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USA

Racial Injustice Inferno

- IV Online magazine - 2025 - IVP611 - December 2025 -

Publication date: Saturday 27 December 2025

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HISTORIAN VAN GOSSE writes: *The many forms of despotism crowding in around us... represent a fundamental counter-revolution whose only counterpart would be the decades-long 'Redemption' that overturned Reconstruction's biracial democracy in the former Confederacy and locked in White Supremacy for three-quarters of a century. ("Red Scares — and a Blue Scare? A Brief History of Repression in the United States")*

That specter of enormous rollbacks in the long struggle for racial justice will be our focus here, even though it's hard to see past the headlines of the Trump regime's nonstop atrocities and swirling chaos.

The context includes the administration's daily signs of possibly cracking — over economic failures and rocketing health costs, popular outrage and community resistance to ICE atrocities, cancellation of all asylum applications, serial-murder bombings of boats in the Caribbean, the pardon of drug kingpin former Honduran president Juan Orlando Hernandez, and whatever's hiding in those Epstein files.

Its twofold core mission, however, remains intact: massively expanding the wealth of the already rich, and dismantling at warp speed decades of accomplishments of Civil Rights and racial justice struggles. The first of these was not only the primary focus of Trump's big barf-bag bill. It also energizes global moves to enrich his family and corporate cronies — that scheme for Mar-a-Gaza luxury resorts without Palestinians, the treacherous betrayal of Ukraine to line up business deals with Putin's Russia, his looming regime-change war plan to grab Venezuela's oil (and distract attention from all-Epstein-all-the-time news).

But it's the counterrevolution against civil rights and racial equality that's likely to have the longest-lasting consequences even after this post-constitutional gangster administration is gone. It's far from clear that even a post-Trump Democratic presidency would seriously commit to undoing the damage.

Reversible Progress

That Black Liberation and racial equality have constantly been central to the hard struggles for democracy and social progress in the United States is of course no new discovery. Leaders from Frederick Douglass to W.E.B. Du Bois to A. Philip Randolph to Rosa Parks to Martin Luther King, Jr. and every historian of the civil rights movement have all emphasized the point. Indeed, the reason why the movement is so intensively studied in every generation is that U.S. history simply cannot be understood without it.

By the same token, restoration of white supremacy is the pivot on which democratic rights can be turned back. Today, the speed with which so much of the civil rights revolution is being reversed is both astonishing and instructive. From the halls of academia to the military to the federal work force and the iconic Smithsonian museums, the quest for equality is vilified — while "Make America Great Again" is a barely disguised appeal to assumptions of inherent "white" intellectual and cultural superiority.

Ground had been prepared by decades of "backlash" as white southern Democratic ("Dixiecrat") voters moved to the Republican Party after the 1964 election and passage of civil rights legislation. Waves of litigation were launched, twisting the civil rights quest for equality into a mythology of "anti-white discrimination."

Thus, for example, the 1970s Bakke case in California sharply restricted affirmative action in higher education admissions, although not fatally all at once. At the University of Michigan, the African American proportion of the

undergraduate student body was cut in half after affirmative action was banned by a 2006 voter referendum, from around eight percent to 4.5% today. The Associated Press (October 23, 2025) reports on the national trend:

After decades of gradual growth, the number of Black students enrolling at many elite colleges has dropped in the two years since the Supreme Court banned affirmative action in admissions, leaving some campuses with Black populations as small as 2% of their freshman class.

Wrecking Ball

Even more menacingly, the Supreme Court under Chief Justice John Roberts has step by step weakened the critically important 1965 Voting Rights Act (VRA) until it is practically a dead letter. During the Obama administration, the Court removed the federal government's oversight of election procedures in states that historically disenfranchised Black voters. It now enables state legislatures to engage in hyper-partisan political gerrymandering of voting districts, so long as they're not explicitly labelled as racially motivated even when everyone knows they are.

Quite likely, the remaining protections under Section 2 of the VRA, allowing citizens to sue over racially biased redistricting, are targeted to be swept away in the Court's current term.

In any case, the irregular mid-decade redistricting ordered by Trump in Republican-controlled states beginning in Texas, Missouri and Indiana is geared to weaken Black representation in Congress. And the retaliation by Democratic-controlled California can only deepen the justified cynicism with which so much of the population already views the country's dysfunctional institutions.

When Trump and his merry band of gangsters returned to power, then, they inherited a quietly crumbling edifice of civil rights protections to which they're taking the wrecking ball. Vilifying "woke," DEI (diversity/equity/inclusion) and Critical Race Theory (CRT), their intent is to turn the racial and social justice clock back six or seven decades.

CRT is especially relevant as an academic framework holding that racism is not simply an individual prejudice but is systemically embedded in U.S. legal systems, policies and institutions. That's central to the study of how American society's racial structures can enable civil rights and social progress, thought to be permanent, can be reversed.

Does this mean literally restoring legal Jim Crow? That would be neither possible nor necessary. After all, the demise of post-Civil War Reconstruction after 1876 did not mean literally reviving slavery in the South. White supremacy was entrenched instead through systematic economic and social restrictions — from sharecropping to enforced segregation, a thousand crippling restrictions on Black people's accumulation of wealth in the North and South alike, lynch mob terrorism, etc.

