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How to Preserve White Supremacy

Jim Crow's five-point plan for the 21st century.

By [Jim Wallis](#) ^[1] [November 2016](#) ^[2]

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EARLIER THIS YEAR I heard Rev. William Barber of the Moral Mondays movement in North Carolina use the phrase “Mr. James Crow, Esq.”

Since hearing the phrase, I have been reflecting on the revised and updated name for Jim Crow, the comprehensive and brutal system of racial segregation, discrimination, and terrorist violence against black lives and bodies—explicit in the U.S. South, and often implicit in the North, throughout the 20th century.

I have been thinking about this new and more-sophisticated Mr. James Crow, wearing a white shirt and a tie instead of a white sheet and a hood and inhabiting the back rooms in state legislatures and corporate offices instead of rural backwoods lynching sites.

I’ve also been thinking about Mr. Crow’s strategy for the 2016 election and the years ahead.

Mr. James Crow’s biggest concern now is the transformational demographic shifts occurring in the United States, which by 2040 or so will see a significant milestone: For the first time, the U.S. will no longer be a white-majority nation and, instead, will be made up of a majority of minorities. That’s one of the most important facts in American political life today. This fundamental demographic shift in racial and cultural identity is underneath almost everything in U.S. politics—including the presidential election.

So with a suit instead of a sheet, how does Mr. James Crow, Esq., enact his strategy? And what are the servants of Mr. Crow saying to one another?

Mr. James Crow, Esquire, enacts his strategy wearing a suit and tie instead of a sheet and a hood.

THIS NEW VERSION of Jim Crow has a clear, systematic strategy to protect white supremacy and promote racial segregation, discrimination, and even violence. He knows that even he, with all his power, can't prevent the racial demographics of America from evolving. But he thinks he can obstruct and delay the changes that new racial demographics will bring to American life and politics. In apartheid South Africa, we saw that even when a racial group is in the minority, it can wield the power to oppress other races and protect its own supremacy.

Mr. James Crow's five-part strategy includes:

1. Racial gerrymandering.

Gerrymandering—the redrawing of congressional districts to benefit a party in power—is not new in U.S. politics, and it has been done by both sides. But to draw district boundaries along racial lines deliberately to diminish the voting power of racial minorities has been a Republican approach for a long time, part of the party's "Southern Strategy" that emerged in the second half of the 20th century out of recognition that the GOP doesn't get many minority votes.

Republicans have gained more than 900 state legislative seats since Obama became president and now control 30 state legislatures, compared to 11 with a Democratic majority. In the 2012 midterm elections—the first held after the 2010 census—Democrats received nearly 1.4 million more votes nationwide for the House of Representatives, yet Republicans retained control of the House by a 33-seat margin. That trend was even more pronounced in swing states in the 2014 midterms: In Pennsylvania, for instance, Democratic candidates received 44 percent of the vote, but won only five of the commonwealth's 18 House seats.

What's most troubling about these recent examples of partisan gerrymandering, however, is the way they have diminished (some would say intentionally) the voices of voters of color. North Carolina provides some of the more egregious examples. Republicans there make up just 30 percent of registered voters, and yet the party holds 10 of the state's 13 House seats. Earlier this year, a federal district court ruled that two North Carolina districts had been unconstitutionally gerrymandered using a blatant "racial quota" to pack African-American voters together so their political power would be diluted, according to *The New York Times*.

Such race-based redistricting has helped create a much more intensely partisan House and helped white politicians retain the levers of congressional power despite shifting national demographics.

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2. Fighting immigration reform.

In 2015, polls showed majority support for comprehensive immigration reform to fix what was broadly seen as a broken immigration system and to invite 11 million undocumented immigrants onto an earned "path to citizenship." Support for immigration reform was found among Democrats, independents, and Republicans, and even among white evangelicals and Catholics.

Republican leaders in the House at that time promised a delegation of religious leaders—three Catholic bishops and three evangelicals—that they would bring comprehensive immigration reform up for a floor vote, since it had already passed the Senate with bipartisan support. They broke that promise to us when Speaker of the House John Boehner caved in to a small number of Republican members who decided to block the legislation. All indications were that an up-or-down vote on immigration reform would have passed the House at that time, but a floor vote was never allowed. Instead, Boehner let a small group of lawmakers from nearly all-white districts veto the will of the American people.

Since then Republican candidates at all levels, from local races to the presidential campaign, have sought to reverse the consensus in support of comprehensive immigration reform. Some have called for the deportation of 11 million undocumented immigrants, which would break up millions of families, many of whom have lived in the U.S. for decades. Others have proposed to move the goal posts by offering expanded guest-worker programs and the “legalization” of some undocumented immigrants, but with no path to citizenship.

This would, of course, take away the possibility that millions of new citizens—and, eventually, their children—could someday vote: Another way to forestall the enfranchisement of new voters of color.

READ: How to Suppress the Vote ^[5]

3. Mass incarceration.

The mass incarceration of black and brown people, in radically disproportionate numbers, has led to massive voter disenfranchisement for those same people when they return from prison, as Michelle Alexander has documented in her groundbreaking book *The New Jim Crow*. As Bryan Stevenson, author of the 2014 book *Just Mercy*, puts it, slavery never ended, it has just evolved.

“There are more African-American adults under correctional control today—in prison or jail, on probation or parole—than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began,” Alexander noted in a Feb. 2011 *Sojourners* article. Despite the fact that white people and people of color use illegal drugs at very similar rates, people of color are arrested, charged, and imprisoned for nonviolent drug offenses at shockingly disproportionate rates. Alexander noted, “Although the majority of illegal drug users and dealers are white, three-fourths of all people imprisoned for drug offenses have been black and Latino.”

