



**INEQUALITY** **SOCIETY** **BILLIONAIRES**

# It's Official: America Is an Oligarchy

*The Congressional Budget Office confirms that the rich exponentially increased their share of America's wealth over the past 30 years.*

By John Nichols

**TODAY 10:06 AM**



A mobile billboard calling for higher taxes on the ultra-wealthy depicts an image of billionaire businessman Jeff Bezos, near the US Capitol on May 17, 2021, in Washington, D.C. (Photo by Drew Angerer / Getty Images)

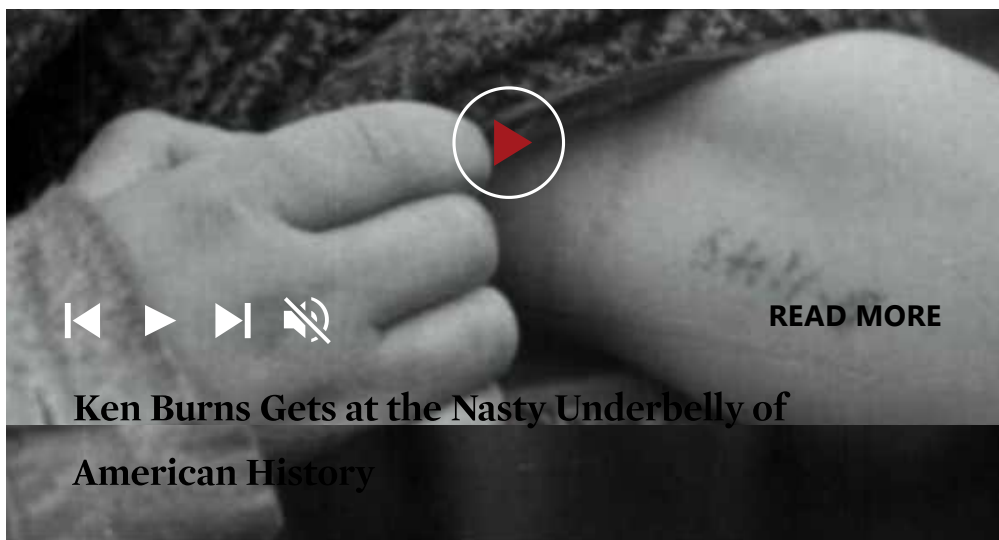
**T**here's plenty of talk in the American media about the expansion of oligarchy in Russia and other authoritarian states. But there's no need to look offshore. Oligarchy is an American phenomenon, and it's expanding at an exponential rate, while income inequality is surging. That's according to the most official of official sources when it comes to economic issues: the Congressional Budget.

In a new study of trends in the distribution of family wealth from 1989 to 2019, the CBO finds:

*Wealth became less equally distributed over the 30-year period. The share of total wealth held by families in the top 10 percent of the distribution increased from 63 percent in 1989 to 72 percent in 2019, and the share of total wealth held by families in the top 1 percent of the distribution increased from 27 percent to 34 percent over the same period.... By contrast, the share of total wealth held by families in the bottom half of the distribution declined over that period, from 4 percent to 2 percent.*

Pause and consider that last fact. Working-class Americans held a greater share of the nation's wealth at the end of Ronald Reagan's "trickle-down economics" presidency in the late 1980s than they do today. Now, pause and consider this fact: Wealth inequality is substantially more severe for people of color. "In 2019, White families' median wealth was 6.5 times that of Black families, 5.5 times that of Hispanic families, and 2.7 times that of Asian and other families," according to the CBO.





Finally, pause and consider one more fact: The CBO report studies the period right before the coronavirus pandemic hit. But we know that the pandemic has delivered a bonanza for the billionaire class. In May of this year, Chuck Collins, a senior scholar at the Institute for Policy Studies who directs the IPS Program on Inequality and the Common Good, reported: “As the U.S. crosses the grim milestone of 1 million deaths from Covid-19, U.S. billionaires have seen their combined wealth rise over \$1.7 trillion, a gain of over 58 percent during the pandemic.”

