

OPINION

THE WEEKEND INTERVIEW with Shelby Steele and Eli Steele | By Tunku Varadarajan

What Does 'White Guilt' Mean in 2025?

It has been almost 20 years since Shelby Steele published the best-known of his five books on race, "White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era." A lot has happened since. In 2006 "we hadn't had President Obama, Ferguson, Trump, George Floyd, DEI, Black Lives Matter, President Biden," Mr. Steele says. "We also hadn't had Oct. 7."

Mr. Steele, 79, is one of America's foremost black conservative thinkers, recently retired as a senior fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution. He is still hard at work, on a film made by his son, Eli Steele, who describes the project as an "update" of the elder Mr. Steele's 2006 book. Eli, 51, is an independent filmmaker who lives in Los Angeles. He sums up the message of "White Guilt": "If you can claim victimhood in America, it gives you leverage and power. For black Americans, the source of that power is 'white guilt.' And they've milked it for decades, transferring responsibility to whites for everything that's wrong with black people." As a result, Shelby chips in, blacks are "worse off today than they were in 1964."

Victim politics gave us pro-Hamas activism and a powerful reaction in the form of Donald Trump.

I interview father and son together at the parents' house in this desert suburb. Shelby's wife and Eli's mother, Rita, sits alongside us. The daughter of Holocaust survivors, she met Shelby during his junior year at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Her father grew up in eastern Poland. When the Nazis invaded, he was able to escape, leaving eight sisters behind. "They thought women would be safe," Mrs. Steele says. When he returned to Poland after the war, he found they'd all been murdered. He met her mother—whose family survived Auschwitz—in a labor camp in Siberia.

Like his own son, the Chicago-born Shelby is a man of mixed race: His father, Shelby Sr., was a black truck driver; his mother, Ruth, a white social worker. Eli and Shelby began working together on their film—also titled "White Guilt"—three years ago. They hope to finish by year's end to release the film in April (the book was published in

May 2006). The Steeles anticipate resistance from distributors and a likely refusal by Netflix and Hulu to carry the work.

Their last film together, "What Killed Michael Brown?" (2020), about the 2014 shooting by police in Ferguson, Mo., was so controversial that Amazon placed it under "content review," reinstating it only after vigorous protests over censorship, including on these pages. The film, says Eli, "dismantles the lie of systemic racism that President Obama and Attorney General [Eric] Holder forced onto Ferguson, and by extension America, after a white cop shot a black teen."

Before that film, Eli was best known for a documentary titled "How Jack Became Black" (2018), made, he says, after "my multiracial son was denied enrollment to his elementary school when I refused to check a race box."

Shelby Steele grew up "in an entirely black community in Chicago," he says. "We were all-American in terms of our values. We served happily in the military, and wanted to fight in the front lines. By today's terms, we would be conservative." Mr. Steele was 18 in 1964, when the Civil Rights Act became law. He says the act and the War on Poverty enabled black America to make a mistake: "We traded self-respect and conservatism for identity and humiliation. The guilt of white people is our power. We work them. And yet we won't look at our own people and ask, 'Why are we not teaching our children to read?'"

The problem was that "blacks had no idea what freedom was. We had experience with everything in the world but freedom. Many blacks hate my guts because I condemn the choices they made. Everybody I grew up with had a family. They don't have families anymore," Eli asks: "Why is it that today, when you cannot by law discriminate on the basis of race, we literally organize our whole culture around race?"

Father and son agree that the Trump presidency has been good for black Americans. "I think Trump is in many ways the inadvertent creation of white guilt," Shelby says. "America grew exasperated with the way in which white guilt was distorting society. And Trump is a result of that exasperation. He is an exasperated leader." Eli adds that President Trump "is not cowed by white guilt." Shelby sums up the 2024 election: "I've never seen a more earnest vote. In fact, Trump is a most earnest president. He's saying that our problem is that we've lost our earnestness as a country."



Eli Steele and Shelby Steele

He says, "Damn it, I'm going to change things."

