

*The “Proud Daughter of Indian Immigrants:”*

*Nikki Haley, Race, and the Story of America in the Contemporary Republican Party*

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## Table of Contents

<u>Introduction</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>Chapter 1: Historical Context</u>	<u>8</u>
<u>Chapter 2: A Story of Self</u>	<u>25</u>
<u>Chapter 3: A Story of America</u>	<u>60</u>
<u>Conclusion</u>	<u>73</u>
<u>Bibliography</u>	<u>75</u>

## Introduction

On the first night of the Republican National Convention in August of 2020, former Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley spoke on her experience as a cabinet member under Donald Trump. Staring down the camera with conviction, she said what would later make headlines: “In much of the Democratic Party, it’s now fashionable to say that America is racist. That is a lie. America is not a racist country.”<sup>1</sup> It came as a shock to some because of what she said next: “This is personal for me. I am the proud daughter of Indian immigrants. They came to America and settled in a small Southern town. My father wore a turban. My mother wore a sari. I was a brown girl in a Black and white world.”<sup>2</sup> She went on to tell a story in which she experienced discrimination. She told the story of a white supremacist opening fire in a Black church. Still, she denied the country’s racism.

This moment indicates much of the paradox one witnesses in Nikki Haley. She is a woman, a child of immigrants, and a racial minority, demographics commonly associated with progressive politics. But the way that she relates to her story paints a nuanced picture of how an Indian American politician may espouse vastly different politics than what may be expected.

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<sup>1</sup> Haley, Nikki. “Nikki Haley: ‘America is not a racist country.’” *YouTube*, uploaded by Associated Press, 24 August 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ybfkur4OOoE>.

<sup>2</sup> Haley, Nikki. “Nikki Haley: ‘America is not a racist country.’” *YouTube*, uploaded by Associated Press, 24 August 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ybfkur4OOoE>.

### Background: Origins of the Persona

Nikki Haley was born Nimrata Nikki Randhawa to Ajit and Raj Randhawa in Bamberg, South Carolina, a small town in which her family was the only one of Indian origin. She describes incidents of students questioning her racial identity, as she was neither white nor Black, and also describes various incidents of discrimination that she witnessed her parents face throughout her memoirs and campaign speeches. She was met with overt racism in the beginnings of her political career, which began with her campaign to represent South Carolina's 87th district in the state legislature. This elected position was followed by her election to the South Carolina Governor's office, and later appointment as the United States Ambassador to the United Nations under Donald Trump. News coverage and political publications highlight Haley's trajectory as an anti-establishment member of the Republican party, who aligned herself with the Tea Party leading up to her election as governor in 2011, garnering an endorsement from Sarah Palin prior to her campaign victory. First a critic of Donald Trump in 2016, she later became a supporter before being appointed to his cabinet, where she served from 2017 to December of 2018. Now, she is making a bid for the Republican nomination in the 2024 presidential election, opposing Trump.

Haley has been known to center her Indian heritage in her campaign speeches, and in recent years has discussed her ethnic background when addressing discourse on the United States' racism. She describes herself as "the proud daughter of Indian immigrants," and can

speak to her own experiences of racism, having experienced the confusion and stigmatization of both white and Black communities around her race, and suspicion toward her family's religion. She garnered attention for her decision to remove the confederate flag from South Carolina's state capitol following the 2015 Charleston Church shooting, in which a white supremacist shot nine Black churchgoers at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. However, in recent years, she has been firm in her position against assertions that the country is racist, engaging in current Republican discourse opposing the teaching of critical race theory in public schools. Her position in American conversations on race occupies a liminal space. She can acknowledge the presence of racism, even seeking racial redress in some forms, but she broadly denies the presence of systemic racism. She also characterizes her own racial identity as an Indian American as neither Black nor white, again occupying a liminal position which she leverages in her elected offices.

How might a Republican, Indian American politician such as Nikki Haley reconcile her racial identity with conservative politics? How does she use her identity to appeal to white voters? I explore this by examining Nikki Haley's written works—including her memoirs *Can't Is Not An Option: My American Story* (2012) and *With All Due Respect: Defending America with Grit and Grace* (2019)-- along with her most recent book *If You Want Something Done* (2022) and visual media from her presidential campaign to decipher how she discusses her identity as an Indian American woman and relates it to her politics.

While Haley centers her racial identity in discussions of her politics, she often decouples race from systems of oppression, and instead favors racial identity as a feature of an individualistic narrative of her success. She discusses personal experiences of racism as isolated incidents of the past rather than as systemic, enduring problems. Additionally, in describing her relationship to Indian-Americanness, Haley highlights and reinforces model minority ideals, painting herself and her family as having earned acceptance by demonstrating their goodness and worthiness in their communities. In promoting these ideas, Haley is able to legitimize conservative policies that target the poor and people of color, leveraging her experiences of racism to assert that the onus is on the racialized individual to make themselves accepted and successful in the dominant white society. As an Indian American, Haley demonstrates her exceptionalism such that she can negate the systemic realities of racism, citing her experiences of racism and comparing them to those of Black Americans when it is convenient in order to promote meritocratic ideals or shift discussions of race away from the need to remedy systemic issues.

