**The Atlantic**

**White People vs. White Privilege**

In certain corners of the country, white Americans are not only embracing the concept, but deciding that it might be key to resolving racial inequalities.

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On Tuesday, a judge in Pennsylvania ordered Bill Cosby to proceed to criminal trial on three counts of [felony indecent assault](http://www.cnn.com/2016/05/24/us/bill-cosby-hearing/). Cosby’s fall from grace has been precipitous, but the charges against him have been [rumored for decades](http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/05/cosby-andrea-constand-coming-forward-sooner-trial/484190/). The person most widely credited for the starting this latest—and most damning—round of speculation is the comedian [Hannibal Burress](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/who-is-hannibal-buress-and-why-did-he-call-bill-cosby-a-rapist/), who is black. As part of a standup routine in 2014, Burress called Cosby [a rapist](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzB8dTVALQI), and set into motion a maelstrom that ultimately resulted in [58 women](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/lifestyle/bill-cosby-women-accusers/) coming forward to claim they were raped, drugged, or sexually harassed by Cosby. (Cosby has [denied the charges](http://money.cnn.com/2014/11/15/media/bill-cosby-rape-allegations/).)

There were many notable aspects of the ensuing drama, but one in particular was the way in which the Cosby drama initially cleaved the black entertainment world. Several prominent African Americans—including [Whoopi Goldberg](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/01/04/whoopi-goldberg-wants-to-hear-bill-cosby-s-side-of-the-story.html), [Jill Scott](http://time.com/3947761/bill-cosby-jill-scott/), [Faizon Love](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2015/07/07/faizon-love-and-jill-scott-were-some-of-the-celebrities-who-offered-vocal-defenses-of-bill-cosby-what-do-they-think-now/), and [Phylicia Rashad](http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/phylicia-rashad-finally-speaks-bill-cosby-allegations/story?id=28055944)—made a point of publicly supporting Cosby, but many more did not. Cosby was a [touchstone for the debate](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/07/07/how-bill-cosbys-2004-pound-cake-speech-exploded-into-his-latest-legal-disaster/) in the black community over respectability politics, made most famous in his 2004 “[Poundcake](http://www.rci.rutgers.edu/~schochet/101/Cosby_Speech.htm)” speech, and the allegations of sexual assault further complicated an already pitched debate. And then there was the fact that the person who’d put this all in motion was a black man himself.

“Cosby was a black person’s problem,” the comedian W. Kamau Bell said. “We all had to answer that question: What do we do with his legacy? We haven’t all agreed on that, but you don’t see Bill Cosby anymore, just like you don’t see Ben Carson anymore. Where is he? He’s at home. If black people had rallied around Cosby and Carson, they wouldn’t have gone home.”

I suggested to Bell that the dismissal of both men from public life was something that was broadly determined by people of all races.

He countered: “Plenty of white people may have thought, That’s enough of [Cosby], but if black people had gone, ‘Oh, no, no, no. You may not accept one of our people, but we do not accept you telling our people to go home,’”the outcome would have been different.

This was an impossible thesis to prove, but Bell—who currently hosts a show on CNN [exploring race in America](http://www.cnn.com/shows/united-shades-of-america)—then made an interesting observation:

“With white people,” he said, “it’s the reverse. When Trump does crazy stuff, all my liberal white friends are like, ‘I don’t even say his name!’ like he’s the [Candyman](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0103919/) or Beetlejuice or something. I’m like, ‘No! You need to say his name and you need to come up with a plan!’ I have white family, and some of them are not Obama supporters. Who is more likely to get someone not to vote for Trump: me or my white family?”

But is Trump really white America’s problem, less than he is necessarily Mexican America’s problem, or Muslim America’s problem? Bell concluded that Trump was, in the end, probably everyone’s problem—but that those best equipped to deal with him were white Americans themselves.

This begged a larger question: Does white America bear the onus of addressing policies that marginalize minorities?