In this issue of *Against the Current*, Paul Ortiz discusses how so many critical issues today cannot be confronted separately from each other. That's a key to understanding where Trump/MAGA and the wretched duopoly of the capitalist Republican and Democratic parties are dragging us.

The brutal inequalities in U.S. capitalism, under which one in eight people and a higher proportion of children rely on food assistance (SNAP), which they were about to lose in the government shutdown, are being deliberately widened

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by Trump's tax policies as well as the obscene self-enrichment of corporate elites and Trump's corrupt cronies.

Deepening inequality directly impacts the lives of African American and Latinx communities of course, in myriad ways from urban food deserts and desperately unaffordable housing to a looming wave of rural hospital closings — devastating to non-affluent white people as well.

Mass incarceration is both a deliberate tool of social control, and a perverse kind of economic stimulus where prisons are constructed, providing local employment where few other job opportunities exist. It's catastrophic for the incarcerated, their families and communities, and actually a big financial loss for society as a whole, but the "prison-industrial complex" is baked into the structure of race and class injustice.

Broader Connections

Understanding and confronting these structures is also highly relevant to other struggles even if they may not appear directly related. A powerful example is the reign of terror against immigrant communities.

But since the targets of ICE and Border Patrol are not mainly African American, what do the ongoing and pending rampages in Latinx, South Asian, Haitian, Somali, Afghan and other communities have to do with the civil rights counterrevolution?

Quite a lot. Under Trump and the right wing, for example, oversight of police conduct such as consent decrees against racial profiling and brutality have been eliminated. Police violence is thereby producing the climate for the Gestapo-like body-snatching, car-smashing ICE tactics.

Trump's calling the Somali community "garbage," or that Haitian immigrants "are eating the dogs," are pure anti-Black bigotry. Even more cynical is the campaign against Afghan refugees, attempting to reverse the wide popular support they have, especially among U.S. military veterans of that miserable war, for the services the Afghan provided and for the safety they were promised in return.

An infamous Supreme Court ruling allowing ICE to grab people on the street or at home for looking brown, written by Trump-appointed Justice Brett Kavanaugh, flows from the effective abolition of prohibitions against racial profiling. It will of course feed straight back into the conduct of police forces against communities of color everywhere in the USA.

As for the mass incarceration epidemic and the spreading plague of for-profit private prisons, it quite logically extends to the rapid construction of huge immigration detention centers with cynically comic names like Alligator Alcatraz, Speedway Slammer (Indiana), Cornhusker Clink (Nebraska) and Deportation Depot (Florida).

Bringing the horrors of Guantanamo home to the U.S. mainland, such facilities might be left intact for future use as concentration camps for political detainees or designated unwanted "surplus" populations.

Such examples are readily multiplied. Trump's full-frontal assault on university admissions, governance and DEI programs — to which some like Columbia, Indiana University and Northwestern have disgracefully capitulated — are inextricably intertwined with criminalizing campus Palestine solidarity, reducing international student access, and threatening to remove students for the crime of exercising free speech rights.

The overall lesson is that injecting toxic racism into political life is a pivotal strategy of this administration, a set of policies that will poison our society for generations unless they're directly confronted and defeated. How?

Looking Forward to Fight

Much of what was won for civil rights, democracy and liberation will have to be fought for again, in new conditions and undoubtedly with new tactics. More court battles are being won than lost, although the courts will not save what rights and democracy we have in the face of a lawless regime.

The biggest shortcoming of the resistance so far is that the major forces of the U.S. working class, the unions, are only weakly involved — with some important exceptions.

Particularly in response to the gutting of union rights for federal workers, school voucher schemes and voter suppression tactics, public service unions including the American Federation of Teachers, National Nurses United, AFSCME and the Service Employees International Union as well as the American Federation of Government Employees have launched various campaigns and court challenges. Industrial unions, broadly speaking, haven't yet mobilized — in part because sections of their members are pro-Trump, they're divided over his tariffs, and projects like massive data centers offer construction jobs even though they're short-term and come with ruinous environmental impacts.

The good news is that active resistance is rising, along with popular revulsion, most visibly in well-videoed community and street mobilizations against ICE. It's also seen in Trump's collapsing approval ratings, although the absence of any strong independent political force means that anger and energy are channeled into the Democratic Party — where they'll ultimately face disappointment and dissipation.

The excitement over the New York City mayoral election of Zohran Mamdani points to both the potential of popular power, and the dangers. Mamdani's performance at the good-vibes meeting with Trump doesn't negate the threat of ICE in New York, which will require a continuing mobilization to overcome — along with all the other obstacles to Mamdani's progressive housing, transit and food affordability agenda.

It's not only about New York. Take for example Trump's threats to the large Minnesota Somali community: "we don't want them here" and "reverse migration is the only answer." Not coincidentally, that same "reverse migration" term is raised by the far-right racist AfD party in Germany, openly supported by Elon Musk and J.D. Vance.

It's the responsibility of state and local officials to put a threatened community under emergency protection, and only that community's self-organization and a powerful allied movement can bring the political pressure to force them to do so — along with mounting the independent defense actions that are urgently necessary.

Whether the Trump presidency is truly in crisis is too early to say. If its daily crimes against humanity are to bring about its downfall, it has to be organized and disciplined movement activism to push it over the cliff.

Source: [January-February 2026, ATC 240](#).

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