Oftentimes, she frames the reputation her family had in her town as something that was up to them to change—a public perception that would inevitably change with the course of time. She also describes this narrative with respect to herself in the political sphere. Ultimately, Nikki Haley uses her Indian American identity to claim authority in discourse surrounding race and

gender, and in doing so is able to keep the conservative white voter comfortable and advance her political career.

## Chapter 1: Historical Context

Haley's rhetoric can be situated in the context of gender politics, specifically the anti-discrimination framework of giving courts authority to legislate gender dynamics, and the cultural and political paradigm that has taken shape as a result. This paradigm necessarily involves race, and emerged at the same time that immigration policy shifted toward accepting an influx of immigration from Asia, including India, helping to establish existing model minority ideas that partly form Haley's public persona. Thus, Haley's rhetoric must also be situated in the context of American immigration policy and the curated groups of immigrants that it produces. Finally, the histories of gender and race as they relate to Haley's persona converge in the formation of the Tea Party and its particular accessibility for women and minorities. It is with the Tea Party where Haley found a political home and a launchpad for a high-profile political career. Here, I outline key pieces of historical context in order to better understand the roots of Haley's rhetoric.

### Roots of Conservative Feminism

We can contextualize Haley's public relationship to her gender in politics by considering the type of feminism that shapes her rhetoric. In her 2018 work, "Which Feminisms?" published in *New Left Review*, Susan Watkins outlines the shift from feminist liberationist politics of the late 1960s to what she calls an "anti-discrimination paradigm" (19). Where the liberationists



espoused a politics that dismantled structural class-based and racial inequalities, the 1960s and 1970s saw a shift away from this focus on social transformation and toward incorporating women as equals in existing capitalist structures, namely through a legalist approach (Srinivasan 163). This meant centering women's equal representation in the workforce, formalized by giving courts the authority over gender discrimination.

In her essay, "Sex, Carceralism, Capitalism" Amia Srinivasan expands on Watkins, and asserts that anti-discrimination feminism empowers women who already benefited, and continue to benefit, from U.S. capitalism, particularly rich, largely white women (164). Srinivasan cites class-based and racial inequalities as the "deepest causes of women's inequality" specifying the lack of housing, healthcare, childcare, education, and decent jobs for most women as central to their continued oppression (163).

Watkins also describes how this paradigm was established by the Nixon administration to address the so-called 'Negro question,' or what Srinivasan describes as "the public spectacle of an immiserated people clamoring for racial and economic equality" (164). Watkins begins by discussing the shortcomings of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which, while acting as a landmark piece of legislation outlawing discrimination, "left intact the barriers of class, poverty, unemployment, rundown schools and housing, compounded by systemic racism and police harassment" (17). Watkins describes how in 1970 the Nixon administration established two classes of the Black population through the Department of Labor with affirmative action policies.

These policies aimed to boost what Nixon called ‘black capitalism’, expanding the Black professional middle class. Simultaneously, the administration instituted “social wars” including the war on crime and war on drugs under a zero-tolerance policy, thus resulting in “a generation of African-American elite” while “over 2 million blacks, mostly male, languished in prison” (Watkins 19).

Meanwhile, affirmative action policies were also expanded to women of all races, requiring firms to submit targets and hiring goals for women and minorities, (though without necessarily having to deliver results) in response to pressure by feminist protests (Watkins 18). By 1972, Nixon also signed Title IX into law, outlawing sex discrimination in federally funded educational activities. This “anti-discrimination feminist model” described by Watkins thus arose from a strategy originally created to, according to Watkins, “neutralize” the Black population (15). In regards to both race and gender, the policies targeted the poor, blaming the behavior or culture of Black individuals who did not find themselves in middle class professional roles following the implementation of affirmative action policies. Srinivasan explains that the anti-discrimination feminist model, “laid bare the division between a newly empowered class of largely white professional women, and the class of the poor, largely non-white and immigrant women who took over the tasks of caring for their children and cleaning their houses” (Srinivasan 165). Watkins illuminates the corollary relationship between the anti-discrimination feminist model and neoliberal politics by comparing the model to other forms of state feminism,

including the social-democratic model. The social-democratic feminism model of the early twentieth century centered expanded social provisions such as childcare, housing, education, and health, in essence socializing what is often women's 'private' domestic labor while allowing for full female employment and maternity leave. In contrast, Watkins points out that the anti-discrimination model was "almost cost-free to the state," as legal actions and fees were to be carried out between an appellant and her employer (20).

We can use the anti-discrimination model Watkins describes, and its institutionalization over the course of the 1970s, as the historical framework from which to analyze Nikki Haley's relationship with feminism as well as racial identity. As the 1980s began to see the emergence of the "New Right," scholar Rebecca Klatch uncovered two forms of conservative women: the social conservative and the "laissez-faire" conservative woman, where laissez-faire conservative women subscribed to an anti-discriminationist feminism, believing that men and women should be able to equally compete in the marketplace, have access to daycare, abortion rights, and gay rights, albeit without any government intervention providing access to these resources for the poor (Deckman 186).