How have black Americans responded? "The black leadership's been silenced," Shelby says. "But individual blacks are breaking away from the group, putting their self-interest ahead of groupthink, asserting their political individuality." Eli calls Joe Biden "the ultimate white guilt-president. And Trump is the opposite. He's actually advocating many policies that are based in classic American values—and many, many, many blacks welcome this." In other words, Mr. Trump has helped ease the burden of racial identity on many black people and allowed them to think of themselves simply as Americans, with the same concerns as their countrymen: healthcare, education, immigration.

At the same time, America has seen an eruption of antisemitism, on the left and more recently on the right. Shelby Steele included the Oct. 7 massacre on his list of significant events since the publication of "White Guilt." Hamas's atrocities, he says, "led us to shift our focus on white guilt to a global scale."

"The big question became, 'Why was there such a lack of moral clarity after Oct. 7?' We have all these campus protests, people protesting on the side of terror, of evil. Why? Because they"—the Palestinians—"are 'brown.' Just think about that. The narrative became one that said Hamas have a right to launch their liberation revolution against a 'white' country. They accused this tiny little country, Israel, of all the Western evils: apartheid, genocide, colonialism, racism. Ta-Nehisi Coates goes to Israel for 10 days and writes a book about it." Israel

was shoehorned into "whiteness" so it could be made a scapegoat.

Looking at the protesters, Shelby Steele was overcome with "a certain emptiness. I realized that there is, in reality, no more racism. By which I mean that there are no longer problems in this country that are traceable to racial inequality."

Mr. Steele is also engrossed by the meltdown at the Heritage Foundation. As Kevin Roberts, president of that conservative think tank, struggles to calibrate how much distance to put between himself and the commentator Tucker Carlson, under fire for pandering to antisemites, Mr. Steele is reminded of 1964. Then, he says, the liberal left was "in flux" in the wake of the Civil Rights Act. "We're seeing something similar now on the right."

Today, "it seems like conservatism is rewriting itself, exploring where to go. Does Tucker represent a legitimate conservatism? Everything has begun to change and shift." He attributes much of the turbulence, again, to Mr. Trump.

"Certainly, Trump is taking things in a new direction," unraveling conservatism as we knew it. "What's new and fresh to me," he says, "is that there's a retreat from the ideological focus of conservatism. In Trump, we have a president who wants to do the dishes, so to speak. Take care of the everyday problems of life. Get our universities straightened out, our immigration lined up." Mr. Steele finds this refreshing: "The vanity of 'wokeism' under Joe Biden was that it could mold people and literally make a better world. Trump just wants to be on the ground, taking care of business."

But antisemitism on the right is also a ramification of white guilt,

Mr. Steele says. "Tucker Carlson and these people like Nick Fuentes are ripostes to white guilt. They say, 'We as white people, we feel put upon. We feel demeaned.' " Eli elaborates: "He, Tucker, is a bad reaction to white guilt. Tucker and others are making the mistake of picking up the identity mantle. And they're doing the very thing that they've accused blacks of doing all these years, which is to use race as a means to power."

Mr. Fuentes in particular "mirrors the black militants of the '70s," Eli says. But the latter drew their "moral force from the documented legacy of evil, a historical wound that was milked for power in the decades that followed." The white rage of Mr. Fuentes and his ilk has no such justification in history and represents merely "direct defiance of true American values." Eli sees a "troubling moral and intellectual drift toward tribalism and away from the universal principles that have long defined American conservatism."

By contrast, what Shelby likes most about Mr. Trump's approach to race is his complete absence of dogmatism. "I think Trump's actual comprehension of the racial dynamics at work in America is pretty naive. It's pretty simplistic. I think, in other words, that he has no personal investment of any depth in the race issue."

Barack Obama "was invested. Yes, he was. He was offering himself as evidence of the broadmindedness of American life and American culture." Mr. Trump is the "we've had enough of white guilt" president, "especially," Eli says, "after four years of Biden and George Floyd and BLM."

Shelby says Mr. Trump's "responses to race are much more designed for the real world we live in, which is a world in which everyone is insecure about race. He's better at that. I've said for years—the best thing for white and black people to do is to leave race alone. Don't go near it."

What gratifies Shelby most is Mr. Trump's effort to eradicate racial preferences. "Ordinary blacks love that he's got the balls to do that. They know the scam."

"I want to see all that stuff dismantled," Shelby says. "I see him as godly. That's the way I see it in my gut. Because all that stuff is what's holding my people back."

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