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IDEAS

A Taxonomy of Right-Wing Dog Whistles

Listen closely and you'll hear these phrases everywhere.

By Molly Jong-Fast



Getty; Wiki; The Atlantic

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About the author: *Molly Jong-Fast is a contributing writer at The Atlantic and the author of its newsletter Wait, What? She is also the host of The New Abnormal and a columnist for Vogue.*

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The first time I witnessed the birth of a right-wing talking point, I was sitting in a crowded ballroom at the Gaylord National Resort and Convention Center, in National Harbor, Maryland. This was the 2019 Conservative Political Action Conference, or CPAC, and I was listening to Sebastian Gorka deliver remarks that fell somewhere on the spectrum from venting to fomenting.

There he was in his three-piece suit, voice booming: “They want to take your pickup truck. They want to rebuild your home. They want to take away your hamburgers.” As I jotted down the line about the hamburgers, a sudden sense of unreality came over me.

Democrats want to take my hamburgers? It seemed too preposterous a threat to alarm even the most willing rube. Knowing the origin of the line was perhaps revealing, but made it no less ridiculous. Republicans had taken left-wing concerns about the environmental effects of factory farming and animal slaughter and contorted those worries, casting the Democrats as not just an anti-hamburger party, but a coalition of hamburger thieves—*hamburglars*, if you will.

That’s the secret of these GOP talking points: They’re sticky enough to be memorable, they’re designed to elicit an emotional response, they typically target an ideologically symbolic bogeyman, and they contain a sliver of truth that can be blown up into something completely unrecognizable.

Franklin Foer: The Republican Party used to fight communism

As the American political machinery grinds into action ahead of the midterms and (*gulp*) the next presidential election, I’ve started tracking the talking points that Republicans are testing, refining, and blasting out to the world in TV spots and campaign emails. Once you start hearing these phrases, you’ll notice them everywhere

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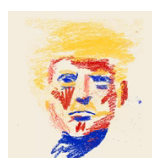
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Vladimir Putin, misunderstood guy

The thought leader of the Republican Party, the Fox News host Tucker Carlson, floated this idea in a fascinating, bizarre soliloquy. “It may be worth asking yourself,” he said: “Why do I hate Putin so much? Has Putin ever called me a racist? Has he threatened to get me fired for disagreeing with him?”

Adding to the chorus of pro-Putin rhetoric, in a radio interview broadcast February 22, former President Donald Trump called Putin’s actions in Ukraine “genius,” and Putin himself “savvy.” He

RECOMMENDED READING



Democrats Are Still
Delusional About Trump

DAVID A. GRAHAM

mused about copying Putin's "peacekeeping" move in Ukraine by sending the military to "our southern border."



Biden's State of the Union
Did Something New

JAMES FALLOWS

I'm old enough to remember when Republicans were against power-hungry autocrats rolling up on other countries.

Crack pipes for racial equity

Have you heard the one about federally funded crack pipes yet? This talking point paints Democrats as hopelessly woke and also as wasting your tax dollars on a group of people whom many Republicans resent: poor addicts. As far as I can tell, it took off in *The Washington Free Beacon* with a February 7 story titled "Biden Admin to Fund Crack Pipe Distribution to Advance 'Racial Equity.'" I know you're going to be shocked (shocked, I say!) to hear this, but this characterization is a blatant misrepresentation of what this program is and what it does. The federal grant initiative, which provides tools to minimize risks associated with drug use, is actually focused on harm reduction, a concept that has been around for decades. You can argue against harm reduction, which is based on the premise that the government should not necessarily expect abstinence from addicts in trying to help keep them safe. As a sober person, I am extremely uncomfortable with this approach. But no one in this administration or in the world is using crack pipes "to advance racial equity." (According to *The Washington Post*, both "the White House and [the Department of Health and Human Services] denied the funds would be spent on the pipes.")

However, despite being both debunked and patently absurd, the talking point worked so well on the senior senator from Tennessee, Marsha Blackburn, that she threatened to hold up a crucial government-funding bill because of the nonexistent crack pipes. The congressional candidate Blake Harbin, running in Georgia's Sixth District, is already fundraising on the line "There won't be a single cent of government money spent on crack pipes." To which a reasonable response might be: *Well, huh. What a refreshing pledge to halt something that, to be clear, is not happening.*

Democrats let Putin attack Ukraine. This never would have happened under Trump.

This one's big this week, for obvious reasons: the idea that if Trump were still president, Putin wouldn't have dared try to seize Ukraine. Of course, there's no way to know what Putin would have done in this alternate reality—and there's only the flimsiest logic to support the notion that because an invasion didn't happen up until

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this moment, it didn't happen earlier *because* Trump was president. In my mind, a more likely scenario is that if Trump were still president, he would have just let Putin take Ukraine. After all, Trump has repeatedly praised Putin for his strength—even doing so as the invasion was about to unfold: “I mean, he’s taking over a country for \$2 worth of sanctions. I’d say that’s pretty smart,” Trump told donors at Mar-a-Lago on February 23.