The legal establishment of these policies, along with the cultural paradigm of individualist ideology that they signaled, can also be considered alongside the changing landscape of American immigration, namely the influx of highly-educated, economically mobile Indian immigrant populations.

### Race and Immigration

The history of immigration policy and its impact on Indian Americans is critical in order to understand formations of Indian American political attitudes and rhetoric. In his work *Desis Divided*, Sangay Mishra provides insight into the impact of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, an act that radically changed the types of nonwhite immigrants allowed in the United States (Mishra 26). Abolishing discrimination on the basis of race and national origin, and creating the categories of family reunification, professional skills, and refugee, the act aimed to recruit highly skilled professional laborers, particularly in the field of science and technology (Mishra 27). This produced a group of financially well-off South Asian immigrants due to the immigration law's priorities (Mishra 28). Highly skilled professionals were able to meet the needs of the American economy and were employed across the country, and continue to do so. This number of professionals with high qualifications has increased since the 1990s with the passage of the Immigration Act of 1990, which created the temporary H1-B visa category for skilled workers, and allowed these workers a pathway to receive a green card during their time in the United States (Mishra 28). This led to a spike in immigrant professionals, particularly those from India (Mishra 28).

This shift in immigration patterns following 1965, Mishra explains, contributed to the development of a racialized model minority framework, which, "promoted the discourse of an

underclass ‘problem’ minority (African Americans) created by a culture of deviance and dependence in contrast to hard-working and successful minorities (Asian Americans)” (6).

Mishra also describes the lesser-known result of the family reunification laws beginning in the 1980s, which provided a labor force during economic recession composed of workers in low-wage positions (29). Mishra writes, “Just as the occupational preferences of the 1965 immigration law responded to the economy’s needs for professional labor, its family reunification quotas serve the interest of a service economy seeking low-wage and deskilled labor amid corporate downsizing” (29). Finally, Mishra speaks to the presence of undocumented Indian immigrants, citing a 2015 report showing that Indian Americans comprise the fourth-largest group of undocumented immigrants at approximately 450,000 undocumented people, with the estimate increasing to 540,000 as of 2018 (31).<sup>3</sup> Mishra’s analysis clearly outlines how American immigration laws curate the immigrant population to fit America’s economic and geopolitical needs, which has privileged much of the existing Indian American population, composed largely of highly educated professionals with access to a legal pathway toward citizenship and economic opportunity provided through the American immigration system. Haley’s family, who arrived in the U.S. in 1969, was part of this wave. Much of Haley’s rhetoric regarding the subject of race and immigration can be contextualized within her family’s

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<sup>3</sup> Mishra cites Baker, Bryan. “Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2015–January 2018,” n.d.

immigration narrative. But we will also see that her ascendancy in politics coincides with another important historical moment: the rise of the Tea Party in the 2000s.

### Nikki Haley and the Tea Party

In *Change They Can't Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America*, authors Parker and Barreto describe the Tea Party as “a loose confederation of leaders, activists, and sympathizers,” with leaders of the movement claiming that it was primarily focused on conservative principles of small government, free market capitalism, and fiscal responsibility (1). It also supported stronger immigration controls. Much like other populist movements in history, it rose in prominence during a time of financial hardship, following the financial crisis of 2008. It positioned itself against the large federal spending of the Obama administration as well as the Republican establishment. However, the movement never came together around a single agenda, leader, or message beyond opposition to the federal government (Schmitt et al. 62). Instead, different local groups pushed different agendas (Schmitt et al. 62).

Evoking the story of the Boston Tea Party of 1773 that occurred in protest of “taxation without representation,” the Tea Party advocated for a revolutionary movement against Big Government, lowering government spending, and lowering taxes. Schmitt et al. explain the movement’s goal of “purifying” the Republican Party of “moderates who had strayed from conservative principles” of fiscal conservatism, opting instead to elect officials who fell in line

with the Tea Party view of fiscal restraint (62). Schmitt argues that Tea Party legislation went beyond “normal” conservative legislation to instead reflect more severe fiscal restraint and language used by Tea Party protesters (63).

The other aspect of the movement included cultural conservative values. Parker and Barreto argue that there was also a considerable amount of rhetoric surrounding Barack Obama and his presidency, both racialized and relating to perceived socialist or communist values (2). The authors highlight two kinds of discourse that typically arose among Tea Party supporters: one that was focused on “ideological conservatism,” which manifested itself in opposition to corporate bail-outs, stimulus spending, and expanded government spending on healthcare, and another on rejecting the “Other,” particularly racialized out-groups and sexual minorities (Parker and Barreto 2).

Consistent with other right-wing movements throughout U.S. history, the Tea Party broadly appealed to white, middle-class, middle-aged, evangelical Protestant men (Parker and Barreto 79). While the movement was nationwide, concentrated pockets of the Tea Party emerged in “Boom Town” counties, which experienced rapid growth around 2000 and the worst of the housing crash that followed, according to PBS. Regions that followed included a mix of wealthy and less wealthy regions, all of which were majority white, in the South, West, and parts of the Midwest.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>“Tea Party Mapped: How Big Is It and Where Is It Based? | PBS NewsHour.” Accessed May 5, 2023.  
<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/tea-party-how-big-is-it-and-where-is-it-based>.

