longer be won by consent—the disciplined society” (Hall et al., 1978, p. 284).

The work of Hall et al. (1978) offers a framework through which to view the uses of race and racism by the state, that is, how states that are experiencing crises of legitimacy can shape narratives that stoke racial anxiety and animosity to restore support for the government by garnering support for ‘law-and-order.’ Furthermore, it allows us to understand how the state’s actions are used in conjunction with rhetoric to create narratives that serve this end. The literature on dog-whistle politics overwhelmingly focuses on examining coded rhetoric in election campaigns. Despite contextual differences, the frameworks investigate many of the same themes, but crucially, central to both is the explanation of how law-and-order rhetoric is used to cue racial anxiety and resentment for political purposes. Given the circumstances

surrounding the 2020 US election, where the Trump Administration faced multiple, intersecting crises and took violent actions against protesters of racial injustice, I contend that combining these frameworks helps us understand the Administration's orientation toward BLM specifically, and racial discourses more generally. The dog-whistle politics framework helps us to understand the sociohistorical context of racial rhetoric in the US, explaining the resonance of the rhetoric used. The framework of Hall et al. (1978) enhances our understanding of law-and-order rhetoric, adding an especially useful piece through its examination of government in crisis. Moreover, the authors add something which the dog-whistle politics scholarship largely lacks, explanation of how state *behaviour* constructs racial narratives and influences public perceptions for political ends. In the 2020 US context, these frameworks can help us understand the crucial questions of why the Administration has engaged in extreme hostility towards BLM specifically, namely what they mean to achieve, and how the current dynamics of racism in the US shape this behaviour. Furthermore, this strengthens our understanding of dog-whistle politics by allowing us to better understand the intersection of rhetoric and state behaviour.

Methodology

Social interactions are extraordinarily complex and nuanced phenomena, with layered, conflicting, and often paradoxical elements. The topic of this research project is no exception, with the dynamics of race, class, culture, authority, history, and ideology interacting to produce tangled and opaque motivations. This may be especially true when examining power relations between dominant groups and racially subjugated ones in modern America, where norms have made overt racism socially unacceptable, especially by those in power, and where racist language is disguised in seemingly race-neutral discourse.

Discourse analysis is the obvious method to examine the complex meanings within speech, writing, and action, and the functions of the narratives created by these discursive acts, as well as how these are shaped by preexisting narratives. I engage critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyze relevant text, speech, and events related to government-BLM interaction and narrative formation. As Van Dijk explains, those engaged in CDA study “the role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance” by analyzing what “structures, strategies, or other properties of text, talk, verbal interaction, or communicative events play a role in these modes of reproduction” (1993, pp. 249-250). This style of sociopolitical discourse analysis has much in common with the analysis of Hall et al. (1978) in that it recognizes that the privileged position of elite groups grants them preferential access to media and other discourse generating outlets, giving them a “special ability to control public opinion” (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 256). Social power relations and hierarchies are produced and reproduced in many social loci, within and outside of formal institutions. Van Dijk explains that power and dominance are “supported and condoned by other group members, sanctioned by the courts, legitimated by laws, enforced by the police, and ideologically sustained and reproduced by the media” (1993, p. 255). To understand how discourse functions as both a producer of and reflection of power, not only the discourse itself, but the context in which it is created must be studied.

Fairclough provides a framework for this in *Discourse and Social Change* (1992), combining aspects of linguistic analysis and broader social analysis to create a CDA framework to study relations between discourse and social formations, paying special attention to discursive manifestations of power and dominance. Fairclough explains that “discourse is a practice of not just representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning” (1992, p. 64). There is no inherent meaning in text or language, and therefore

meaning is created through the interpretation of social actors, drawing on shared understandings and symbols, based on their positionality and cultural context (Fairclough, 1992 pp. 71-72).

The context dependent nature of discourse makes a holistic understanding of the social environment where it is produced of critical importance, which is why Fairclough maps a three-level framework for conducting CDA. First, the micro level, discourse as text, scrutinizes the specific features of instances of discourse (Fairclough, 1992, p. 74). This includes the examination of word choice, use of metaphors and comparisons, the structure and organization of discourse, and implicit or explicit references to other texts/discourses (Fairclough, 1992, p. 75). There are social and strategic motivations for choosing particular signifiers, and so paying close attention to discrepancies between the “meaning potential” and the actual received meaning, dependent on interpretation, is key (Fairclough, 1992, p. 75). Second, the meso level, discursive practice, analyzes the “processes of text production, distribution, and consumption” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 78). How a text is produced and distributed affects how it is interpreted, meaning examining which institutions produced/distributed it, who the target audience is, and how it is modified for its context are crucial factors in understanding how discourse is formed. For instance, “producers within sophisticated organizations such as government departments produce text in ways which anticipate their distribution, transformation, and consumption, and have multiple audiences built into them,” and institutions themselves have symbolic resonance with various populations, further imbuing discourse with meaning (Fairclough, 1992, p. 79).

Third, the macro level, discourse as social practice, examines the larger social structures and currents that shape and are shaped by discourse, such as historical events, class and race formations, and other sub-discourses competing or interacting with a given discourse (Fairclough, 1992). Especially important here, is understandings social ideologies (for instance,

the American understandings of meritocracy), as they have significant implications regarding the codes, structures, and formations that underlie language practice (Fairclough, 1992, p. 88).

Ideologies are more or less naturalized and accepted within and between communities, and may be a site of contention between social groups, but regardless, the meanings they imbue into discourse must be examined to understand the nuances of how discourses operate in a society.

Understanding all levels at which discourse is constructed, influenced, and challenged is vital to uncovering the complex ways which narratives are shaped, and shape society and social actors.

Rather than selecting cases based on generalizability, the interpretive methodology of which CDA is affiliated aims to understand social phenomena in context, and so rather than the random-sampling of positivist methodology, case selection is based on relevance for the agents under study (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 70). The three events examined were selected due to their special significance to government-BLM interaction, namely, where the government engaged physically and rhetorically with BLM, publicly signifying their position in relation to the movement, its goals, and other relevant social actors: the clearing of protesters from Lafayette Square in Washington, DC; the deployment of federal agents against activists in Portland, Oregon; and the Republican National Convention. The first two are instances where the federal government violently repressed protesters. These events allow us to examine the stated intentions and justifications of the government, analyzing their rhetoric and the symbols invoked to understand the narrative they constructed and the intentions behind these actions. The RNC allows us to examine the narrative that the Administration attempted to forge specifically in the electoral context. While public perceptions are always a consideration of governments, and governments take actions specifically to shape public perceptions, constructing a narrative surrounding the election is the explicit goal of the RNC. As the convention took place in late

August of 2020 after months of nationwide civil unrest, and during a period of heightened protest, RNC discourse allows us to understand how the Administration and GOP attempted to frame themselves in relation to BLM and the Democrats.

This project aimed to survey the most relevant text and speech related to these events. This included speeches by the President and Administration officials, press releases from the White House and relevant agencies, related House and Senate testimony, media interviews, tweets from the President and other Administration officials, executive orders, and other related speech and text. While discourse produced by protesters, observers, and other relevant actors was analyzed to get a holistic understanding of events, the primary focus of this project was on the discourse produced by the Administration. The data sources were not bounded at the outset of research so not to preclude the discovery of relevant material. Schwartz-Shea & Yanow (2012) describe the search for meaning during interpretive research as a ‘circle-spiral’ where the researcher begins by examining the information and explanations with which they are most familiar, and expand outwards, encountering different perspectives which challenge, strengthen, nuance, or complicate their understandings. This design was chosen due to the need in CDA to examine intertextual links across sources. Flexibility is vital, as the researcher cannot have a complete knowledge of what is relevant to the discourse until they are conducting research.

The murder of George Floyd on May 25th, 2020 sparked the current wave of protest and marking the beginning of the timeframe analyzed. All relevant sources of data—like White House press briefings, tweets, DHS press releases, and presidential speeches—from the weeks surrounding each event were collected and analyzed, and keyword searches¹ were used to narrow

¹ Examples of terms used included: “BLM,” “Black Lives Matter,” “George Floyd,” “Protest(s),” “Riot(s),” “Portland,” “Lafayette Square,” “Antifa,” “Terrorist(s),” “Thug(s)” “Police,” “Blue Lives Matter,” “David Dorn,” “Patrick Underwood,” “Chaos,” “Crime,” “Suburbs,” etc.

the scope of material. Even sources that the keyword search did not flag were skimmed to make sure they were not relevant. Government websites, such as House and Senate archives, were searched for relevant proceedings, and when found, transcripts were downloaded if possible, and if not, proceedings were watched. Media interviews with relevant Administration officials were searched for on Google, and on websites major media corporations such as CNN, CBS, MSNBC, and Fox News. Footage of all four nights of the RNC were viewed and transcripts were read. All sources deemed to be relevant were viewed or read in their entirety, and pertinent rhetoric, themes, and information were recorded. When a source referenced another pertinent event or text, that source was analyzed in the same way. All in all, hundreds of hours were spent analyzing talk and text. While not the most economic method of data analysis, this exhaustive procedure was required to ensure that a complete picture of the discursive themes and dynamics was captured. While it is impossible to survey every piece of relevant discourse, the analysis portion of the project was completed once all major sources of discourse were analyzed, and the same findings were repeatedly uncovered in new materials.

Results

Lafayette Square

The most recent and dramatic protest cycle associated with the Black Lives Matter movement was spurred by the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police on May 25th, 2020. Floyd was detained on suspicion of using a counterfeit bill, and killed by an officer kneeling on his neck for over eight minutes while he was handcuffed and expressing that he could not breathe. Video of the event quickly circulated the internet and news media sparking nationwide, and eventually international, protests. The stark brutality of the murder, paired with other recent cases of police killings of unarmed black people—including the murder of Breonna Taylor by

police around a month prior—motivated widespread, sustained protest, and sparked deep hostility towards the police and government. Data shows that the vast majority of demonstrations have been peaceful, however, some have included rioting, and violence and property crime unassociated with BLM demonstrations has occurred, with perpetrators taking advantage of the anonymity provided (Kishi & Jones, 2020; see also Chenoweth & Pressman, 2020).

Protests erupted in Washington D.C. days after Floyd’s killing, including in Lafayette Square, a plaza situated opposite the White House. On June first, coinciding with a White House speech where Trump addressed the protests, federal agents from multiple agencies—the Park Police, Secret Service, Bureau of Prisons Special Operations Response Team, and D.C. National Guard, among others—violently removed protesters from the square and surrounding area (Washington Post, 2020, June 8). While aspects of this event are contested—for instance, if agencies gave sufficiently perceptible warnings for protesters to disperse, if ‘tear gas’ was used, and the motivation behind clearing the square at that exact time—video evidence, on the ground reporting, and participant interviews indicate disproportionate use of force by law enforcement against peaceful protesters (Siegel, A., 2020, July 13; U.S. House, 2020, June 29; Washington Post, 2020, June 8). Officers rushed protesters, assaulting them with truncheons and shields, and used sting-ball, flash-bang, and smoke grenades, and rubber bullets, pepper balls, and tear gas² (Siegel, A., 2020, July 13; U.S. House, 2020, June 29; U.S. House, July 28; Washington Post, 2020, June 8). Once protesters were cleared, and his Rose Garden speech ended, Trump and high-ranking Administration officials crossed Lafayette Square and posed for photographs in front of an adjacent church. This event is perhaps the most direct confrontation between the

² The use of tear gas is contested by the Trump Administration, although tear gas canisters were retrieved by media and protesters at the scene. Furthermore, many protesters and law enforcement officers with tear gas training testified to experiencing the symptoms of tear gas exposure during the clearing of the square. (CBS News, 2020; U.S. House, 2020, July 28).