Collins, who keeps tabs on spiking billionaire wealth, has reminded us, “The \$5 trillion in wealth now held by 745 billionaires is two-thirds more than the \$3 trillion in wealth held by the bottom 50 percent of U.S. households estimated by the Federal Reserve Board.”

These are good times for American oligarchs, as the CBO report confirms. While studies may vary with regards to the precise details of inequality in the United States, the bottom line is undebatable. “Both family wealth and family income are skewed toward the top of the income distribution,” explain the economic researchers. “The families in the

highest quintile of the income distribution receive disproportionate shares of total family income and hold disproportionate shares of total family wealth.”

For Senator Bernie Sanders, the Vermont independent who made inequality a central focus of his presidential bids, the CBO report strengthens the argument for an Ultra-Millionaire Tax that would impose a 2 percent annual tax for wealth over \$50 million, along with a 3 percent tax for wealth over \$1 billion. That could narrow the gap between rich and poor, says the senator, who during the pandemic proposed a Make Billionaires Pay Act to claw back some of the wealth piled up by the wealthiest Americans when everyone else was engaged in “shared sacrifice.”

“This report confirms what we already know: The very rich are getting much, much richer while the middle class is falling further and further behind, and being forced to take on outrageous levels of debt,” argues Sanders.

*The obscene level of income and wealth inequality in America is a profoundly moral issue that we cannot continue to ignore or sweep under the rug. A society cannot sustain itself when so few have so much while so many have so little. In the richest country on Earth, the time is long overdue for us to create a government and an economy that works for all of us, not just the 1 percent.*

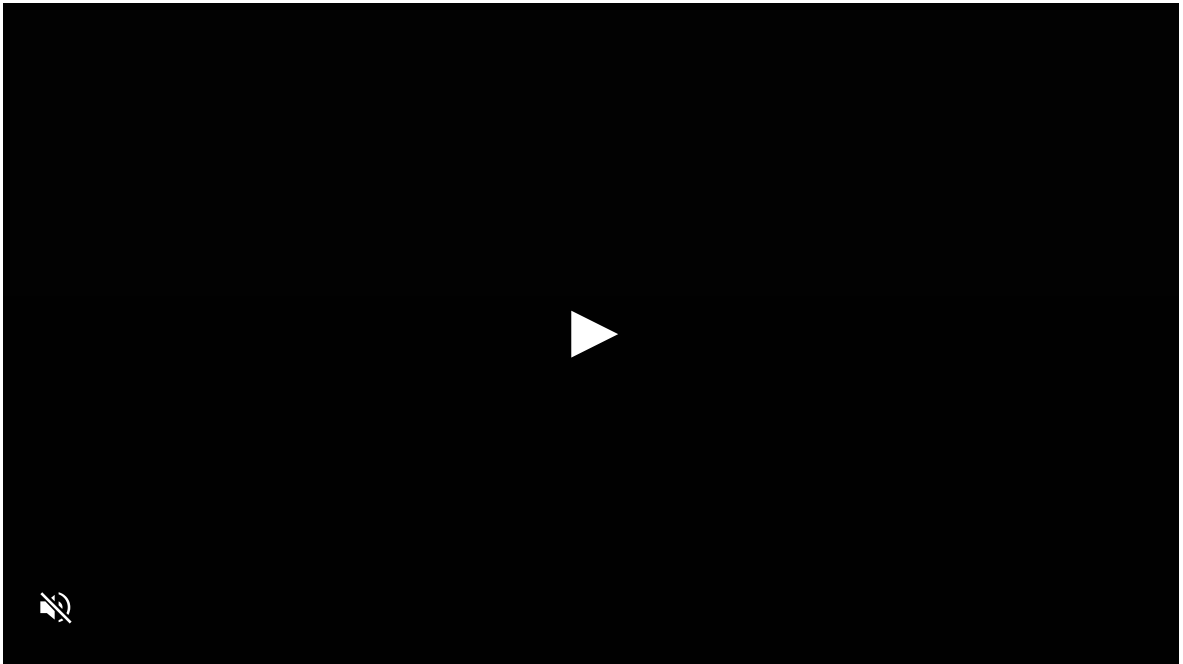
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**John Nichols** John Nichols is a national affairs correspondent for *The Nation* and the author of the new book *Coronavirus Criminals and Pandemic Profiteers: Accountability for Those Who Caused the Crisis* (Verso). He’s also the author of *The Fight for the Soul of the Democratic Party: The Enduring Legacy of Henry Wallace’s Anti-Fascist, Anti-Racist Politics*, from Verso; *Horsemen of the*