President Obama became the face of both the encroachment of government on state and individual freedoms and a racialized figure symbolizing a changing America.. The authors conclude that Obama “transcends politics, ideology, [and] race” to represent a “threat to American way of life” to Tea Party sympathizers, consistent with their claim that members of an out-group in power are likely to be perceived by in-group members as antagonistic, thus the Tea Party belief in the left-wing’s conspiratorial thinking (Parker and Barreto 97). Indeed, something that most clearly separated Tea Party conservatives from mainstream conservatives was their considerably higher likelihood of expressing that Obama was out to “destroy the country” (Parker and Barreto 23).

In keeping with the notion that dominant social groups use any means available to stall a perceived loss in social prestige, Parker and Barreto argue that the Tea Party espoused a paranoia about ““vast and sinister conspiracy”” dedicated to destroying Americans’ way of life (Parker and Barreto 4). The Tea Party’s methods, consistent with other right-wing movements included ““an all-out crusade”” to defeat the enemy, rather than a political “give and take” (Parker and Barreto 4). With this in mind, the authors argue that the movement was motivated for reasons beyond views of conservatism of economic freedom, small government, and social and fiscal responsibility, and beyond racial hostility or hostility toward sexual minorities. Instead, the authors assert that people drawn to the Tea Party were *reactionary conservatives*, defined as

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people who “fear change of any kind—especially if it threatens to undermine their way of life” (Parker and Barreto 6).

Nikki Haley bills herself as pro-business and small government, in keeping with traditional conservative Republican ideas. She used the support of the Tea Party, particularly the endorsement of Sarah Palin, to ultimately win the governorship in 2010, when the Tea Party was at its peak in responding to the Obama administration. According to Jason Kirk, the Tea Party “took aim” at both the Obama presidency and the Republican establishment, and parts of the movement perpetuated a sense of rage and resentment that Haley did not continue (3). According to Kirk, this made her part of the Tea Party movement, but not quite “of” it, as someone perceived to be more even-keeled, and as an Indian American politician (3).

Of Haley’s victory in the gubernatorial race, Kirk writes, “Haley lagged behind three Republican rivals in 2010 polls, before the Palin endorsement helped put her on top heading into the primary. The Tea Party was at the height of its cultural and political impact” (29). The impact of Sarah Palin’s endorsement, and its ability to rally white South Carolinians who aligned themselves with the Tea Party, must be analyzed in terms of the Tea Party’s relationship with race, and how non-white politicians might appeal to the Tea Party’s sensibilities around race. Kirk provides further insight into this when he places the Tea Party in the context of enduring conservative politics in the South:

Historians of southern culture have analyzed the reactionary ‘politics of whiteness’ and a ‘pattern of defensiveness that shaped the region’s political and cultural conservatism’ in the face of pervasive national criticism, across the post-Reconstruction twentieth century to the present day. In this light ‘new groups, such as the Tea Party protestors, the Birthers who challenge the constitutionality of Barack Obama’s presidency, and the anti-environmentalists, among others, are not new, but are old spirits that will not die’ and that ‘predominate in the South.’ (Kirk 27)

When regarding the Tea Party as one of these new groups reacting to the Obama presidency and espousing the “politics of whiteness,” one can gain more insight into Haley’s relationship to the movement. As an Indian American woman identifying with the Tea Party movement, Haley’s racial position involved a complex maneuver that included absolving white people belonging to it of any racist guilt. Thus, when Haley talks of how the Tea Party was not concerned about race or gender, she reflects and legitimizes a Southern conservative reaction to charges of systemic racism (*Can’t Is Not An Option*). In defending and endorsing this reaction, she becomes a racial exception, rewarded by those white Tea Party members who endorsed her campaign (Tsukerman 46).

Consistent with conservative governors of the day, Haley’s policy decisions included harsh stances on undocumented immigration, implementing voter ID laws, and opposing the Affordable Care Act (ACA) (Kirk 32-35). According to Kirk, the ACA had passed “along

strictly partisan lines in the US Congress,” leading to its signing in early 2010. However, Kirk explains, “Tea Party supported GOP victories in the fall midterm elections had empowered opponents at the federal and state levels, including Haley” (34).

Understanding Haley’s relationship with the Tea Party as a far-right and reactionary movement can provide further insight into how she might use her identities to legitimize Tea Party ideology. Parker and Barreto argue that the Tea Party was fueled from an anxiety that the perceived America once known by the movement’s supporters— a country defined by heterosexuality, Christianity, patriarchy, and whiteness—was under threat by the quickly changing face of the country (3). The face of this change was Barack Obama, whose presidency was vehemently opposed by the Tea Party. Much like the historians Kirk cites, Parker and Barreto assert that the Tea Party’s ideas were “simply the latest in a series of national right-wing social movements that have cropped up in America since the nineteenth century,” part of a persistent reaction to a threatened way of life (3).

The authors argue that the Tea Party differed from mainstream conservatism, and in their analyses provide insights that give context to Haley’s descriptions of the movement as subversive and anti-establishment.