Administration and BLM protesters, and set the tone for the coming months of government-BLM conflict. To understand the significance of these actions, we must examine the discourse leading up to the event, the event itself, and the shaping of the narrative afterwards.

The first statement by Trump addressing protester concerns during this protest cycle (although not explicitly addressing protesters) was a tweet on May 27th, stating that the DOJ is investigating the “sad and tragic death in Minnesota of George Floyd [...] I have asked for this investigation to be expedited and greatly appreciate all of the work done by local law enforcement.” (Trump, 2020, May 27a; May 27b) This statement sets a pattern in the discourse whereby any acknowledgement or implication of wrongdoing by police is accompanied by an utterance praising law enforcement. In this case, just the mention of Floyd’s death, which one would have no knowledge was caused by police brutality unless already familiar, is balanced by support for law enforcement. This statement was repeated in a press conference the next day, the first official statement by the Administration on the killing of Floyd and ensuing protest.

The press briefing begins with a short acknowledgement of Floyd’s death, calling it “tragic” and claiming the president was “upset,” and that “justice will be served” (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, May 28) The briefing does not mention race in any way, and does not attribute any blame for the death or mention law enforcement other than favorably. When asked about the role of the police officers and what consequences they should face, press secretary McEnany dodges the opportunity to say anything critical of law enforcement or the officers involved in Floyd’s death, instead reiterating that the president was “upset when he saw the video,” and wants “justice to be served” (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, May 28). Asked about what justice would look like, she states “I’ll leave that to the justice system to work out” (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, May 28). In leaving it to the justice system, and

praising the work done by law enforcement, the justice system is framed as the solution to the problem, implying the system, narrowly, and the social order, broadly, are fundamentally just.

The next day, in response to rioting in Minneapolis, Trump tweeted in a way which encapsulates much of the tone and rhetoric which he and his administration took towards BLM protests from this point on, and contained what many commentators recognized as a dog-whistle:

I can't stand back & watch this happen to a great American City, Minneapolis. A total lack of leadership. Either the very weak Radical Left Mayor, Jacob Frey, get his act together and bring the City under control, or I will send in the National Guard & get the job done right [...] These THUGS are dishonoring the memory of George Floyd, and I won't let that happen. Just spoke to Governor Tim Walz and told him that the Military is with him all the way. Any difficulty and we will assume control but, when the looting starts, the shooting starts. Thank you! (Trump, 2020 May 29a; May 29b)

This is the first instance in which Trump attempts to escalate the perceived threat of protesters by asserting that the National Guard and Military, including 'shooting,' is required to bring the protests under control. Trump positions himself at the centre of this conflict as the personification of authority through I statements: "I can't stand back," "I won't let this happen."

The phrase "when the looting starts, the shooting starts" was first used by Miami police chief Walter Headley in 1967, in an overtly racist press release discussing his department's response to civil unrest associated with the struggle for civil rights (Standard-Speaker, 1967). Headley was announcing a harsher policy for policing black communities, during which he accused "young hoodlums" of "taking advantage of the civil rights campaign," and advocated an escalation of police violence against rioters who he explicitly equated with young black men (specifically by using dogs and shotguns against them), stating "we don't mind being accused of

police brutality” (Standard-Speaker, 1967). This statement and variations of it have been used a number of times, overwhelmingly by authorities signaling willingness to use violent against African American communities, and in some instances by vigilante groups signaling their intention to do the same (Nelson, 1967; Santa Cruz Sentinel, 1968, February 4; Thompson, 2008, December 17). The invocation of this phrase ties Trump’s authoritarian posturing to a legacy of politicians demonizing black communities to justify extreme police violence against them. Used in the context of widespread mobilization against systemic racism in the justice system and predatory policing practices against African Americans, the statement signals a lack of sympathy to protester demands and a defence of the status quo, including state violence against racialized communities. While not explicitly invoking race, it taps into a well of racist understandings and signals the current position of the Administration as against change to the racial order.

The next day, May 30th, at a NASA/SpaceX launch, Trump spoke about the Death of Floyd and the ensuing unrest in the most somber terms of his rhetoric throughout the protest period, however, still demonizing protesters, aligning uncritically with law enforcement, and ignoring systematic racism and race as a factor in Floyd’s death and the protests. While Trump states he supports peaceful protesters, he then asserts:

what we are now seeing on the streets of our cities has nothing to do with justice or with peace. The memory of George Floyd is being dishonored by rioters, looters and anarchists. The violence and vandalism is being led by Antifa and other radical left-wing groups who are terrorizing the innocent, destroying jobs, hurting businesses and burning down buildings. (Rev Transcripts, 2020, May 31)

The majority of the speech is spent demonizing rioters, and police wrongdoing is mentioned only briefly, with Trump stating that one officer has been arrested and charged with murder

expressing sympathy with the other officers who “sadly” may be charged (Rev Transcripts, 2020, May 31). Trump then pivots to defending the “overwhelming majority of police officers” who “keep our city safe, protect our communities from gangs and drugs and risk their own lives for us every day” (Rev Transcripts, 2020, May 31).

The above statements in the days following Floyd’s death during the growing unrest demonstrate well the discursive themes in the Administration’s rhetoric surrounding the events of Lafayette Square. The violent clearing of the square became an event which signified the narrative the Administration pushed regarding BLM and protests for racial justice during the outset of the protest cycle. Put simply, that peaceful protest was legitimate but did not exist in this movement, that BLM had been hijacked by radicals and criminals and therefore had nothing to do with racial justice, and that the bad actions of individual police officers did not warrant criticism of law enforcement as a whole. Three interrelated themes found throughout the Lafayette discourse build this overall narrative: the separation of protest from issues of race; the escalation of the threat posed, and the framing of law enforcement as victims/heroes.

The first theme is comprised both of what is present and what is lacking in the discourse. Race and racial dynamics of Floyd’s murder are not discussed by Trump and Administration officials, and his death is framed as a tragedy not having anything to do with racial justice. For instance, in his Rose Garden address during the clearing of the square, Trump begins by stating “All Americans were rightly sickened and revolted by the brutal death of George Floyd. My administration is fully committed that, for George and his family, justice will be served. He will not have died in vain.” (Miller Centre, 2020, June 3). Here, as in the larger discourse, Floyd’s death is treated as a tragedy detached from any larger systemic issues. In a teleconference with governors about how protests should be dealt with earlier that day,

asked about the absence of any recognition of protesters grievances, Trump dodges the question by claiming he already spoke about it at the Space X launch, a speech which Trump refers to multiple times to avoid acknowledging race.³

We just sent out a billion-dollar rocket, and before I spoke about the rocket in a major speech after the rocket launch, I spoke as to what happened with respect to Mr. Floyd.

I thought it was a disgrace. I feel like what happened was a disgrace, but I spoke about it probably as long as I did about the rocket itself. (Rev Transcripts, 2020, July 6)

When asked directly about racial dynamics of the protests and police brutality, officials blame individuals to avoid discussion of racism and deny the existence of systemic racism. At a press briefing just prior to the clearing of the square, asked about whether systemic racism exists within law enforcement, press secretary McEnany states that Trump “fundamentally rejects the idea that these egregious actions of these four Minnesota officers are representative of our police force as a whole” (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, June 1). In two press briefings following the clearing of the square, on June 3rd and 8th, discussion of race is absent unless pushed by reporters, and systematic racism is denied (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, June 3; 2020, June 8). When asked if the president acknowledges “there is systematic racism in law enforcement?” McEnany responds that “he believes there are instances of racism” but that “our law enforcement are the best in the world” and that “by and large they are good people” (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, June 8). Attorney General Barr concurs in a CBS interview while portraying law enforcement as the primary

³ In an interview a few days later when asked how he would handle issues of African American relations with law enforcement Trump answered: “I’ve spoken about it numerous times in various speeches. It’s interesting. I spoke about it when we launched a very successful rocket, a tremendous program that culminated on that day, and now, obviously, it goes on from there, but I then made a speech, and it was a speech about the rocket, and I devoted at 25% of the speech, probably, to what happened, or more, to what happened with respect to George, George Floyd, and it was... Then you... Listen to this. “He doesn’t talk about George Floyd.”” (Rev Transcripts, 2020, June 3)

victims of violence at Lafayette: “All organizations have people who engage in misconduct, and you sometimes have to be careful as for when you ascribe that to the whole organization and when it really is some errant member who isn't following the rules” (CBS News, 2020, June 7).

Here we see the ‘bad apples’ response to police brutality, that “condemns police for “unjustified” police violence, but excuses the police as an institution by locating the problem as limited to the individual” (Correia & Wall, 2018, p. 235), and its larger place within colourblind racism. The cause of George Floyd’s death, and presumably other police killings of black people, is placed squarely at the feet of the officers involved, and no systemic causes are acknowledged. The larger trends of racist criminal justice outcomes are disregarded, which implicitly blames individuals and/or cultural factors and leaves unchallenged (as fundamentally just) systems that reproduce race-based social hierarchy. Notably, the actions of individual officers are not said to be motivated by racism either, and so race disappears from the Administration’s narrative surrounding police brutality entirely.

This leads to a contradiction in the Administrations narrative, where the legitimacy of protesters’ grievances is acknowledged on some level, but the issues behind which protesters mobilize are not acknowledged to exist, delegitimizing the movement. In the same way, the legitimacy of peaceful protest is recognized, but not acknowledged to exist. Trump demonstrates this in his Rose Garden address:

All Americans were rightly sickened and revolted by the brutal death of George Floyd. My administration is fully committed that, for George and his family, justice will be served. He will not have died in vain. But we cannot allow the righteous cries and peaceful protesters to be drowned out by an angry mob. The biggest victims of the rioting are peace-loving citizens in our poorest communities, and as their

President, I will fight to keep them safe. I will fight to protect you. I am your President of law and order, and an ally of all peaceful protesters. But in recent days, our nation has been gripped by professional anarchists, violent mobs, arsonists, looters, criminals, rioters, Antifa, and others. (Miller Centre, 2020, June 3)

This speech occurred as federal agents were clearing Lafayette Square, and in the background the crack of rubber bullets and canister launchers can be heard (Miller Center, 2020). Race, the demands of protesters, and the causes of the unrest are not mentioned, and although peaceful protesters and the right to protest are acknowledged in the abstract, they are not recognized to be part of the protests as they are occurring. The overwhelming majority of sources reported the protest that afternoon to be peaceful, yet the violent response of the state signals that these protesters are illegitimate (Siegel, A., 2020, July 13; U.S. House, 2020, June 29; Washington Post, 2020, June 8).