*Trumpocalypse: A Field Guide to the Most Dangerous People in America*, from Nation Books; and co-author, with Robert W. McChesney, of *People Get Ready: The Fight Against a Jobless Economy and a Citizenless Democracy*.

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## COMMENTS (2)



# Fox News Compares a Film Examining White Women's Racism to Pearl Harbor

*Really. So I had to watch it.*

By Joan Walsh

YESTERDAY 12:23 PM



The film “Deconstructing Karen” features a dinner party hosted by Saira Rao, left, and Regina Jackson, where the pair confront white women about their complicity in white supremacy. *(Courtesy of Patty Ivins Specht)*

**A** provocative if uneven documentary about an intriguing project to help white women acknowledge their own racism sent Fox News huckster Jesse Watters into hysterics Monday night, calling it an attack comparable to Pearl Harbor. The film, *Deconstructing Karen*, was made by

American women, but distributed by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Apparently, our peaceful allies to the north are coming for us.

“America’s under attack tonight. A cross-border war has been waged by our northern neighbors,” Watters began.

Thanks, Jesse! I had no plans Tuesday night, and I had to see this. I reached out to project organizer and activist Saira Rao, who connected me with director Patty Ivins Specht, who sent me a screener. I settled in and prepared to feel attacked.

And you know, sometimes I did. That’s the point. Even the most (self-designated) enlightened white ally can have blind spots, and *Deconstructing Karen* walks us through most of them.

But first, it sits us down to a delightful meal, with red and white wine, at an elegantly appointed table in a gorgeous home near Denver. The film features one dinner hosted by Race2Dinner, a group led by Rao and her political partner Regina Jackson. Rao, who is of Indian descent, and Jackson who is Black, have created a project that tries to bring white women together, along with the pair of color, to have “radically honest conversations,” in Jackson’s words, about white women’s racism, whether conscious, unconscious or fervently denied (we see all three over this dinner, whose participants agreed to be filmed for broadcast).

“The market we have identified is white women who identify as liberal or progressive or Democrat, to not only change themselves, but their children, their families, their coworkers, their friends,” says Jackson.

“The only way you can change the DNA is through personal interactions,” Rao says. “And the best way to do that is breaking bread.”

Watters calls it “the dinner party from hell,” and sometimes it feels that way, but it’s worth it. On an elementary level, Rao and Jackson quickly identify, with the help of their more clueless guests, the many forms of white female denial of their racism, which is itself racism. At least two women insist that they’re “color-blind,” they “don’t see color”; one uses the good old-fashioned dodge: “When we’re cut, we all bleed red.” Rao sternly warns the group: “Do *not* teach your kids about ‘red blood’” as a way to profess your non-racism.”

When another expresses shock at the persistence of racism, she is told that “shock” is a racist hedge too. “Part of white feminism is acting surprised,” Rao tells the group. “When you express shock, it pushes you away from the blame.”

Getting upset at what they’re hearing is also a controlling form of “fragility” that keeps the conversation centered on the white woman, they are told. Women who insist they’ve had boyfriends and even husbands of color get the funniest rebuke from Rao: “You cannot, frankly, fuck your way out of racism.”

And, for anyone who didn’t know, “white women’s tears” over racism are deadly. In the worst case, they can get a person of color in all kinds of trouble, but even in anti-racist work, tears can be used to shift the conversation to the feelings of the poor, crying white woman, and away from the conflict at hand. In fact, any guest at the table who begins to tear up, let alone cry, over what she’s hearing has to go to the living room and compose herself.