To be sure, white Americans have historically advocated for abolition, participated in Freedom Rides, and led civil-rights marches. But now, in the 21st century, the battle has morphed into something different, with policies less explicitly racial than slavery or Jim Crow (though, as many would argue, [no less pernicious](http://mappingpoliceviolence.org/)). Younger whites who identify as progressive seem to have adopted a vocabulary around racial inequality (see: [use of the term white privilege](http://www.wndu.com/home/headlines/White-Privilege-Seminar-sparks-some-controversy-on-ND-campus-285679731.html)) but are yet to determine the tactics by which to combat it.

Against this backdrop, a few weeks ago, Jack Teter and Kyle Huelsman, two white, self-described Democratic activists in their mid-20s, created a stir when they announced the formation of their political action committee, the [Can You Not](http://canyounot.org/) PAC.

Started “by white men, for white men,” the group’s goal is to discourage white men from running for office—literally, “Bro, can you not?”—with the idea that the many white men flooding the political process have edged out equally worthy (and potentially worthier) female, minority and LGBTQ candidates.

“We’re not saying women, LGBTQ, and people of color can’t get elected without white men sitting a race out,” clarified Teter. “When women run, women win. What were talking about is an inundation of under-qualified white guys.”

The group’s website explained that, in addition to raising funds specifically in support of minority candidates, “we are happy to host interventions for the misguided bros in your life who looked in the mirror this morning and thought, ‘Yeah, it’s gotta be me.’”

Setting aside the reality that some of those bros are not necessarily self-satisfied Alex P. Keaton-types admiring themselves in the hallway mirror, but committed progressives running for earnest reasons, Teter and Huelsman proposed that the White Dude Inundation might actually be causing harm to the political process.

Citing studies including those conducted by the [Victory Fund](https://www.victoryfund.org/sites/victoryfund/files/media-files/More_Than_Represent_0.pdf) and the Center for American Women and Politics at the [Eagleton Institute of Politics](http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/resources/stlegpastpresentfuture.pdf), Teter pointed out that bills addressing “racial justice, women’s issues, LGBTQ issues” are more likely to get passed when their sponsors are people of color, women, or LGBTQ persons themselves.

“There’s the empathy effect,” he explained, noting that these kinds of policymakers have the ability to rally fellow representatives to their cause, in a way that your average white guy—no matter how well-intentioned—does not.

“This is a project about allyship,” said Huelsman.

“Men need to call out other men,” said Teter. “White people need to have conversations about white privilege.”

So far, Can You Not PAC has not threatened to curb white male dominance in elected office any time soon: The group has raised only [three thousand dollars](https://secure.actblue.com/contribute/page/canyou). But in their way, Huelsman and Teter are making Bell’s point: It is incumbent upon whites to address issues that affect people of color, whether actively (through, say, conversation or protest) or passively (by taking themselves out of the game and allowing those best positioned to do the work to perform it).

I asked the civil-rights activist DeRay Mckesson, who recently mounted a bid to be mayor of Baltimore, what he thought about the notion of this style of passive-activism: whites taking themselves out of the election game in order to reset the scales. “Getting white people not to run?” he said, “I don’t understand it as a strategy.”

Instead, Mckesson suggested that the bigger concern was whether progressives seeking racial, economic, and social justice could “be as organized on the inside as [they] are on the outside. This work is not only about bringing issues [to light], but about institutionalizing change—and then protecting that change once it’s been institutionalized.”

If Mckesson was a critic when it came to self-sacrifice in service of broader racial equity, there was still the point that Bell had made about his white family and Donald Trump: Are whites actually the best interlocutors to address policies that target minorities?

[Showing Up For Racial Justice](http://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/), or SURJ, is a seven-year-old organization founded on the very idea that whites can and should have an equal stake in issues affecting black and brown Americans.

“We started in 2009, when there were all kinds of racist attacks on President Obama and people of color in his administration,” said SURJ’s organizing resource coordinator, Andrew Willis Garcés. “A bunch of black leaders came to the white leaders of SURJ and said, ‘We don’t want to be the only ones out there doing this, defending.’”