This portrayal of all protest as it is occurring as illegitimate is closely linked with the second discursive theme: the escalation of the threat posed by protesters. In the Administration's narrative, there is a complete conflation of peaceful, destructive, and violent protest, with all BLM mobilizations accused of holding the latter two traits. In the teleconference discussing how best to deal with protesters, for instance, almost every governor regardless of party recognizes that the majority of protests in their locales are peaceful and acknowledges the legitimacy of protest and the anger and felt by protesters (Rev Transcripts, 2020, July 6). Many discuss engaging communities, and talk about how to best deploy law enforcement to deescalate the situation. Trump and Barr did not acknowledge any of these subjects, ignoring them or pushing back and instead fixating on the need to "dominate"⁴ protesters and make an

⁴ The words "dominate" and "domination" were used 20 times in relation to protesters.

example of rioters, although protesters and rioters were not differentiated (Rev Transcripts, 2020, July 6). Hours later, this sentiment is reiterated in a press briefing, which begins with a complete conflation of protest and violent and destructive actions, through the basic denial that peaceful protests exist and that there is any legitimate reason for BLM mobilization: “what we are seeing on America’s streets is unacceptable. Violence, looting, anarchy, lawlessness are not to be tolerated, plain and simple. These criminal acts are not protest. They are not statements. These are crimes” (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, June 1).

Days after the clearing of Lafayette Square, Trump and Barr furthered conflation in the media, going on Fox and CBS News, respectively, and defending the clearing of the square and Trump’s photo-op. Both men, as in the White House press briefings following the event, associate destructive acts that took place at different times and places with those who were peacefully protesting on June first, using the former events to justify the repression. Trump states, “I heard how nice and wonderful the protesters were over there. Really? Then why did they burn down the church?” (Rev Transcripts, 2020, June 3). Barr justifies the actions of federal agents by discussing events that took place on the days before the event, and when the interviewer brings up that the June first protest was peaceful, Barr interrupts and continues to list things that happened the previous night, before stating that on June first federal agents were facing a “very rowdy and non-compliant crowd” (CBS News, 2020, June 7). Barr continues “I didn’t see any video being played on the media of what was happening Friday, Saturday, Sunday [...] all I heard was comments about how peaceful the protesters were. I didn’t hear about the fact that there was 150 law enforcement officers injured and many more taken to the hospital with concussions, so it wasn’t a peaceful protest” (CBS News, 2020, June 7).

Similarly, the threat posed by protesters was escalated through the repeated and unsubstantiated claims that protesters were led by and comprised of extremists, Antifa, and various other nefarious groups. In the teleconference, Barr refers to “professional instigators” and “extreme anarchist types, agitators, who are driving the violence,” while Trump blames “radicals and [...] anarchists,” “professional anarchists,” “Antifa and the Radial Left,” claiming “these are terrorists, these are terrorists,” and comparing the protester/rioters to “a military operation” claiming “it is a war in a certain sense” (Rev Transcripts, 2020, July 6). This information is stated as fact, and Trump and Barr claim to have intelligence supporting this but neither offer concrete evidence, and when directly asked for it Trump claims “we’ll present it to the appropriate people” (Rev Transcripts, 2020, July 6). I could not uncover any substantial evidence, government or otherwise, of professional organization by Antifa or any other extremist groups, and reporting, as well as FBI and DHS intelligence suggest these accusations are unfounded, and that opportunistic right-wing individuals and groups poses a greater threat of violence (Kelly and Samuels, 2020; MacFarquhar et al., 2020).

In Trump’s Rose Garden address, Trump states “[i]nnocent people have been savagely beaten, like the young man in Dallas, Texas, who was left dying on the street, or the woman in Upstate New York viciously attacked by dangerous thugs” (Miller Centre, 2020, June 3). Race is not mentioned; however, these were instances where white individuals were beaten by groups of men who appeared to be black (Reuters Staff, 2020, June 4; W-HEC News 10. 2020, June 1). In both instances, the events are more complex than they are presented here: in the former, the man beaten charged a group of protesters with a machete and was hit in self defence, in the latter, the woman assaulted was attempting to stop a burglary, and stated that she did not believe the men had anything to do with a nearby protest (Acrie, 2020, May 31; Reuters Staff, 2020, June 4). The

presentation of events out of context leads one to assume that these were predatory acts of violence committed by protesters, and the selection of cases with white victims and black perpetrators acts as a dog-whistle to cue racial fears. The use of specific labels for protesters, especially the term ‘thug,’ which is used repeatedly, further attaches negative racial connotations to rioters. As Joseph (2016) argues, in America, the term is often strategically used by leaders to attach understandings of racial criminality, associated with black Americans, to political dissent.

Furthermore, Trump discusses these events in conjunction with destructive acts that were committed in relation to the unrest caused by Floyd’s murder. While discussing unrest around the country he states, “African American enforcement hero was shot and killed,” implying by protesters, when in fact it was by white supremacists (Blankenstein & Collins, 2020; Miller Centre, 2020, June 3). The mention of race in this instance delegitimizes the claims of protesters by associating them with violence against an African American. It is also part of a larger theme in this speech and the discourse which elevates instances of violence against law enforcement officers while largely ignoring violence against (non-law enforcement) minorities, or recognizing police brutality as a problem. Trump equates protest and violence: “these are not acts of peaceful protest. These are acts of domestic terror. (Miller Centre, 2020, June 3).

The threat posed by protesters is further escalated through the advocacy of harsh action to put down the protests. Just prior to the violent clearing of Lafayette Square, during the teleconference, Trump, using Minneapolis as an example states it was an “experiment” where “You had the first part, which was weak and pathetic. And you had the second part, which was domination,” continuing that the contrast was a “beautiful thing to watch” (Rev Transcripts, 2020, July 6). Attorney General Barr concurs, asserting that a decisive use of law enforcement is necessary to make a “strong statement in the major cities” (Rev Transcripts,

2020, July 6). Trump is clearly concerned with the optics, stating that America will look like “a pushover,” and that “if you don’t dominate [...] you’re going to look like a bunch of jerks” (Rev Transcripts, 2020, July 6). In the Rose Garden address, during the crackdown, Trump repeatedly positions himself as the personification of law-and-order by saying he will end the “riots and lawlessness” and claiming he is “dispatching thousands and thousands of heavily armed soldiers, military personnel, and law enforcement officers to stop the rioting, looting, vandalism, assaults, and the wanton destruction of property” (Miller Centre, 2020, June 3). The threat he opposes is at once amorphous—“chaos,” “anarchy,” and “lawlessness”—and organized by “Antifa and others who are leading instigators of this violence” and who will “face severe criminal penalties” (Miller Centre, 2020, June 3). This vagueness escalates the perceived threat to American society, while the specificity makes fears tangible and justifies concrete coercive actions by the state. This is indeed the form and function of the folk devil.

These requests for state violence were made in a context of mobilization against excessive violence by law enforcement, but in the Administration’s narrative, this systemic racism does not exist. From the very first statement acknowledging this Floyd’s death, Trump and his administration has framed police, overall, as heroes, and as the narrative developed around Lafayette Square, as victims of the BLM movement. As discussed above, in the Rose Garden address, violence against police is elevated above violence against minority communities. The protesters’ grievances that black communities suffer disproportionate violence at the hands of law enforcement is ignored, and instead, rhetoric focuses on victimization of police officers and the threats posed to them, like the unsubstantiated claims that at Lafayette Square “there were calls for violence against police officers, and they found caches of class bottles, baseball bats, and metal polls hidden along the streets” (U.S. Office of the Press

Secretary, 2020, June 3, 2020). In the Administration's telling, violent action was needed "to protect the lives of officers," and to "protect the average citizenry," and McEnany describes police as a "Thin Blue Line in American Society [...] between peace and chaos, between order and anarchy" (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, June 3; 2020, June 8). Press briefings on June third and eighth end by listing instances of police victimization of violence (unrelated to protest) and heroic acts by police, respectively.

In the June eighth briefing, McEnany again associates the movement with the deaths of two black police officers stating: "Black Lives Matter D.C. said 'Black Lives Matter' means 'defund the police,'" and continuing "of course the President stands against defunding the police. All black lives matter, including the life of David Dorn, who perished in the last week and a half; including Patrick Underwood, who also lost his life this week" (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, June 8). She further portrays the police as victims of the policies pursued by protesters, as:

when you think the left has gone far and they couldn't possibly go farther, because we all remember the Defund ICE movement — they want to defund Immigration and Custom Enforcement and now they want to defund the police. This is extraordinary. This is rolling back the protective layers that protect Americans in their homes and in their places of business. (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, June 8)

Later in the briefing, discussing "750 [officers] who were injured defending this country from rioters and Antifa in the streets," she claims that "those officers were heroes" as were David Dorn and Patrick Underwood" (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, June 8). In the Administration's telling, the police are victims of the protesters physically and the policies they represent, and, in the 'bad apples' narrative, are having their reputations tarnished by the actions

of a few ‘errant members.’ Instead, the Administration’s focus is on “valiant police officers who have taken to the streets each and every night [and] protected our communities” (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, June 1). The narrative is clear: while individual acts of racism occur occasionally, the law enforcement is unbiased, responsible for social order and public safety, and are the primary victims of the events surrounding George Floyd’s death. BLM is therefore a direct threat to personal safety and public order.

Portland

Around a month after the Lafayette Square events, President Trump signed an executive order signaling the federal government’s would become more involved in suppressing the nationwide unrest, and would seek harsher penalties for those arrested in relation. This led to the creation of the Protecting American Communities Task Force (PACT) and the deployment of Department of Homeland Security (DHS) agents to protests across the US (Kishi & Jones, 2020). Since Floyd’s death, Portland, Oregon, saw intense protests, and just after the executive order, in early July, multiple federal law enforcement agencies were sent there to combat the unrest. Personnel from the DHS, Marshals, and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) were deployed to a Federal Courthouse in Downtown Portland with the stated goal of protecting federal property (Riski, 2020; July 8; Victoria Lozano, 2020, July 21). The area around the courthouse became a site of violent conflict between federal agents (especially DHS personnel) and protesters over the coming weeks. In late July, the Governor of Oregon and Trump Administration reached an agreement where state and local law enforcement would take over protection of the courthouse and the federal agents would withdraw (Taylor & Miroff, 2020, July 31).

Rather than helping to get a handle on the situation, data suggests the deployment of federal agents dramatically aggravated unrest, increasing the violence directed at protesters and

violent behaviour by protesters (Kishi & Jones, 2020).⁵ Local politicians denounced the presence and tactics of federal agents, which they deemed to be a breach of their authority and claimed were escalating violence, with the Mayor of Portland requesting the removal of federal agents on July 14th, and the Oregon Attorney General filing lawsuits in an attempt to remove the agents (Wilson, VanderHart, & Powell, 2020, July 17; Riski, 2020, July 14). During and after these events, Portland became the major focus of the Trump Administration's discourse regarding BLM. There is much continuity from the earlier discourse surrounding Lafayette Square, but the narrative develops in ways that further delegitimize protest for racial justice and shift blame for the unrest towards Trump's Democratic political rivals. Moreover, the actions and rhetoric of the Administration crafted Portland into a symbol of the crime and chaos that would befall America if protesters' demands are met, progressive policies are adopted, and the Democrats gain power.

It is important to understand why Portland, specifically, became the focus of the Trump Administration, and made symbolic of their conflict with BLM. Trump had been extremely critical of other cities' responses to BLM protest and the unrest associated with it, especially majority black cities like Baltimore and Chicago (e.g. U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, August 8), and specifically Democratic run cities as Trump blamed the unrest on failures of Democratic policies and governance. The population of Portland is overwhelmingly white (over 75% [U.S. Census Bureau, 2019]), however the city has a more recent history of left-wing institutional politics and longstanding tradition of radical left-wing mobilization (Bryans, 2002). Furthermore, the political dynamics of Oregon, being very socially conservative outside of its cities, as well as the presence of white supremacist groups within and around the city, has made

⁵ State force was used against demonstrations under 24% of the time prior to July, rising to 40% after July when federal agents were deployed. Prior to the deployment of federal agents 53% of demonstrations in Portland were classified as violent, compared to 62% after deployment. (Kishi & Jones, 2020, n.p.)