Additionally, the call for such a subversive and anti-establishment right-wing organization was rooted in what Parker and Barreto cite as “conspiratorial discourse” in which a

perceived “enemy” seeks to destroy society. This, the authors argue, was the discourse that emerged around the Obama administration and its policies (22).

The idea evokes parallels between the Tea Party and Trumpism, and how Nikki Haley has bought into, and furthered her career through, both of these reactionary political movements. Conspiratorial discourse and demagoguery is what appears to set the Tea Party apart from mainstream conservatism, according to Parker and Barreto. This is echoed by the Trump era from conspiracies about QAnon to the allegedly fake 2020 presidential election results, and overtly bigoted attacks against critics. The discourse of the Tea Party hinges on the reaction to a Big Government encroaching on individual freedoms, and “Others” who defy preconceived notions of law and order, threatening one’s established way of life. Similarly, Haley has, and continues to, use rhetoric in opposition to the discourse surrounding racial justice.

Her politics have been in reaction to a real or perceived lack of government accountability, government spending, and racial justice and diversity initiatives. Through her rhetoric, Haley asserts that sufficient social change has occurred, that she is living proof of such change, and that it is now being taken too far.

Haley often loops in the Tea Party movement in discussion of her going against the “good old boys” of South Carolina politics, who were Republicans, along with her opposition to Democrats. She centers the discursive focus of the Tea Party on small government and supporting business, but makes sure to note that “The Movement” did not “care” about race or

gender. She frames the Tea Party as a shift away from the status quo, contrary to Parker and Barreto's assertion that the movement called for a regression to the past. While the Tea Party, according to Parker and Barreto, in part reflected a bigotry toward the Obama presidency due to his race, Haley seems to highlight its openness to her presence. What does it mean for such a movement to rally behind her? How does she use her identity to veil the Tea Party's call for a regression under the guise of social progress? We can gain insight into how the Tea Party, and Haley's place within it, might ultimately serve the neoliberal guise of social progress by including certain minority populations and women while excluding others, in keeping with legislative initiatives taken in the 1960s and 1970s regarding gender and race.

In her study of Tea Party women conducted between 2012 and 2013, Melissa Deckman describes the way the Tea Party allowed a welcoming place for women on the right to emerge as leaders where the establishment Republican Party did not. Studies of Tea Party organizations show that women dominated as Tea Party leaders at the local level and made a significant mark on the national level. Deckman cites the fame of Sarah Palin and Michele Bachmann as two of the most prominent Tea Party politicians nationally, along with women leaders of Tea Party organizations (2). Her findings suggest that the decentralized, dispersed, and sporadic nature of the Tea Party allowed for a more diverse group of people to get involved in its activism, including women (Deckman 8). The 'open source' nature of the Tea Party allowed many political entrepreneurs to more easily start political groups or become active Tea Party members.

Deckman explains how many conservative women “flocked” to the Tea Party as an alternative to the traditional Republican Party because of difficulties breaking into the ‘old-boys network’ of the male-dominated Republican Party, in some cases experiencing outright sexism by party insiders, while other Tea Party women found the Republican establishment “weak-kneed,” or compromising in their conservatism, and felt that the Tea Party held these establishment Republicans accountable (12). She also asserts that women have emerged as Tea Party leaders to a degree that was unprecedented in conservative activist networks in part due to the increased level of higher education and workplace experiences that Tea Party women have experienced compared to conservative women of the past (Deckman 13). The rise of Tea Party women leaders coincides with women reaching workforce parity and surpassing men in higher education, bringing an unprecedented higher education and workplace experience to their political involvement (Deckman 15).

Additionally, Deckman finds that Tea Party women adopted a “gendered rhetoric” that promoted conservative policies. This rhetoric included what Deckman refers to as the ‘motherhood frame,’ which espoused the argument that small government is beneficial to American families, along with other gendered claims that large government and federal policies such as the Affordable Care Act “promote women’s dependence on government rather than empowering them” (4). Deckman goes further to examine the Tea Party conservative interpretation of feminism, explaining that Tea Party leaders such as Sarah Palin emphasized

self-reliance and personal responsibility as signs of women's empowerment (183). Since women should be equal to men in all areas of public life, Tea Party feminists argued, progressive policies such as those in pursuit of pay parity, expanding the social welfare system, and regulations addressing work/family balance and sex discrimination in the workplace "betray the original vision of the women's movement," as these policies promoted women's dependence on government (Deckman 179). This type of feminism has been described as 'freedom feminism' and has been adopted to varying degrees by conservative women. Much of this feminism is derived from the belief that a liberationist ideology renders women victims of a patriarchal society, which freedom feminism denies. It is out of this belief that women are helpless victims, freedom feminists argue that social welfare programs for women are justified; according to Sarah Palin, modern feminism has come to mean, 'no we can't—at least not until government helps' (Deckman 184).

This is in keeping with much of the anti-discrimination rhetoric established throughout the 1960s and 1970s as outlined by Watkins, as many conservative women abandoned traditional gender roles regarding women as homemakers, but maintained that feminism only extended to incorporating women into existing structures, without the necessity of aiding women, particularly poor women, within these structures.