After 18-year-old Mike Brown was [shot and killed](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/08/13/us/ferguson-missouri-town-under-siege-after-police-shooting.html) by Ferguson police, Garcés said the growth of the organization “really exploded. Hundreds and hundreds of people signed up—and then we were in the thousands after Charleston.”

While growth leveled off after the [massacre](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-36375672) at the city’s Emmanuel AME Church in 2015, Garcés says that SURJ has seen an increase in interest since the start of this year, “when Trump rallies became more of a thing.” SURJ chapters in Chicago reported that “way more white people were interested in getting involved”—literally, Garcés said, “thousands of people coming out of the woodwork” to protest the rise of a politician who has staked a large part of his candidacy on the unvarnished criticism of [Muslims](http://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/muslim-members-congress-speak-hate-era-donald-trump-n579631), [Latinos](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/9-outrageous-things-donald-trump-has-said-about-latinos_us_55e483a1e4b0c818f618904b), and [women](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/18-real-things-donald-trump-has-said-about-women_us_55d356a8e4b07addcb442023).

I asked SURJ regional resource organizer Zoe Williams whether this kind of protest has been more effective because its foot soldiers are white citizens talking to other ([mostly) white citizens](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/05/an-election-in-negative/483905/)—rather than, say, Black Lives Matter activists talking to white citizens, a version of the conceit Bell had offered.

Williams responded: “This is about saying, ‘I know your values, I know where you’ve come from, and this guy is no good’…. The more [we] say that kind of thing, the more people out there relate.”

Whiteness, in this case, is critical to the work. Said Williams: “We depend on our communities for so much of our survival; we depend on our neighbors to keep us safe. And so the idea of becoming alienated is a really scary thing. It’s about encouraging folks to speak up.”

If SURJ is encouraging white people to take on their own community, and Can You Not is encouraging white people to bench themselves in service of a different community, there are other, perhaps less-conspicuous efforts underway in which whiteness is being employed to get to a broader conversation about marginalization.

In the [promotional trailer](http://neginfarsad.com/vids/)for her book The Muslims are Coming!,activist and author Negin Farsad, a Muslim American, features several Muslim entertainers exploring cultural tensions around Islam. Interspersed among them are Lewis Black, David Cross, Jon Stewart, and Janeane Garofalo—each offering their own assessments on the same topic.

Farsad (who, incidentally, has a forthcoming book entitled How to Make White People Laugh) made a conspicuous effort to include white, decidedly non-Muslim comics in her video piece, because, as she said, “That was a critical piece of getting people to say, ‘Hey look at these white, Jewish Americans tell us it’s okay—that these are people are Muslim and it’s completely not a big deal.”

It was of course, also good business—a lot of people find Jon Stewart very funny and probably want to know more about her book because of him. But here was a discreet example of white people telling other white people it was necessary to address the problems that many white people had with Muslims.

Bell posited that this was maybe what it was all about: white Americans recognizing their power in entertainment, in politics, in the community, and using that very same power for good.

“This is not [necessarily] about denying white privilege,” he told me. “There’s power in white privilege and in white supremacy and if you don’t use it for good … you’re using it for bad. It’s like Clark Kent walking around, and not pretending to be Superman all the time.”

In this case, Bell thought, there was a time to be Clark Kent, but there was most assuredly a time to be Superman—as in, right now. “Put on the cape and the tights!” he urged an unseen (and presumably privileged) white audience. “You have power. And you’re not using it.”

In the end, of course, Superman and Clark Kent were two halves of a whole, one fighting on the front lines, the other a mild mannered bench-sitter. And so too with this set of disparate voices using different methodologies, but all saying something similar: Whiteness and its assumed advantages are things to acknowledge—to embrace, even—and then to be dealt with in service of a broader goal. And quickly. The urgency of the moment had made it too costly to act otherwise