Portland a frequent site of conflict between left-wing and right-wing politics and groups (Abbott, 2015, HoSang & Lowndes, 2019; Rosenthal, 2019). Since the murder of George Floyd, Portland had been the site of some of the most intense and sustained protest in the United States (Kishi & Jones, 2020), and during this time, Portland was governed by a Democratic Mayor, Democrats controlled all branches of state government, and Oregon was overwhelmingly represented by Democrats at the federal level (with one GOP congressman as the exception).

While not representative of the demographic who would gain from racial advancement, Portland could be made symbolic of the threat posed by progressives to America. Portland's reputation as having far-left politics, alongside its centrality in the George Floyd protests, meant that the criminality that the Administration had linked to BLM previously could be attached to left-wing politics to a greater degree. The fact that Portland and Oregon were run by Democrats allowed institutional politicians to be blamed more directly for unrest in the streets, as either encouraging it, or being unwilling or unable to stop it. By combatting activists in Portland against the wishes of local Democratic leaders, Trump could portray the threat posed by BLM as ideological (as leftist extremism, vaguely) and criminal, rather than as motivated by racial justice, and link Democrats to this extremist threat. Using Portland to symbolize the Administration's conflict with BLM and the Democrats drew on American understandings of Portland's progressivism to shape perceptions of these groups, and indicate who the Administration was fighting.

The executive order issued by Trump on June 26th heralds the Administration's narrative regarding BLM mobilizations and racial unrest over the coming weeks and demonstrates both the thematic continuity and change from the early BLM mobilizations and events of Lafayette square. Justifying federal intervention, the order states:

Over the last 5 weeks, there has been a sustained assault on the life and property of civilians, law enforcement officers, government property, and revered American monuments such as the Lincoln Memorial. Many of the rioters, arsonists, and left-wing extremists who have carried out and supported these acts have explicitly identified themselves with ideologies—such as Marxism—that call for the destruction of the United States system of government. Anarchists and left-wing extremists have sought to advance a fringe ideology that paints the United States of America as fundamentally unjust and have sought to impose that ideology on Americans through violence and mob intimidation. They have led riots in the streets, burned police vehicles, killed and assaulted government officers as well as business owners defending their property. (Executive Order No. 13933, 2020)

It continues:

[M]any State and local governments appear to have lost the ability to distinguish between the lawful exercise of rights to free speech and assembly and unvarnished vandalism. They have surrendered to mob rule, imperiling community safety, allowing for the wholesale violation of our laws, and privileging the violent impulses of the mob over the rights of law-abiding citizens. Worse, they apparently have lost the will or the desire to stand up to the radical fringe and defend the fundamental truth that America is good, her people are virtuous, and that justice prevails in this country to a far greater extent than anywhere else in the world. (Executive Order No. 13933, 2020)

In this next step of the narrative, the nationwide mobilization is completely divorced from any legitimate claims or grievances, and instead comprised of Marxists, anarchists, and left-wing extremists bent on the destruction of the system of government and social order of the United

States. BLM and racial justice is not explicitly mentioned, however, any assertion that the US is not just is labeled a ‘fringe ideology’ and equated with extremism and associated with violence, which delegitimizes and demonizes the movement. BLM is therefore part of an extremist medley of groups and ideologies which is fundamentally opposed to the American way of life.

Furthermore, politicians are empowering these extremists by allowing them to mobilize and their ideologies to be aired. Through weakness or cowardice, political leaders are allowing Americans to be harmed and the American way of life to be imperiled. Here, Democrats are not specifically named, however this link is made explicitly in press releases, congressional testimony, and other public rhetoric in the coming weeks.

The above passage gives a good representation of two major discursive themes building from Lafayette Square: the complete divorcing of protest/mobilization from racial justice, and the heightening of the threat posed by BLM and linking of Democratic politicians to the problem. A further theme, not discussed in this passage, is the framing of law enforcement as entirely heroic, and as the primary victims of current, BLM related events.

An enduring trait of the Administration’s discourse regarding BLM is the lack of acknowledgement of any legitimate claims or grievances of protesters, or of any racial dynamics to issues contributing the mobilization and unrest. This deliberate omission and lack of recognition was present in the discourse surrounding Lafayette Square; however, Portland represents and even greater (almost complete) divorcing of protesters mobilization from issues of racial justice. By omitting the goals and grievance of the movement, protesters are seen as irrational, or engaging in disruptive activity or violence out of malice (McLeod, 2007). Just as in the executive order, in press briefings by Trump and his communication team, the unrest in Portland is discussed as being carried out by ‘anarchists’ with no real political goals or

motivations other than hatred of America. Trump for instance explains at a briefing that the unrest in Portland was caused by “lawless rioters and agitators and anarchists [who] are really sick, disturbed people” (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, August 8). To the extent that the protester-rioters are acknowledged as political agents, they are linked to the left as “leftwing, violent extremism” or “leftwing domestic terrorism,” although their specific goals or ideology (other than chaos and hatred of America) are not specified (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, August 8; U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, August 11).

To the extent that issues are acknowledged, it is to challenge the claims of BLM. In his opening statement to a congressional oversight hearing probing the deployment of federal agents to Portland and other cities, AG Barr talks about how racism codified by law no longer exists in America and contrasts this to the increasing diversity of police departments and blacks in positions of power within them (Rev Transcripts, 2020, July 28). He employs a bad-apples explanation of police misconduct, stating “it would be an oversimplification to treat the problems as rooted in some deep-seated racism generally infecting our police departments” (Rev Transcripts, 2020, July 28). He goes on to state that “the threat to black lives posed by crime on the streets is massively greater than any threat posed by police misconduct,” and that “the leading cause of death for young black males is homicide [and] the vast majority of them, around 90%, are killed by other blacks” (Rev Transcripts, 2020, July 28). Here, we see the operation of colourblind racism, explaining negative social phenomena experienced by blacks through individualism (police misconduct as caused by bad police officers) and cultural (black males dying at the hands of other black males at high rates) to deny systematic racism and racial hierarchy. By using the latter statistic, Barr conjures an image which Linnemann and Medley argue is familiar to white Americans, that of the “racial underclass” who “kill each other,” which

frames surveillance and coercion as the only possible solution to this problem, and, moreover, as necessary to protect the rest of society from this violence (2017, p. 76). This is paired with the assertion that the US has progressed from its racist past to a point where black men can succeed within law enforcement, challenging the existence of barriers based on systemic racism and instead explaining outcomes through individual merit.

To the extent that protester's goals are mentioned, other than alleged destructive or criminal objectives, they are explained as wanting to 'defund the police.' This slogan, which gained prominence as the current cycle of BLM protests progressed, supports the reallocation of some funds from police departments to other social services and programs which support public safety (Koziarski & Huey, 2021). While various activists and groups advocate different levels of divestment and different roles for the police, the Trump Administration portrays this goal, disingenuously, as wanting to decimate police forces without any substitute or further plan. In this narrative, BLM's goal is "gutting every single police department in America [...] [n]o city, no town, and no suburb would be safe. Your suburbs would be a disaster. Your cities, your towns would be a disaster. They want every city to be a Portland" (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, August 8). This is a straightforward reiteration of the thin blue line narrative, in which any weakening of police power equates to increased crime and violence (Linnemann & Medley, 2017). Throughout the Administration's discourse, Portland is used to symbolize what will occur if police departments are weakened, despite the widespread mobilization of local, state, and federal law enforcement against protesters over the entire period.

This is also tied to the theme which developed around Lafayette Square, that the police are the primary victims of the events stemming from Floyd's killing. In statements by Trump and his communications team and other Administration officials, there is an overwhelming focus on

violence directed towards police officers and a complete disregard for violence committed by police in Portland or as a reason for the unrest in the first place. Like Lafayette Square, the police are the primary victims of both physical violence and rhetorical slights. For instance, in a July 21st press briefing, McEnany states that there are

Democrats on the Hill, Nancy Pelosi, calling these officers stormtroopers and Jim Clyburn calling them the Gestapo. This rhetoric is unhelpful and gives the violence we have seen a pass. [...] The well-organized mob in Portland has become increasingly aggressive, especially against law enforcement officers. Individuals have thrown bricks, chunks of concrete, glass bottles, feces, balloons filled with paint, pig's feet, slingshots to hurl ball bearings and batteries at federal agents and the courthouse. (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, July 21)

This listing of violence against officers appears in similar forms repeatedly throughout the discourse (e.g. U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, July 21; August 10) In another instance, when asked about Trump supporting counter-protesters going to Portland to clash with BLM activists, McEnany becomes incensed that a reporter is asking about violence against protesters and not against police:

it's incredible that, for 90 days, I've stood at this podium talking about officers who have been — lasers flashed in their eyes in an attempt to blind them; commercial-grade fireworks being thrown at them; a church, right out here, burning down [and] you're going to ask me about a paintball video when, in fact, for 90 days we've seen horrific, horrific violence by Antifa, a radical anarchist organization, and you're going to ask me about a paintball video. (U.S Office of the Press Secretary, 2020 August 31)

In the administration's narrative, police are wholly responsible for protecting the social order and citizens from the vague, ever-present threat of crime and chaos. Therefore, they portray themselves as completely on side and uncritical of law enforcement and policing practices. The Administration claims that "criticism of our police officers and the drawing down of funds for these officers" has caused a massive spike in murders in Portland and Seattle (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, August 31).⁶ For this reason "[w]e shouldn't criticize our police, because it is our police officers who are responsible for taking to the streets and protecting us" (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, August 31).

This blaming of BLM and the left more broadly relates to another trend throughout the larger discourse, the extreme escalation of the threat of BLM protests and protesters. Like in the discourse surrounding Lafayette Square, the threat posed by protesters is greatly escalated in the Administration's narrative, and the increased clashes between law enforcement and protesters in Portland were used exemplifying the threat posed to America by the protesters-rioter folk devils and the dangerous ideologies they are associated with. As surrounding Lafayette (and as mentioned above) there is an overwhelming focus on violent or threatening incidents or behaviours by protesters towards police. The creation of the folk devil intensifies, however, through increased conflation of protesters and violent criminals. As mentioned above, in this stage of the narrative, mobilization is divorced from racial grievances or demands for racial justice. Therefore, all of those mobilizing are portrayed as doing so to pursue violence and sow chaos. This is perhaps most obviously seen in a statement and press release by acting DHS Secretary Wolf, which uses the term "Violent anarchists" to describe any person(s) taking any

⁶ While crime rates did increase in these cities in 2020, I could not find any data supporting the extreme increases cited by McEnany (apparently a 650% increase in the case of Portland). (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, August 31)

actions related to the unrest, even though in most cases the ideological affinity of the individuals are unknowable, and their actions were non-violent (Department of Homeland Security, 2020).⁷

In this narrative, the threat of BLM has escalated, as it is asserted that major American cities, Portland being the principal example, have been overrun by violent mobs. Trump, for instance, claims “Portland is a disaster. [...] Brave federal law enforcement officers singlehandedly [...] saved the federal courthouse in Portland from lawless rioters and agitators and anarchists [...] Mayor Wheeler has abdicated his duty and surrendered his city to the mob” (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, August 8). The unrest is portrayed as part of a growing threat of “[l]eftwing, violent extremism” (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, August 11) or “leftwing domestic terrorism” (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, August 8), alongside its portrayal as purely senseless and anarchic. This threat is portrayed as spreading across America, as AG Barr demonstrates in his Senate testimony: “We are concerned about this problem metastasizing around the country, and so we feel that we have to, in a place like Portland, even where we don’t have the support of the local government, we have to take a stand” (U.S. Senate, 2020, July 28). In this vein, Trump claims that “[w]hat you’re seeing in Portland is the radical left’s agenda in action. Portland is their roadmap for America” (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, August 8). This narrative escalates the threat of BLM mobilization to individuals and communities (especially suburban and rural ones) who are not likely to encounter the unrest associated with some urban mobilizations. It also, justifies coercive intervention by the federal government to stem the alleged tide of turbulence and violence.