Deckman's analysis provides context as to how Haley, as a conservative woman, benefited greatly from associating with the Tea Party, as it allowed her the platform to challenge

South Carolina's male-dominated Republican establishment. The diffuse nature of the Tea Party additionally provides context for how parts of its base could view Haley as an ideal representative with a focus on fiscal conservatism. Coupled with the context of Indian American migration, and the curated base of Indian Americans formed by American immigration policies, Haley's politics can be located in enduring conservative stances on individualism and family structures. This becomes more apparent in Haley's description of her experience as a South Carolina legislator, governor, and UN Ambassador throughout her memoirs.



## Chapter 2: A Story of Self

Each of Haley's three books brings different insights into how she has leveraged identities as a person of color, a woman, and a child of immigrants to espouse right-wing political ideologies. In particular, these books highlight her neoliberal identity politics, as she frames narratives of her parents' immigration, her response to racism against herself and her family, and her perseverance as a woman as the fruits of individual labor in pursuit of the American dream. Through an analysis of each book, we find that her rhetoric is rooted in the historical context of anti-discrimination perceptions of gender dynamics rooted in the 1970s, immigration policy and racial politics of Asian Americans, and the Tea Party's unique place for women and minorities on the Right.

### *Can't Is Not An Option: My American Story*

Published in 2012, Haley's first memoir *Can't Is Not An Option: My American Story* narrates her parents' process of migrating to the United States, her upbringing in Bamberg, South Carolina, her discovery of politics and election to the South Carolina state legislature, and her election as governor in 2011. Published prior to President Obama's election for a second term, Haley highlights her relationship with the Tea Party, a conservative movement to which she belonged, and that was active in her gubernatorial election and outspoken against Obama administration initiatives. Throughout the memoir, Haley espouses individualistic and model

minority ideals, often by subtly assuming the responsibility of making herself acceptable to her peers.

Beginning with the story of her parents' migration to the United States, Haley describes how her parents, both from wealthy families and highly educated in Punjab, India, left their lives of privilege for the promise that America would have in store. Of her parents, Haley writes, "They knew America was a place of unlimited opportunity, and they wanted those opportunities for their children, even if it meant starting over...America was a place where opportunities couldn't be bought. They knew that here, if you worked hard, you could be as successful as you wanted to be" (*Can't Is Not An Option* 3). Here, it is important to note that "starting over" meant arriving in the United States without material wealth, but with higher education; her father, having received a PhD in Canada, accepted a faculty position at Voorhees College, a historically Black college near the small town of Bamberg, South Carolina (*Can't Is Not An Option* 3). There, her mother became a social studies teacher, and later an entrepreneur.

The Randhawas arrived in South Carolina in 1969, following the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. Ajit Randhawa, hired as a professor in Chemistry, benefitted from this shift in immigration policy that called for his level of expertise, and was part of a wave of South Asian immigrants that changed, in the words of Mishra, the "socioeconomic profile" of the community which lent itself to the broader narrative of "model minority" (6). This framework is widely used to explain the success of South Asian immigrants, and Haley deploys the framework

early in her memoir, depicting her parents' choice to immigrate as an abandonment of their existing privilege altogether in favor of the bottom of the American economic hierarchy. This allows Haley to frame their story such that solely hard work would later propel them through the economic strata. In fact, a closer read allows us to see that the privilege of education, in India and Canada, allowed for the admittance of the Randhawas into the United States, four years after the passing of the legislation that allowed them to do so.

Hayley discusses multiple stories from her childhood that serve as cornerstones of her experience with racial identity. These have been covered across her three books, and, as she discusses in the memoir, are covered more extensively in news media. The conclusions Haley draws from these stories are particularly illuminating in order to understand how she ultimately seeks to influence public perception of her racial identity.

She colors these stories of early childhood by first describing her general approach to handling situations when her race was called into question by peers. She writes:

As a seven-year-old in a class full of eight-and-nine year olds—and brown to boot—I had trouble being accepted. But I knew it was my job to fix that. By then I was starting to suspect that my differences from the culture that surrounded me—my religion, my race, and later even my gender—would be a constant issue. I never felt bad about it. I never resented it. I just had to do what my parents had always taught me to do: deal with it. For

me that meant focusing on finding the similarities between myself and my friends and avoiding those things that separated us. (*Can't Is Not An Option* 8-9)

The passage introduces threads that Haley pulls through the rest of the memoir. The first, that it was her own “job” to change the perspective of those around her and her family. Her parents’ graciousness in the way that they handled white people’s desire to convert them to Christianity by attending numerous church services, or celebrating Christmas and sending gifts to children around the town, and by focusing on what was commonly shared between them and members of the community, is something that Hayley highlights with reverence. Haley’s own decision, beginning in childhood, to always find “common ground,” is a survival tactic that she acknowledges as such, and while she later began to embrace difference and speak more freely of her heritage in college, she maintains one sentiment: that it was her job to “deal with it” when she faced any stigmatizing experience or problem. Haley maintains that, per the teachings of her immigrant parents, she was to handle the problems she faced as an individual, to change the perceptions of others often by “being the best” at things and “[making] sure people remember you for it” (*Can't Is Not An Option* 14-15). She later uses this logic when comparing her experiences to Black and women’s issues during her time as governor.