David A. Graham: Putin’s useful idiots

Masking is child abuse

Early in the pandemic—okay, fine, throughout the pandemic— the public-health messaging about masking was confusing at best and chaotic at worst. But it became clear that masks were a worthwhile tool to prevent the transmission of COVID-19, and that reasoning was good enough for plenty of responsible citizens to wear them. Republicans have decided that this global tragedy is a political opportunity, and they’ve zeroed in on mask requirements for children as a form of abuse.

Because this is a talking point, it needs to be maximally blown up for dramatic effect, hence the abuse part. In April, Carlson told his audience, “As for forcing children to wear masks outside, that should be illegal. Your response when you see children wearing masks while they play should be no different to seeing someone beat a kid in Walmart. Call the police. Contact Child Protective Services. Keep calling until someone arrives.” Masking is still relatively popular, depending on where you live, but my guess is that Republicans are banking on the idea that masking won’t continue to be popular in a few months. One can see this narrative taking shape in this J. D. Vance tweet: “Republicans should pass a law giving every parent in the country the ability to sue school administrators for the developmental issues and emotional distress caused by the mask mandates forced on their children.”

Let parents decide

This one is an outgrowth of the child-masking debate. The idea is to tap into parental rage about school closures, and use it to target the teaching of the role of race in American history. Some pundits claim it’s why Glenn Youngkin won the gubernatorial election in Virginia last year, helping fuel a surge around the country of exaggerations and lies about critical race theory. But according to recent polling, 57 percent of Virginia voters oppose banning the teaching of critical race theory, something that Youngkin has made a central plank of his governorship. Not clear yet is whether this polling will keep Youngkin from going full Ron DeSantis.

Read: Red parent, blue parent

The walls are closing in on Hillary Clinton

John Durham, the special counsel appointed by former Attorney General Bill Barr, may have disavowed the right-wing-media claims that a motion he recently filed showed the Clinton campaign had a mole in Trump Tower and the White House. (The reaction included this Laura Ingraham tweet: “Finally the walls are closing in on the Clinton campaign. Get the popcorn ready.”) But unsurprisingly, most conservative pundits haven’t. In a more recent filing, Durham wrote, “If third parties or members of the media have overstated, understated or otherwise misinterpreted facts contained in the government’s motion, that does not in any way undermine the valid reasons for the government’s inclusion of this information.”

My guess is that the “Hillary Clinton is a mastermind” talking point will be trotted out in the midterms, a full six years after she ran for president. This one’s almost too easy. Hating the Clintons is catnip for conservatives, and it’s a formula that has worked for them for decades.

The *New York Post* has published numerous versions of the same HRC-Russia talking point. One version includes this baffling line: “Hillary Clinton’s 2016 presidential campaign paid an internet company to surveil servers at Trump Tower and the White House in order to link Donald Trump to Russia, a bombshell new legal filing alleges.” Another version of this talking point was the completely unprovable assertion that the “Durham report proves Hillary Clinton—not Trump—was Putin’s puppet.” Especially as tensions between Russia and the West escalate, you can expect to see much more variation on the theme that Clinton—not Trump—had some kind of nefarious relationship with Putin.

In a world filled with information, there’s only so much any of us can absorb, and the Republicans have figured this out. There’s an argument that these talking points are too silly to be believed, but that’s just it: They don’t need to be completely believed to work. They just need to muddy the waters enough that voters put up their hands in dismay and start to wonder if maybe there’s something to this Clinton-and-Russia thing.

Also, Hillary’s running

Republicans remain obsessed with Clinton, and obsessed with the possibility of her running for president. No matter what she says to the contrary, this one’s not going anywhere.

Fauci lied, people died

Last spring, Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene introduced the “Fire Fauci Act,” which aims to fire the National Institutes of Health’s Anthony Fauci for his “evolving

and contradictory advice on COVID-19.” (Let’s just hope she doesn’t sic the gazpacho police on him.) In 2020, a Cornell study analyzed 38 million articles about the pandemic and came to the conclusion that Trump was likely the single largest driver of COVID falsehoods, but sure, let’s censure Fauci, free-speech protections be damned.

Watch out! Socialism!

Socialism, socialism, socialism. You get the idea. It’s bad. It’s coming. Not clear when or how or why, but be afraid.

Democrats want to defund the police

It doesn’t matter how many times Joe Biden says, “No, I don’t support defunding the police,” nor does it matter if the Democrat running for office is a former police chief, like U.S. Senate candidate and current Representative Val Demings of Florida. Republicans think they can win by painting Democrats as soft on crime, as they’ve been doing for years.

Democrats want open borders

The southern border is a particular Republican obsession, but the notion that Democrats want people freely streaming into the United States is ludicrous. (Biden has in fact retained a lot of Trump’s immigration policies.) *The Washington Post’s* Catherine Rampell summed it up best when she wrote, “The disconnect between GOP claims about ‘open borders’ and Biden’s actually-quite-Trumpy border policies, is enormous.”

The real villain? Justin Trudeau.

The far-right celebrity Candace Owens offered perhaps the most galaxy-brained take on Russia’s war against Ukraine when she tweeted, “STOP talking about Russia. Send American troops to Canada to deal with the tyrannical reign of Justin Trudeau Castro.” I didn’t have “war with Canada” on my dystopian-hellscape bingo card, but I suppose 2022 is still just getting started.