⁷ Over half of the events described are graffiti, which is a non-violent offence. In one case the victim of an overdose is described as a violent anarchist: “DHS law enforcement officers supported local police to help a violent anarchist who overdosed.” (Department of Homeland Security, 2020)

The Administration also escalates the threat of protesters through the conflation of crime broadly, and which is unrelated to the protests, with the actions of protesters. Specifically, arrests and incidents related to Operation LeGend, which deployed federal law enforcement agents to select cities to combat violent crime—unrelated to the Portland DHS deployment, and allegedly unrelated to the BLM protests—was repeatedly discussed alongside protest violence, portraying them as part of the same phenomenon (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary July 24; August 19; Sep 3.). For instance, in a September third press briefing, after discussing the failures of the Mayor of Portland to contain crack down on protests and recognize the violent nature of protesters, McEnany claims “when the local government doesn’t act, we use every avenue available to us at the federal level.” She continues that “[an] example is Operation LeGend, which we’re very proud of and have some new numbers for you on that” before listing arrests, charges, and firearms and drugs seized (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, September 3).

Just as at Lafayette Square, this violence, unrest, and crime is blamed on ‘the left’ broadly, but the events and discourse surrounding Portland shifts to blaming Democratic politicians and policies for these phenomena. The unrest in Portland is blamed on “leftwing extremism,” and the Administration’s discourse surrounding these events constantly accuses the Democrats as being leftwing radicals. In an August 11th press briefing, Trump stated “Democrats or the radical-left democrats—or both, because they’re becoming one and the same, if you look at election results—the Democrats are being taken over by the radical left” (U.S Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, August 11). This is also done through the conflation of the demands of some activists, especially ‘defund the police’ with the Democrat’ policy goals:

They want every city in America to resemble Portland, in a form. They want to pass federal legislation gutting and hamstringing every police department in America. They

want to get rid of your Second Amendment. They want to end cash bail; close prisons; defund police departments... (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020 August 11)

This is paired with well-worn dog-whistles employed by Trump that Democrats will open borders: “look at some of the things that these people are saying, with “Defund the Police” and no borders, open borders — everybody just pour right into our country; no testing, no nothing” which he asserts will cause crime and chaos like “what’s going on in places like Portland” (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, August 19). Alleged failures of Democratic governance and policymaking broadly, and their inability to control this specific period of unrest are conflated, and both local and federal Democrats are blamed for protest violence and property damage.

Trump claims that “Portland is a disaster. It has been a disaster for many, many years” he continues, “[t]he disgraced mayor of the city has ordered the police to stand down in the face of rioters, leaving his citizens at the mercy of the mob [...] Mayor Wheeler has abdicated his duty and surrendered his city to the mob” (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, August 8). This quote demonstrates another primary way that Democrats are blamed in this narrative, in that through their ‘soft’ law-and-order policies and the alleged hampering of law enforcement agencies, they encourage lawlessness and violence. The latter action is claimed to be through the failure to utilize local law enforcement—despite the fact that in Portland local law enforcement consistently used harsh measures against protesters and rioters (Evans, 2020)—and their resistance to federal intervention, which Trump, his communications team, and DHS secretary Wolf repeatedly criticize Democratic leaders for. In late July, McEnaney criticizes Democrats for opposing the actions of DHS agents in Portland, stating:

This rhetoric is unhelpful and gives the violence we have seen a pass. But President Trump will not give the violence a pass. He will restore order where the Democrat

governor and the Democrat mayor are unwilling to admit that they have lost control of their city. (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, July 21)

Furthermore, the Administration asserts that the failure of Democrats has forced them to intervene, as they must “protect the people of this country when derelict Democrat mayors and governors do not” (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, July 24). Supporting the justification of the executive order deploying DHS personnel to Portland, Secretary Wolf stated:

Instead of addressing violent criminals in their communities, local and state leaders are instead focusing on placing blame on law enforcement and requesting fewer officers in their community. This failed response has only emboldened the violent mob as it escalates violence day after day. This siege can end if state and local officials decide to take appropriate action instead of refusing to enforce the law. DHS will not abdicate its solemn duty to protect federal facilities and those within them. (Department of Homeland Security, 2020)

The explicit blaming of the Democrats for the unrest in Portland—and other Democrat run cities—links the narrative forwarded by the Trump Administration more directly to electoral politics by portraying the party as unable to maintain, or even as opposed to, law and order, which equates to police and repressive policing. Law and order, here, is simply a lack of unrest. Portland is used as a symbol which the Democrats, as representatives of the radical left and its progressive agenda, pose to America:

What you’re seeing in Portland is the radical left’s agenda in action. Portland is their roadmap for America. If the radical left gets in — and they treat Joe Biden as a puppet; he’s merely a puppet. But if the radical left gets in, they look at Portland as a thing that

they want. That's what they want. Why? Who knows? Doesn't matter. It's a different thinking, but it's a mess. (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, August 8)

This quote demonstrates the conclusion of the Administration's rhetorical strategy: the conflation of protest, destruction and violence, and progressive/Democratic institutional politics. Just as protesters and rioters are conflated, and the BLM movement is portrayed as apolitical as those mobilizing are doing so purely to sow chaos, Democrats are portrayed as one in the same, opposing law and order for no intelligible reason. Questions of racial justice and racialized police brutality are completely erased. Instead, and despite the fact that this nationwide unrest is occurring under Trump, the mobilization is used to rally the white electorate, who are threatened by the folk devil that will be let loose on America if the Democrats gain power.

Republican National Convention

The 2020 Republican National Convention (RNC) took place between August 24th and 27th. The RNC's purpose is to nominate and confirm a presidential candidate, and frame the party's election narrative and pitch to voters. While a wide variety of Republicans spoke, the 2020 RNC entirely centered around the President, who was framed as a complete embodiment of the GOP. The election narrative took the discourse that the Administration had been crafting regarding BLM at Lafayette Square and in Portland and tailored it to the electoral context. Here, we see the completion of a signification spiral, where crime and political and ideological opposition are completely conflated, BLM and the Democrats are linked, and the threat that they pose to America becomes total: physical, political, and cultural. Furthermore, a thin blue line narrative is crafted where the only way to repel this threat is law-and-order policies and unconditional support for police who become the only thing protecting Americans from the

threat posed by the folk devil. Through more intense dog-whistling, electoral choice is imbued with racial codes, and the Trump Administration is framed as the defender of white America.

The most dramatic and perhaps apparent development of the Administration's discourse regarding BLM at the RNC is that while in the cases of Lafayette Square and Portland race was minimized and ignored, at the RNC race and racial dynamics were discussed repeatedly. This discourse was raised by black speakers whose contribution to the discourse discredited BLM, challenged accusations of systemic racism in America, and claimed that Trump, his Administration, and his policies are not racist. Clearly, in the view of the Trump Administration and Republican Party, the race of these speakers gives them legitimacy and authority to speak on these topics, and race can therefore be used to support the assertions previously made by the administration which conspicuously minimized racial dynamics up until this point.

As HoSang and Lowndes (2019) have argued, the meritocracy and individualism central to America's self-perception ironically makes the participation and visibility of minorities in movements which defend the privilege of the dominant group—whether that be white supremacist social movements or the Republican party. The participation of these groups gives both plausible deniability to charges of individual racism, similar to Saul's (2017) fig leaves and systemic racism by giving examples of 'good' minorities or who have 'made it' through hard work and perseverance. At the RNC, both dynamics are operating. In their most crude form, these were endorsements by black politicians and public figures of Donald Trump and his Administration as non-racist, like Ben Carson's claim that "many on the other side, love to incite division, by claiming that President Trump is a racist. They could not be more wrong." (Rev Transcripts, 2020, August 28). Or Jack Brewer, who claimed:

My early high school experience included fighting with skinheads [...] I remember my dad's bravery when he personally stood up against a KKK rally in my town. In my house, my father taught me to back down from no one. I know what racism looks like, I've seen it firsthand. In America, it has no resemblance to President Trump. (Rev Transcripts, 2020, August 27)

By raising the threshold of racism to skinheads and the KKK, more subtle forms of racism existing in America and enacted by the Administration are excluded. This relates to another way which systematic racism is denied or minimized and therefore the ideologies and policies of the administration are defended: the assertion of the value American equality as fundamental—often through showing the individual successes of minorities—and emphasis on progress from America's (more) racist past. For instance, Cheryl Allen a superior court judge, states “I know what racism feels like, but I also know that but for my being in this country, I would have never been able to achieve the things that I have been able to achieve,” (Rev Transcripts, 2020, August 26) while Burgess Owens asserts that his great-grandfather arrived “shackled in the belly of a slave ship” and he grew up during Jim Crow, but “[e]ven through the challenges of segregation, we were taught that anything is possible in America,” and he worked hard to become a successful businessman and congressional candidate (Rev Transcripts, 2020, August 26) Senator Tim Scott tells the story of his Grandfather, who

[g]rowing up had to cross the street if a white person was coming, he suffered the indignity of being forced out of school as a third grader to pick cotton and he never learned to read or write. Yet, he lived long enough to see his grandson become the first African American to be elected to both the United States House and the United

States Senate, in the history of this country. Our family went from cotton to Congress in one lifetime. (Rev Transcripts, 2020, August 26)

These anecdotes omit the ways that racism and racial inequality has changed forms, and ignore larger persistent trends of racial inequality in America while supporting the myth of American individualism that anyone can improve their station through merit. While admitting that racism exists to greater or lesser extents in America, it challenges the assertion of BLM that it is hardwired into American society and institutions.

These prominent black figures are also used to discredit the BLM movement more directly through challenges to their tactics, motivations, and character, as well as assertions that they are hurting the black community rather than helping it. For instance, Anne Dorn, wife of an ex-police officer killed by burglars, conflates the BLM movement with criminals who killed her husband, stating “Violence and destruction are not legitimate forms of protest. They do not safeguard black lives. They only destroy them” (Rev Transcripts, 2020, August 28). Similarly, Judge Allen claims “[t]here are injustices but the way to deal with those injustices is for people to sit down across the table and talk and come up with solutions” (Rev Transcripts, 2020, August 26). Civil rights protester Clarence Henderson discredits BLM by juxtaposing it to the Civil Rights Movement which he alleges was entirely peaceful: “In the end, segregation was abolished and our country moved a stepped closer to true equality for all. That’s what actual peaceful protest can accomplish. America isn’t perfect. We’re always improving” (Rev Transcripts, 2020, August 27).