One essential story from her childhood took place when Haley was ten years old at a produce stand that she visited with her father, when the owners called the police to watch Ajit

Randhawa while he collected and paid for his produce (*Can't Is Not An Option* 13). At the conclusion of this story, Haley writes “I still travel that route between Bamberg and Columbia, and that produce stand is still there. When I pass by, I remember what my father so graciously put up with there. And I smile. I smile because I know the same thing would never happen to him today. South Carolina is a different place. My story is proof of that” (*Can't Is Not An Option* 13).

The quote brings forth another throughline in the memoir that carries over into Haley's other works, which is that the racism she experienced was of the past, that the people of South Carolina have changed, and that the story of her rise through the political ranks is emblematic of a sort of post-racial South Carolina. Haley has asserted that she “would not have been elected governor of South Carolina if [it] was a racially intolerant place” (Cobb). Here, too, we see a model minority ideal in the sense that her exceptional career success can be attributed entirely to her merit, as systemic forces, particularly of race, could no longer be an issue in the wake of her political success. Additionally, Haley continues to largely place the focus on South Carolina, not the United States more broadly. She then expresses some disdain for national news media that focus on her experiences of racism, asserting that the media gives South Carolina a negative image.

This is how Haley frames the story of when she and her sister entered a pageant in their early childhood. When introducing the story, Haley writes, “It quickly became one of the stories

the media most liked to repeat about me. For too many of them, it confirmed their preconceived notions of life in the South, particularly in the small-town rural South of Bamberg, South Carolina” (*Can’t Is Not An Option* 17). She then tells the story of how the Wee Miss Bamberg pageant had two winners, a Black queen and a white queen, and that Haley and her sister were disqualified as they fit in neither category. She continues, “Many people have found this story shocking, and I suppose to someone who hasn’t seen it in context it is. But I do see it in context, and I see it differently...the same town that disqualified me was the one that accepted me into a Girl Scout troop, helped my dad get a job in a community college, and helped my mom get a job as a sixth-grade social studies teacher. Over time that town, Bamberg, adopted us as its own” (*Can’t Is Not An Option* 18).

Haley asserts that the press was not paying attention to the story of a southern town that came to accept an Indian family, “despite our cultural differences” (*Can’t Is Not An Option* 18). The focus, Haley argues, should be on the fact that Bamberg could, and had, changed, not on the occurrence of racism from many years ago. She insists that in electing her as governor, South Carolinians showed that they loved that the Randhawas “knew the greatness of the American Dream just as much as anyone born here could—and maybe more, because [her] parents had come from a place where they couldn’t dream such dreams” (*Can’t Is Not An Option* 19). Once again, Haley’s assertion reveals the standard set for the model minority, or the “good immigrant,” in that such immigrants must believe in, and be in active pursuit of, the American Dream. To

“know its greatness,” is what makes an immigrant a worthy American, what makes Haley worthy of becoming governor. In this case, to subscribe to the dream appears largely to mean endorsing meritocracy, and asserting that racist experiences, such as that of the pageant, need not be examined critically or considered symbolic of systemic issues, but rather regarded as, at worst, an ugly remnant of a past now gone.

Haley’s discussion of the press, and how national media is predisposed to paint South Carolina as racist and “backwards” also serves to make white, southern voters more comfortable. Painting South Carolina as the victim of media dominated by those outside of it, seemingly those bent on exaggerating discussions of race and maintaining one image of the state, seems to achieve the same things that the survival tactics of Haley’s childhood achieved: maintaining a common ground, and minimizing differences. In making herself, a South Carolinian, one of the victims of news media, she detracts attention away from a real discussion of racism or power, in South Carolina or anywhere else, instead framing her memories as stories of adversity that she overcame and eventually transcended, as, she seems to say, anyone can if they stopped complaining and did something about it. This makes her more relatable and acceptable to the white voter.

Similarly, when Jake Knotts, at the time a South Carolina state senator, referred to Haley as a “raghead” when she was first running for governor, Haley writes in response, “When I heard what he had said, I was immediately angry because I knew his comments would go national.

They would be repeated by media all over the country and the world. At a time when I wanted people to feel good about our state, he was an example of why we've been regarded as a bunch of uneducated, backwoods racists. So I refused to dwell on the ignorance of one senator," again insisting that Knotts was "reinforcing everyone's worst stereotypes" about South Carolina (*Can't Is Not An Option* 162). Interestingly, Haley did not appear concerned about whether Knotts was reinforcing anyone's worst stereotypes about Indian Americans. What appears more important is defending South Carolina from accusation of racism, and thus protecting a white Republican's comfort, rather than preventing the persistence of racism itself.