What starts as a lovely dinner evolves into a bit of an emotional boot camp. And maybe it has to be, to get past these women's ingrained defenses. But there are a couple of faulty premises: Jackson said these are liberal women who are paying \$250 to dine, converse, and learn about their racism. But at least two—and it's no coincidence that they're the most clueless, defensive, and annoying of all the guests (one insists she faces discrimination because she's a "blonde female")—admit that they voted for Trump. That undermines the premise: The hosts say at one point that "white liberal women fight white Republican women, but you're all the same," and a staffer goes so far as to say, "Liberal white ladies are the most dangerous women out there."

But at this very Race2Dinner table, we have proof that just isn't true, at least among these 10 white women. Several, who listen more than talk—which is the foundation of understanding, at least to start with—say they've worked to deal with their own racism and admit that they have more work to do. One says she's the descendant of slave traders, sounding ashamed. I'd venture these are not "the most dangerous women out there."

In the part of the dinner Watters finds most objectionable, Rao and Jackson ask their guests to raise their hands if they think they're racist. The camera focuses first on the women who are shocked, including the two Trump voters, and no hands are raised for a few tense seconds. But then a few of the women, including those who've previously admitted to working on their own race issues, put their hands in the air. But when Rao joins them, almost every hand goes up.

I found that fascinating, and key to my own small reservations about this project: It promises conversation, but mostly the white women are lectured. When Rao admits her own racism, which she describes as anti-Black, not uncommon in Indian communities, it somehow triggers more of the women to do the same. Maybe they shouldn't need such hand-holding, or maybe Rao's admitting to the complexity of the issue—a brown woman can still be racist—lets the women go deeper into their own hidden biases. In fact, Rao's own story is of moving from being “a white woman in a brown body,” an avid Hillary Clinton supporter and Democrat, to getting in touch with her own identity and her anger at how white feminism suppressed it. She declares independence from the Democratic Party in one scene, but then goes on to run for Congress, primarying longtime white moderate Diana DeGette. And while she loses, the multiracial team she assembled is a win.

I'd have liked more of that depth on some of the white participants, too. While we're constantly told that white women get “defensive” in order to make the issue about them, on one level, the whole project absolutely *is* about them, in the project founders' own words. A bit more exploration of and tolerance for their feelings might go a long way. (If I were involved, I'd even let them cry under some circumstances, but I know I'm white.)

Still, my discomfort is part of the process. When Jackson says she doesn't trust a single white woman, many of her dinner guests object, strongly. I felt a twinge too. But that's grown out of her life experience; am I asking her to change

it to make me feel better? Doesn't she know she can trust me? Some of the guests just can't acknowledge Jackson's reality.

By the end, the guest who complained that she'd faced discrimination as a "blonde female" has an epiphany: "I'm not being killed for being white," she acknowledges. At this session, that's a kind of progress. A year later, she did not respond to a request for a follow-up interview, nor did the two other most resistant dinner guests. But the others all reported that the dinner launched them on a deeper journey to understand their own complicity with white oppression.

Rao and Jackson are trying to turn Race2Dinner into a business, but they've struggled to find financing. Ten women ponying up \$250 each hasn't created a sustainable organization. During Covid, they took their dinners to Zoom. Personally, I would love to see Race2Dinner become a weekly reality show, not one that's edited to provoke catfights and intrigue, but one that lets us get to know these women more deeply. Those who've already realized they are racist—how did that happen? We hear more from the clueless Trumpers than from women who've actually tried to do some internal anti-racist work. And while nobody wants *Real Housewives*-style catfights, genuine debates could be illuminating. There's something to this method, despite my discomfort, or maybe because of it. But anything that triggers Jesse Watters to new heights of stupidity and vindictiveness has my support.

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**Joan Walsh** Joan Walsh, a national affairs correspondent for *The Nation*, is the author of *What's the Matter With White People? Finding Our Way in the Next America*.

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