Again we see the generalization that BLM protests are violent and therefore the criminalization and demonization of the movement. Like in the discourse surrounding Portland and Lafayette Square, Democrats are blamed for the unrest, however in this final

escalation of the threat posed by BLM, the Democrats, and the left broadly, all of these entities are spoken about almost interchangeably, and portrayed in their ultimate form as ill-defined leftist ‘mob.’ The rhetoric used in this final construction of the BLM threat uses the most clear-cut dog-whistles found in the Administration’s overall discourse regarding BLM. The first speaker, Charlie Kirk illustrates the threat posed to America in this narrative:

Trump is the bodyguard of Western civilization. Trump was elected to protect our families from the vengeful mob that seeks to destroy our way of life. Our neighborhoods, schools, churches, and values. President Trump was elected to defend the American way of life. (Rev Transcripts, 2020, August 25)

Matt Gaetz continues the narrative:

They’ll disarm you, empty the prisons, lock you in your home and invite MS-13 to live next door. And the police aren’t coming when you call in Democrat run cities, they’re already being defunded, disbanded [...] nightmares are becoming real. Cops killed, children shot. (Rev Transcripts, 2020, August 25)

The threat here is a vague, amorphous mob coming for religion, schools, and American values, killing police and children (or at least enabling their murder), threatening to destroy the American way of life, and even Western Civilization. While not explicitly racial, invoking the threat of MS-13 adds the criminal immigrant to the mob empowered by Democrats and the left (see Lasch, 2016), while the emptying of prisons conjures American understandings of racialized criminality and incarceration similar to those drawn on by the Willie Horton ad (Mendelberg, 1997, 2017). Furthermore, as Bhat and Klein (2020) note, Western Civilization and Western Culture conjure understandings of white, Christian society, and a threat to Western Civilization is often used by white nationalist groups to

signify an alleged threat to white communities by non-whites through immigration and globalization.

A speech by the McCloskeys, a St. Louis couple who threatened BLM protesters with guns furthers this narrative, more explicitly ties the democrats to the mob, and further escalates the threat. The McCloskeys spoke of “defending our home as a mob of protesters descended on our neighborhood” (Rev Transcripts, 2020, August 25). Playing on racial tropes of urban decay associated with minority communities, they continued:

[t]hey’re not satisfied with spreading the chaos and violence into our communities.

They want to abolish the suburbs altogether by ending single family home zoning.

This forestry zoning would bring crime, lawlessness and low quality apartments into now thriving suburban neighborhoods, [...] your family will not be safe in the radical

Democrats America.” (Rev Transcripts, 2020, August 25)

The threat posed to the racial status-quo was further heightened by highlighting the possible political ascension of black activists: “These radicals are not content with marching in the streets. They want to walk the halls of Congress. They want to take over. They want power.” BLM activists were juxtaposed with the Trump Administration as defenders of the racial order, to which the progressive policies of the Democrats were portrayed as a fundamental threat. Using the McClowskey’s to symbolize white America, this narrative portrays “whites [as] civilized victims, while non-whites are violent animals” (Lasch, 2017, p. 182).

In this narrative, the Democrats became a vessel for the BLM-leftist mob to gain power and destroy America, where Biden was, as stated by Rudy Giuliani, “a Trojan horse with Bernie, AOC, Pelosi, Black Lives Matter, and his party’s entire left wing, just waiting to execute their pro-criminal, anti-police, socialist policies” (Rev Transcripts, 2020, August

28). Trump's closing address ties this narrative up nicely, explicitly linking it to the 2020 election to motivate his voting base:

Your vote will decide whether we protect law abiding Americans, or whether we give free reign to violent anarchists, and agitators, and criminals who threaten our citizens.

And this election will decide whether we will defend the American way of life or whether we will allow a radical movement to dismantle and destroy it. (Rev Transcripts, 2020, August 28)

He continues,

If the radical left takes power, they will apply their disastrous policies to every city, town, and suburb in America. Just imagine if the so-called peaceful demonstrators in the streets were in charge of every lever of power in the US Government. (Rev Transcripts, 2020, August 28)

The threat posed by the Administration's leftist mob is massive, and their proposed solution/defence, following decades of Republican policy, is law and order, secured by law enforcement and unconditional support for the police. This narrative continues the discourse surrounding Lafayette Square and Portland that law enforcement are unfairly malign and in fact have been the primary victims of the events surrounding the current BLM protest cycle. This narrative permeates the discourse of the RNC, including speeches of two leaders of Law enforcement organizations: Pat Lynch, President of the Police Benevolent Association, and Mike McHale President of the National Association of Police Organizations. The bad apples narrative of police brutality continues to be central, such as McHale's statement that "the overwhelming majority of American Police officers are the best of the best" (Rev Transcripts, 2020, August 27), and Lynch's that there "is nobody who hates bad cops more

than good cops,” while not acknowledging any systemic problems (Rev Transcripts, 2020, August 28). Violence against police officers is also given prominence in the discourse, as in the speech of Anne Dorn, whose ex-police husband was killed by looters unrelated to the protests, or Pence’s highlighting of Dave Underwood a law enforcement officer who was “shot and killed during the riots in Oakland,” although he does not mention it was by white supremacists (Rev Transcripts, 2020, August 27).

Police officers are also victimized by Democrats through their criticism, which tarnishes their reputation, and their enactment of policies that hinder their ability to do their job. In this narrative, anything less than complete support makes the police unable to protect Americans. Lynch, for instance, states that “[t]hey’ve passed laws that made it impossible for police officers to do their job effectively,” and continues that “[t]o them we’re all just bad because we’re all just blue” (Rev Transcripts, 2020, August 28). McHale argues:

[O]fficers need to know their elected leaders and the department brass have their backs. Unfortunately, chaos results when failed officials in cities like Portland, Minneapolis, Chicago and New York make the conscious decision not to support law enforcement. Shootings, murders, looting and rioting occur unabated. (Rev Transcripts, 2020, August 28)

Alongside the escalation of threat posed by the BLM folk devil, the thin blue line narrative is solidified, whereby law enforcement are the only thing protecting American citizens from violence and anarchy, and a binary between support for law enforcement under Trump, and hostility to it, under Biden, is created. Lara Trump illustrates the narrative: “Joe Biden will not do what it takes to maintain order, to keep our children safe in our neighborhoods and in their schools, to restore our American way of life.” She continues, “Trump

is the law and order president, from our borders to our backyards. President Trump will keep America safe, president Trump will keep America prosperous, President Trump will keep America America” (Rev Transcripts, 2020, August 27). Here, physical safety is tied to the American way of life and local and national demographics. As in the McCloskeys’ rhetoric, BLM are outsiders invading ‘American’ (read: white, suburban) neighborhoods to spreading crime and disorder. The securing of America’s ‘border to our backyards’ signifies the protection of white supremacy in America through law enforcement. The constructed binary of law and order versus violence and anarchy is bluntly stated by Rudy Giuliani, claiming Democrats will:

release prisoners as many, and as soon as possible, and to go to war with the police, the only group with the capability to protect your citizens. It is clear that a vote for Biden and the Democrats creates the risk that you will bring this lawlessness to your city, to your town, to your suburb. (Rev Transcripts, 2020, August 28)

The overall narrative is clear: protesters are violent criminals who want to dismantle the American way of life. The only way to stop this is through unconditional support of police and the enactment of strict law enforcement policies. The Democrats are supportive of, comprised of, and/or beholden to these criminals, and so the only way to stop them and save America is through voting for Trump. The narrative is imbued with extolation of American individualism and meritocracy, blaming positive and negative outcomes on individual characteristics, and downplaying systemic causes for injustice. This manifestation of colourblind racism stresses the progressive nature of American society, viewing it relative to its more overtly racist past, not based on concrete societal dynamics and outcomes. Alongside this denial and minimization of racism, coded language which heightens white American’s fears of racialized crime and demographic change is employed to motivate support for Trump.

Discussion

The three discursive events examined above develop a narrative portraying the Trump Administration as the representative of hardworking, law-abiding Americans, which is in conflict with a leftist-BLM folk devil spreading lawlessness and threatening the entire American social order. The Administration constructed the folk devil, comprised of protesters, rioters, criminals, anarchists, Antifa, leftists, liberals, Democrats, and anyone else politically opposed to them, and used BLM protesters to personify this amorphous ‘mob.’ Just as Hall et al. (1978) explain in the UK context, society was portrayed as divided into “two camps: authority and its enemies” with the Administration and law enforcement as the former and the leftist mob, symbolized by the folk devil, as the latter. The threat posed by the folk devil was portrayed to be so total, as to menace the American way of life and even Western Civilization. While racial dynamics were downplayed and ignored—unless being instrumentalized as a racial fig leaf (Saul, 2017)—dog-whistles permeated the discourse, giving racialized understandings of who posed the threat, and who was threatened.

The Administration’s heightening of state conflict with BLM created dramatic events that were used to symbolize the threat posed to the current American social hierarchy. These not only provided discursive opportunities and symbols through which to spread their narrative (e.g. “Portland is their roadmap for America” [U.S Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, August 8]), but the violent mobilization against BLM can be seen as a dog-whistle in itself. Similar to the “profiling as a public spectacle” of Middle Easterners post-9/11 (Haney Lopez, 2015, p. 329), the Administration’s actions speak to the racial anxieties of Americans, and their targeting of BLM, specifically, signals to the public that they will violently resist attempts to challenge the American racial hierarchy. While the Administration claims to support peaceful

protest, their targeting of a peaceful protest at Lafayette and grouping together all protest as ‘violent’ in Portland communicates that it is not the actions of specific protesters, but the nature of the movement that is threatening and deserving of repression. It becomes unclear if there is any way of challenging the racial hierarchy that is sufficiently anodyne as not to trigger violent repression. Escalating conflict in this way also heightens conceptions of traditional (white) American identity in opposition to a threatening ‘Other’ (Haney Lopez, 2015, pp. 332-334).

The underlying message of the Administration’s actions becomes even clearer when examining their response to BLM-counter-movements and those associated with conservatism and white supremacy. After the killing of protesters associated with BLM by a white counter-protester Kyle Rittenhouse, leaked Department of Homeland Security documents revealed that DHS officials had been instructed to be sympathetic to Rittenhouse in public statements, suggest that he was acting in self-defence, and state that he was innocent until proven guilty (Ainsley, 2020). Furthermore, Trump repeatedly blamed BLM and left-wing groups for violence inflicted against them, and has legitimized right-wing groups associated with white supremacist views such as the Proud Boys. In the first presidential debate, asked to condemn white supremacy outright, Trump instead called on the Proud Boys to “stand back and stand by,” stating “somebody’s got to do something about Antifa and the left, because this [violence] is not a right wing problem” (Rev Transcripts, 2020, September 29). Downplaying the threat of right-wing extremism and white supremacy, which intelligence agencies assess pose a greater threat than BLM and left-wing movements (Gross, 2020; Kelly & Samuels, 2020), and portraying movements for racial justice as extremist and un-American signals support for white racial dominance by portraying the fears of white supremacists as legitimate and change to the racial

order as threatening. Increasing violence between law enforcement and BLM creates images and media items that transmit to the public who the enemy is in the eyes of the Administration.