When these nonviolent offenders are released from prison with felonies on their records, they find themselves deprived of many of the rights that most American citizens take for granted. As I wrote in *America’s Original Sin*, “The tragic irony here is that many of the rights they forfeit are precisely those that people of color fought for during the civil rights movement,” including, crucially, the right to vote.

4. Voter restrictions.

Since 2010, 21 states—including some key battlegrounds in the presidential election—have instituted new voting restrictions. In our April issue, Myrna Perez of the Brennan Center for

Justice called this “the biggest rollback of the right to vote since the Jim Crow era.” The 2013 Supreme Court ruling (in *Shelby v. Holder*) made voter suppression even easier for states by gutting a key provision of the Voting Rights Act.

These restrictions, usually done under the guise of preventing alleged voter fraud, are in fact aimed at making it more difficult for poor people and minorities to vote. (Numerous investigations and studies have shown that voter fraud is largely a myth—the real “fraud” is that many eligible voters have been prevented from practicing their right to vote.) Methods to suppress voting rights include everything from cutbacks on early voting and restrictions on registration to requiring specific forms of photo ID.

This summer a federal appeals court struck down a North Carolina voter ID law, provisions of which, the court ruled, “target African Americans with almost surgical precision.” The court added, “With race data in hand, the legislature amended the bill to exclude many of the alternative photo IDs used by African Americans” and “retained only the kinds of IDs that white North Carolinians were more likely to possess.”

Deliberately suppressing voting rights is the most effective technique for those seeking to obstruct the changes brought about by the new demographics in this country. That is a fundamental moral issue, not just a political one.

5. A resurgence of white nationalism.

The fifth strategy is to “mainstream” white nationalism and support a “strongman” approach to politics. Such an approach emphasizes large-scale deportation, mass incarceration, “voting reforms,” and other policies ostensibly aimed at promoting “law and order” but which actually are efforts to delay or roll back the demographic changes occurring in America. At the very least, this approach implicitly and explicitly promises that white people will retain the levers of power no matter how the demographics of the country shift.

It should be said that Republican candidates and office holders going back to Richard Nixon’s Southern Strategy have appealed to white racial resentment to win votes, often by using coded language. But this year we are seeing an unprecedented amount of open appeals to bigotry, xenophobia, and racism. Such rhetoric is further eroding civility in our public discourse, as are those who embrace being “politically incorrect”—which really just means saying things that are hurtful or bigoted toward entire groups of people, which tends to embolden others to openly express their racially tinged animus.

We must protect the right to vote of 'Matthew 25 people.'

There are serious and legitimate reasons for many white, blue-collar people to feel anger and despair at their stagnant economic fortunes. But using the understandable anger of economically marginalized people whose lives and families are falling apart to hatefully blame “others” who are not the ones responsible for their problems—in order to build political power—is one of the most dangerous patterns in U.S. and world politics.

HOW CAN WE DEFEAT Mr. James Crow, Esq., and his insidious agenda? It is a monumental task, but there are some clear signs of hope. Christian leaders from many denominations came

together this spring to issue a theological statement, “Called to Resist Bigotry,” which urges Christians to reject and resist bigoted rhetoric and tactics used in service of political campaigns. As we said in the statement, “by confronting a message so contrary to our Christian values, our religious voices can help provide a powerful way to put our true faith and our better American values forward in the midst of national moral confusion and crisis.”

Mr. James Crow’s first four tactics have even more clear solutions.

1. Racial gerrymandering—by either party—must be rejected. People of faith and conscience should advocate consistently and clearly for redistricting reform in their respective states, especially ahead of the 2020 census, which will trigger the next round of congressional redistricting.

2. The champions of comprehensive immigration reform need to keep the pressure on their elected representatives for a path to citizenship and reject calls to “legalize” undocumented immigrants with no hope of future citizenship, particularly in the immediate wake of the November elections.

3. The racially disproportionate incarceration of our citizens needs to stop. We must remove mandatory minimum sentences for nonviolent drug offenses and deal with illegal drugs more through education and treatment than via policing and incarceration. And every state should restore the voting rights of returning prisoners who have “paid their debt to society,” as has been done in Virginia by Gov. Terry McAuliffe.

4. Perhaps most important, we must protect the right to vote of “Matthew 25 people.” In the 25th chapter of Matthew, Jesus calls us to protect the “least of these”—the hungry, thirsty, and naked, strangers and those sick and in prison. Because the new voter restrictions are aimed at these very people, I call this effort “the Matthew 25 voter-suppression campaign.”

As activists work at the state and federal level to challenge unjust voter suppression laws, volunteers will be needed all across the country to ensure that vulnerable voters know their rights, have a way to get to the polls, and have the opportunity to express their constitutional right to vote. A number of organizations have created an election-protection hotline, 866-OUR-VOTE, which anyone can call to learn about their rights and report problems they encounter at the polls.

On Election Day, I would love to see clergy in their collars, along with others from their congregations, in polling places all over the country, acting to protect the rights of our most vulnerable voters. Sojourners is working with other nonpartisan groups, in partnership with lawyers and others, in training people of faith to take these very appropriate—and necessary—steps to protect these Matthew 25 voters.

Together, we can vanquish Mr. James Crow, Esq., and truly welcome the new nation we are becoming. It won’t happen overnight, and it will take people of all races working together on multiple fronts, but I believe it will be done.

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