Table 1: Development of Discursive Themes

	Lafayette Square	Portland Protests	RNC
Downplaying of Race & Racial Dynamics	- separation of protest from issues of race	- no acknowledgement of racial dynamics or grievances - Democrats, Democratic policy, & progressivism are responsible for unrest/violence	- racialized individuals used to discredit BLM & defend Administration
Folk Devilization	- conflation of protesters & rioters - escalation of threat posed (blame Antifa, Anarchists, organized groups vaguely)	- no acknowledgement of legitimate protest, or of cause, demands, or grievances of movement - greater escalation of threat of protesters - more overt blaming of Democrats for unrest	- conclusion of signification spiral: folk devil as ‘the mob,’ comprising all political opposition
Thin Blue Line	- bad apples narrative: some police bad, but most police good, and no systemic racism	- police are heroes, & are primary victims related to BLM movement	- thin blue line narrative: choice between Trump Administration & law-&-order in the form of traditional policing, or lawlessness and violence

While paying scant lip service to the legitimacy of anger surrounding George Floyd’s death, and the legitimacy of peaceful protest, the Administration relied on violent conflict with BLM to construct a binary contrasting authority and law-and-order to lawlessness and violence. As the election neared, Trump relied more heavily on this binary, and pushing this narrative became his primary campaign tactic (McCoy, 2020, p. 470), as made patent in the RNC discourse. This overarching narrative relied on the construction and development of discursive themes that downplayed race and racial dynamics, constructed a folk devil and

escalated the threat it posed, and portrayed police as the solution to this threat. Table 1 demonstrates the development of these themes.

The first theme, downplaying of race and racial dynamics, is necessitated by the norm of equality that produces colourblind racism, and intimately linked to the operation of dog-whistle politics. Central to colourblind racism is the view that since formal structural barriers to racism no longer exist, all communities have equal opportunity to succeed (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Carr, 1997). Therefore different outcomes—such as one group’s higher likelihood of being subject to police surveillance and violence—are explained through individual characteristics and behaviours, and this works in the reverse as well, with events like Floyd’s murder blamed on a few bad cops, not systematic racism. Floyd’s murder was so visibly horrifying that in the rhetoric surrounding Lafayette Square, in the earliest stages of this cycle of BLM mobilization, the Administration had to recognize it as unjust and recognize the legitimacy of protesters’ anger to some extent; however, they minimized and ignored the racial dynamics of the murder and racist policing more generally, against which BLM mobilized. The recognition of race in discussing Floyd’s death, or of a larger phenomenon of police brutality against people of colour, would challenge the colourblind assertion that contemporary America is fundamentally just, and that victims of police violence have brought it on themselves. In claiming “I am your President of law and order, and an ally of all peaceful protesters” while simultaneously repressing a peaceful protest, Trump pays lip service to public anger, while siding with law enforcement and signaling challenges to racial order will not be tolerated.

During the federal crackdown in Portland, racial dynamics and protester grievances were completely absent from the discourse. This is likely due to time elapsing since Floyd’s

murder and so public outrage by those not immediately effected or politically sympathetic subsiding somewhat. The complete absence of racial justice serves to make the unrest in Portland a wholly criminal issue, which delegitimizes activists, obfuscates the government's responsibility for underlaying issues, and justifies state repression (Hall et al., 1978).

Removing acknowledgement of race from the discourse also allows for the inclusion of dog-whistles, which can be less effective the more perceptibly they are tied to race (Haney Lopez, 2015; Mendleberg, 1997, 2017). This may be harder for the Administration, since BLM's *raison d'être* is bringing attention to racial injustice, making it imperative to delegitimize the movement's authority in this realm, such as by claiming it had been hijacked by apolitical extremists. The conflation of protest with criminality allowed the Administration to rely on latent American understandings of crime and criminality that are linked to African Americans (Peffley & Hurwitz, 1998). They could therefore draw on the racial image of the urban rioter, which Linnemann and Medley explain to be a "longstanding and familiar form of the racial underclass, ungoverned and recalcitrant subjects who "kill each other," [and] "burn their own neighborhoods" (2017, p. 76).

The deployment of race at the RNC differs from the first two events in that racial dynamics in contemporary America are centred, however, people of colour are used in this instance to discredit the claims of systemic racism made by BLM and their supporters. As HoSang and Lowndes explain, while the GOP's policies and priorities "only strengthen long-standing racial hierarchies," in the GOP "conservatives of color" are "primarily authorized to address matters of race from a conservative perspective and to critique those demanding more robust state intervention into discrimination" (2017, p. 77). These figures, however, also allow the intensification of dog-whistles. In this instance, the black speakers act as a fig leaf, providing

cover for racist behaviours outside of the RNC—in its crudest form through simple assurances that the president is not racist—and allowing speakers at the RNC to use dog-whistles that would be too apparent without their cover.

While Saul argues that American politics has “moved from dogwhistles to figleaves,” the RNC demonstrates them working in concert (2017, p. 113). The defence of the Trump Administration as non-racist and America as fundamentally just by people of colour allows white speakers to cue racial threat through stark dog-whistling like claiming the Democrats/leftist mob will “bring crime, lawlessness and low quality apartments into now thriving suburban neighborhoods” and “empty the prisons [and] invite MS-13 to live next door” (Rev Transcripts, 2020, August 25). This is similar to the utilization of the race of David Dorn and Patrick Underwood as a fig leaf whereby Trump and Administration officials could show to care about black lives while mobilizing against a movement for racial justice. While Saul (2017) conceptualizes figleaves as covering overtly racist statements, in instances where race is already brought to the fore—here, by BLM and racial police brutality—although racism is *not* overt, figleaves serve the same function: providing “cover for what would otherwise have too much potential to be labelled as racist (2017, p. 103).

The second theme, the folk devilization of BLM, is vital to how both racial threat is heightened, tied to a wide range of actors and phenomena, and placed into the ‘authority and its enemies’ paradigm. Public sympathy during the initial stages of the protest necessitated recognition of the legitimacy of protest, however, the ties of conservative ideology and GOP base to white supremacy meant that the movement’s racial justice claims could not be treated as legitimate. Moreover, the movement could not simultaneously be treated as legitimate and demonized to heighten racial threat. Therefore, at this stage in the discourse, peaceful protesters

were recognized to be legitimate, however the BLM movement as it was occurring was framed as being taken over by radicals, and the conflation of peaceful and violent protest was used to demonize and discredit the movement. The conflation of protesters and rioters and their alleged link to Antifa or other organized groups is the classic form of folk devil (Hall et al., 1978). The group is at once amorphous and tangible, consisting of radicals (broadly) and shadowy organizations, but also of the looter on the evening news, or the activist on the receiving end of agents' truncheons at Lafayette Square.

As Hall et al. (1978) find in the UK, a signification spiral occurs whereby other groups and social phenomena are drawn into or linked to this folk devil category and political deviance and criminality are treated as part and parcel of the same problem. In the rhetoric surrounding Portland, protesters are linked to politics insofar as they are “leftwing, violent extremis[ts]” or “leftwing domestic terroris[ts]” however their ideas and goals other than violence and destruction are omitted (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, August 8; August 11). Furthermore, claims that “Portland is the radical left’s agenda in action [and] roadmap for America” and that the problem is “metastasizing” (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, August 8; U.S. Senate, 2020, July 28), escalate the threat that the folk devil poses and link institutional political rivals to the folk devil in that their policies have not prevented and/or will worsen the unrest. In this signification spiral, the left and their irresponsible and malicious policies and goals represent the underlying problem responsible for the unrest. Again, the threat is vague and extensive, but the folk devil who poses it is visible battling DHS personnel in the smoke filled streets of Portland.

The RNC represents the conclusion of this signification spiral, and therefore the final form of the folk devil. We also see the utilization of the folk devil construct in the electoral context, as the Administration’s Democratic political rivals are framed as supportive of,

beholden to, or part of the folk devil, and support for Trump is contrasted to support for the folk devil and social issues it represents. As in Hall et al., all social deviance and political opposition become “different parts of the same slippery slope” (1978, p. 310). The ‘mob,’ an amorphous grouping of leftists, liberals, anarchists, Democrats, protesters, criminals, and everyone not politically aligned with the Administration, found its physical manifestation in the BLM protester and urban rioter which Administration conflated since the beginning of the unrest. This deliberately conflates criminality with politics, and ‘the mob’ framing links the imagery of urban unrest and crime with all progressive politics. Furthermore, this complete conflation escalates the threat of the folk devil by claiming that the Democrats both empower them in the streets and will facilitate their ascension to power. As the McCloskeys assert: “These radicals are not content with marching in the streets. They want to walk the halls of Congress” (Rev Transcripts, 2020, August 25).

Throughout the protest cycle, through utilizing language which cues racial understandings of crime and criminality in America, but especially at the RNC (as discussed above), dog-whistles racialize the image of the folk devil. Fears of black criminality and demographic change are heightened through rhetoric that claims this mob will open prisons and borders, and by amplifying a threat to suburban communities. Trump is framed as the protector of American values, the “American way of life,” and even “Western civilization” (Rev Transcripts, 2020, August 25). The threat posed by the folk devil is total, including violence and crime, transformation of the social fabric and values of America, and a change in the groups who wield power. There is an implicit racial dimension to these threats, which serves to cue racial threat for political ends. The BLM folk devil represents a racial (black) and ideological (left) threat, which can only be combated through support for Trump.

The third theme, the thin blue line, relies on the blending of political and criminal deviance demonstrated above. The construction of the folk devil allows law-and-order to be framed as the solution to a wide range of social problems, and the Administration to portray themselves as the embodiment of law and order. In the context of BLM, where mobilization was against the current system of policing, systemic injustice in law enforcement had to be denied. At the beginning of the protest cycle, the ‘bad apples’ narrative pushed at the beginning of the discourse reflects the public outrage immediately after Floyd’s death, where the Administration was forced to acknowledge a connection between police misconduct BLM mobilization. The explanation that ‘errant members’ are responsible for racist policing, and that the ‘overwhelming majority’ of police are good allowed the Administration to maintain their identification with law enforcement while admitting that something terrible was done by police. The focus on police officers as the primary victims of violence and defamation Surrounding Lafayette Square and Portland demonize and delegitimize BLM and ignores the systematic criticisms made by the movement. Furthermore, the Administration’s escalation of law enforcement-protester conflict at both events helped to create the violent image of the protester that their narrative depended on.

The separation of BLM with issues of racial justice and their complete conflation with crime as surrounding Portland and at the RNC exacerbated this, as, rather than a political problem requiring systemic reform, it could be treated as a criminal matter requiring surveillance and coercion. As in the “War on Cops” narrative explained by Linnemann and Medley (2017, p. 74), the actions and rhetoric of protesters are portrayed as motivated solely by malice: even though the “overwhelming majority [of police officers] protect our communities from gangs and drugs” (Rev Transcripts, 2020, May 31), the bad actions of a few are being used as an excuse to attack the system which protects Americans. Defund the Police was portrayed in this way, as an

attempt to “roll[...] back the protective layer that protect Americans in their homes and places of business” rather than as a reform agenda (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2020, June 8).

BLM’s goal then is portrayed as “gutting every single police department in America” purely out of hatred for police and disdain for law and order (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary August 8).

The thin blue line narrative is completed and tied to vote choice as the central theme of the RNC. The threat to law enforcement as they traditionally operate, posed by the folk devil, is framed as a direct threat to Americans. The police are “the only group with the capacity to protect [...] citizens,” and BLM and Democrats threaten society both directly, as criminals, and indirectly through their hampering of police (Rev Transcripts, 2020, August 28). As discussed above, dog-whistles which cue racialized understandings of criminality that, in turn, cue feelings of racial threat in whites permeate the discourse. Furthermore, As Blumer (1958) demonstrated, support for police can be a proxy for support for the prevailing social and racial hierarchy, and Drakulich et al. showed that in the BLM context, support for police was only a predictor of voting for Trump insofar as it stood in for racial resentment and “Black political threat” (2020, p. 392). The thin blue line as it is employed in this context connotes racial threat in multiple ways. It signifies law enforcement not only as protection from racialized criminality and violence, but as resistance to the reform of institutions and structures that perpetuate white supremacy. BLM, as a movement for racial justice which specifically challenges traditional methods of policing, is a perfect folk devil in the context of American dog-whistle politics. However, public sympathy spurred by the visibly egregious behaviour of police in Floyd’s killing required dilution through fear mongering, the denial of systemic racism, and the demonization of BLM.

The discourse surrounding the conflict between BLM and the Administration at Lafayette Square and in Portland became central to the Administration’s campaign pitch: support for the

Trump Administration is support for law and order and American values, while support for Democrats is support for lawlessness and cultural change. As in Hall et al. (1978), the construction of the folk devil tied together and simplified disparate and complex social phenomena into a simple binary: “authority and its enemies” (1978, p. 251). This was tied to the ballot box through the well-worn strategy of focus on law-and-order as America’s central issue, and associating political rivals with the folk devil. As the literature on dog-whistle politics demonstrates, focus on law-and-order issues heightens the salience of racial animosity for political gain. In the contemporary United States, in spaces where the norm of racial equality exists, appealing to racial threat requires dog-whistles. In the runup to the 2020 election, the Administration’s conflict with BLM both created discursive events around which dog-whistle rhetoric could be employed, and acted as a dog-whistle as it symbolized resistance to racial justice and a defence of the existing racial hierarchy. A narrative that minimized racial dynamics and demonized activists was required to maintain the norm of racial equality and justify repression. The work of Hall et al. (1978) shows how this demonization occurs and links together all political opposition under the demonized category: the construction of the folk devil. Together, the dog-whistle politics literature and work of Hall et al. not only help to explain the Trump Administration’s orientation and behaviour towards BLM in this specific instance, but help to illuminate the form and function of strategic racism in the United States.

Conclusion

Trump’s more direct style of race-baiting in his 2016 campaign and throughout his presidency has led scholars to re-examine the role of dog-whistles in American electoral politics (Filimon, 2016; Saul, 2017; Valentino et al., 2018). My findings concur with Saul’s assertion that despite the shifting of political norms represented and affected by Trump, “it seems quite

likely [...] that the Norm of Racial Equality is still in force” (2017, p. 100). This is made clear by the extensive work the Administration put into crafting a narrative regarding BLM which downplayed and ignored the racial dynamics of the movement, and portrayed an image whereby the harsh criticism and state violence directed towards the movement was justified as combating crime and dangerous ideology. As Mendelberg (1997; 2017) and Haney Lopez (2015) argue, making the racial aspect of dog-whistles explicit can defuse their effectiveness. The fact that racial justice was central to BLM associated the movement with race in a way that made it well suited to represent a racial threat and be used in dog-whistle politics; however, race’s centrality also meant the Administration required concerted effort to separate the movement from race, so that mobilization against it would have less potential to be labelled as motivated by racism.

At the same time, the nature of the movement and dog-whistles that linked it to black criminality allowed the Administration to demonize it and develop it as a folk devil which represented a wide range of threats to white supremacy, including demographic change and the increased political power of non-white groups. This became central to the Administration’s election pitch, that American’s had a choice between Trump, or the folk devil ‘mob’ that represented these threats. As more explicit appeals to race were made at the RNC, prominent black Americans were used to give plausible deniability to racism, both by directly challenging assertions that Trump and his Administration were racist, and indirectly through their prominent presence and advocacy for Trump and his policies. Furthermore, their antipathy to ‘the mob,’ with BLM as its embodiment, discredits the movement by demonstrating that it does not speak for all black Americans. HoSang and Lowndes (2019) argue the prominent placement of black

figures is central to the GOP's ability to adhere to norms of racial equality and meritocracy, while advocating policies that disproportionately negatively affect racialized communities.⁸

As demonstrated by the dog-whistle politics literature, obliquely linking law-and-order issues to race in a way which heightens perceptions of racial threat in whites has been a central tactic of the GOP since Goldwater. Linnemann and Medley explain that the thin blue line narrative, which "holds that it is the police and the police alone who stand between the law-abiding public and wholesale violence and anarchy," is crucial to this tactic (2017, p. 65). BLM's grievances revolve around excessive police violence and systemic racism in American policing, and the movement advocates dramatic police reform, putting it in greater symbolic and direct conflict with law enforcement. This allowed the threat posed by BLM to be heightened, as it not only represented a threat through criminality in the streets, but also as a threat to the system keeping American's safe. The signification spiral through which BLM's direct, physical threat was heightened, and the movement was used to personify all political and ideological opposition, created the folk devil which law enforcement and the Administration were juxtaposed to.

Law and order versus crime and chaos became the Administration's election narrative, and as the dog-whistle politics scholarship has demonstrated, law-and-order campaigns rely on race-based understandings of criminality. The framing of 'the mob' as opposed to law-and-order cued anxieties about both a criminal and cultural threat to white America. The linking of BLM to the Democrats presented the mechanism through which the wall protecting Americans from violence would be pulled down. This was complicated, however, by the fact that police violence was in the centre of American consciousness due to the brutality of the George Floyd video. To identify themselves with law enforcement and forward the thin blue line narrative, a deliberate

⁸ This is not to take away the agency of these figures, or suggest that their participation in the GOP is solely to offset accusations of racism. This is just one function of their race in this instance.

framing of the police had to be undertaken by the Administration, where systemic racism was denied while instances of extreme police violence towards black individuals were explained through the bad apples paradigm. It also required the playing up of positive attributes of law enforcement and portraying them as unfairly victimized by BLM. The whitewashing of police and demonization of anyone proposing alternative versions of law enforcement allowed the law-and-order campaign playbook to be run at a time when the horrible effects of racist policing were made highly visible, meaning the righteousness of law enforcement was under greater scrutiny.

The three prominent discursive themes pushed by the Trump Administration—the downplaying of race and racial dynamics, the folk devilization of BLM, and the thin blue line—together created the election narrative: a choice between the Trump Administration, representing law and order and American values, or the Biden Administration, representing lawlessness and cultural and demographic change. Underneath this surface level narrative are implications regarding who has access to power in America, and how the social hierarchy is constructed and enforced. In a society that is nominally racially equal, racial hierarchy continues to operate through the assertion that the lack of formal racial barriers and policies means that negative social outcomes along racial lines are the responsibility of the individual or community. Instances of racism are due to racist individuals, and institutions which influence social and economic outcomes are blameless. Therefore, there is no need to reform institutions despite social disparities, or grapple with the legacies of racial oppression. Furthermore, accusations of race-based privilege can be denied through invoking the formal state of equality. This is the operation of colourblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Carr, 1997; Winant, 2000). The separation of BLM from racial justice while at the same time associating the movement with negative understandings of African Americans, framing this folk devil as a direct challenge to law and

order and American values, and linking this to the choice between Trump and Biden gave the election much more far-reaching implications: a choice between continued white supremacy, or cultural, demographic, and political change at the expense of whites.

Although Trump did not win re-election in 2020, it would be mistaken to assume this means his tactics of dog-whistling and coercive state intervention were not successful to a large extent. The 2020 election was by no means a total rebuke of Trump, with Democrats losing seats in the House and gaining a razor-thin control of the Senate, with the results determined by two runoff elections in Georgia. Given the confluence of crises facing the administration, especially the devastation of human life and the economy wrought by Administration's mishandling of the coronavirus response, these results are surprising. While we are far too close to the election to have reached definitive conclusions, preliminary analysis suggests that Trump may have won if COVID-19 cases had been five to 10 per cent lower (Brodeur, Baccini, & Weymouth, 2020; see also Clarke, Stewart, & Ho, 2021). This suggests that Trump's dog-whistles and coercive actions were largely successful. Indeed, discussing Republicans more broadly, Moscrop argues that adherence to rigid partisan identity explains the relative success of the GOP, and that "[r]acism, misogyny, xenophobia, anti-socialist and anti-communist attitudes" were largely responsible for mobilizing voters through this identity (2020, n.p.). Valentino et al. (2018) find evidence that in our current political environment, racial appeals no longer need to be implicit to successfully engage white prejudice and affect political opinion and mobilization, as overt racial demonization has become more acceptable. The relative success of Trump and the GOP despite the multiple crises of legitimacy his Administration faced, his continued influence and 'king-maker' status in the party, and the extreme loyalty his party and supporters have shown him and his baseless conspiracy theories, even when his rhetoric has led to shocking violence like the

January 6th insurrection, demonstrate that his brand of politics, what Filimon (2016) terms the ‘dog scream,’ is here to stay.

The continued prevalence and intensification of dog-whistles has dramatic implications for the American political environment. Despite the findings of Valentino et al. (2018), Drakulich et al. (2020) and Wetts & Willer (2019) have shown, dog-whistles are still an effective way to mobilize white voters who fear losing their privileged place in society and blame other races for this. As this resentment is directed at specific groups like BLM, which are used to symbolize racial threat through their construction as folk devils, violence towards these groups by the state, vigilante groups (as in Kenosha), and resentful individuals will likely worsen. This violence may in turn heighten racial conflict and produce further violence. Furthermore, as Koski and Bantley (2020) argue, Trump’s use of dog-whistles are partially responsible for increases of hate crimes against people of colour that have occurred under his presidency. “Some offenders have lashed onto this rhetoric to justify their attacks,” with many directly stating that they were motivated by the President’s rhetoric (Koski & Bantley, 2020, p. 56).

While Trump’s more explicitly racist dog-whistles makes it easier to identify racism which was always present, it also creates an environment of permissiveness to racism, which leads directly to violence towards minority groups. The continuation of this style of politics will likely mean the continuation of heightened violence, prejudice, and discrimination directed towards people of colour. Again, as groups like BLM mobilize to challenge oppression, and are in turn demonized for political gain, intergroup violence will likely result. As Haney Lopez states: “Dog whistle politics turns people's lives into nightmares. People just like us. People whose heights of joy and depths of pain are no less real than our own, even as their humanity is rendered invisible by slurs about their behavior and culture. In our inability to recognize their

humanity, we as a nation have lost part of our own” (2015, p. 125). To combat dog-whistles, he argues, “the research is clear that putting race front and center [...] helps reduce the power of coded racial appeals” (2015, p. 220). Unfortunately, four years of a Trump presidency may have challenged that analysis, as the President’s racism was continually identified yet has had little negative political consequences for him. The Biden presidency does not seem to have changed GOP strategy or rhetoric, and it remains to be seen whether the more civil political discourse from the White House will affect the social unacceptability of more overt dog-whistling, or whether the norms of political discourse have shifted for good. Regardless, naming, shaming, and mobilizing against racism must continue regardless of the overt despicability of whoever holds the presidency if deeply seated structural racism is to be challenged.

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