In describing how Nikki Haley and Bobby Jindal successfully cover or morph aspects of their identity to "fit the dominant white culture and aesthetic," Misha Tsukerman discusses "racial exceptionalism," an idea explained as follows:

That when the outsiders (Jindal and Haley) make the insiders (the white Republican power structure) feel comfortable, by demonstrating dissimilarities to other members of their race through racial exceptionalism, they are "racial exceptions." Insiders (in this case whites) expect outsiders to make them feel uncomfortable. When those outsiders do not create the expected discomfort...they can be afforded privileges that are withheld from non-exceptional outsiders of the same race. (Tsukerman 46)



Haley, in the way that she discusses instances of racism that she and her family endured, practices racial exceptionalism. She does this by narrating and framing these stories so as to keep the audience, presumably white and Republican voters, comfortable. She asserts that South Carolina, and Bamberg, are places that have changed and are accepting, and conveys a disdain for the news media that pays attention to displays of racism. She also assumes responsibility on the part of her and her family for making themselves ideal Americans in their pursuit of success and acceptance. In doing these two things, Haley places no responsibility on white readers to challenge themselves. Thus, these readers can remain comfortable as Tsukerman details, assured that they are not racists, that other minorities could simply think as Haley thinks and assume more responsibility for their success. Haley can then be rewarded by the ruling class of white Republicans, per Tsukerman's assertion.

In Haley's case, being a racial exception does not only include demonstrating dissimilarity to other members of her own race, but distancing herself further from her Black peers. Haley dismisses the unique oppression of Black communities by highlighting the racism that she faced, and equating it to what Black legislators in South Carolina faced. She also frames the prejudice she experienced in terms of being cast out by both white *and* Black individuals. This is most apparent toward the end of the memoir, when she describes transitioning into her position as governor. When discussing her decision to appoint a majority-white cabinet, she describes the response of the Legislative Black Caucus, a group of Black state legislators who

expressed concern about the lack of diversity among leadership. Referring to them as “the identity-politics bean counters,” Haley claims that the lack of diversity in her cabinet was due to her commitment to picking the most qualified candidates (*Can't Is Not An Option* 189).

In emphasizing the value of meritocracy without consideration for systemic inequalities, Haley again prioritizes the comfort of white, Republican readers, allowing them to claim to not be racist. She describes explaining to Black legislators that she “didn’t think” about race or gender when making appointments, and goes on to explain that appointing someone “because of their race or gender,” was akin to being beholden to any “special-interest group” (*Can't Is Not An Option* 189). Again, Haley exemplifies Tsukerman’s description of the racial exception, separating herself from members of the Legislative Black Caucus, minorities who might make white voters and legislators uncomfortable, thus making herself palatable.

Haley invokes her identity as an Indian American to justify her decisions and assert that she cannot have racist intentions. After a Black legislator expressed feeling hurt that Haley had made such decisions in her cabinet appointments, Haley writes in response:

To come into my office and tell me that I wasn’t sensitive to race was something I couldn’t take. ‘You can’t grow up the way I did and come at me like that,’ I said. ‘We were the only Indian family in Bamberg. You can’t tell me I don’t know what you’re feeling.’ I had grown up with a white population that didn’t think we were white enough

and a black community that didn't see us as minority enough. We were always the 'other'. My family had suffered too. (*Can't Is Not An Option* 190)

Here, not only does Haley compare the experience of her Indian family to the lived experience of Black individuals, she describes the discrimination she faced as being perpetuated equally by both Black and white groups. This, too, can be seen as comforting to the hegemonic group. In neglecting to acknowledge the difference between white systemic oppression and acts of prejudice on the part of Black communities or individuals, Haley can ensure that white supremacist racial hierarchy is not seen as an enduring facet of the institution by which she has been rewarded. Again, the responsibility is not on the white Republican reader to challenge racism; rather, racism is something that can be practiced by any individual toward another, and while it can have damaging effects, one can still choose to be exceptional in spite of it.

Haley's first memoir provides the stories she uses throughout her writing to establish a relationship between herself and her Indian American identity. In her complex use of these narratives to illuminate her perspective to the public and to justify political ideas, she establishes herself as a model minority and a racial exception that ultimately comforts the white reader. Haley fosters comfort among white populations by, essentially, standing up for them. She asserts that they are in fact not racist, that society is not racist, and that the racist actions of some are actually exceptions too often misconstrued as the rule by the left. Thus, the villain truly becomes

the left for seemingly antagonizing the average conservative white. This becomes increasingly clear in her following works.

*With All Due Respect: Defending America With Grit and Grace*

Haley's second memoir *With All Due Respect: Defending American With Grit and Grace* was published in 2019, after the end of her time in Trump's cabinet. Between her last memoir and this one, she had faced more questioning on her stances regarding race and racism following the shooting of Walter Scott, a Black man who was shot in the back by a police officer, and the Mother Emanuel Church shooting in Charleston, both of which happened in 2015. Following the shooting, she signed off on the removal of the confederate flag from the state capitol. The bulk of the book focuses on her relationship to Donald Trump and her time serving as the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. Here, she addresses her racial identity and womanhood with noteworthy consistency compared to her first memoir, along with new ways of describing these relationships that have continued into her current campaign rhetoric. Nikki Haley of 2019 relates to her Indian American identity so as to react to discussions around race in the Trump era, and this becomes apparent with the way her rhetoric shifts to discuss the Left with respect to racial politics. She uses similar tools of the past to establish herself as a racial exception, but uses more contemporary language and framing. This is apparent in her discussion of systemic inequalities and systemic racism. This rhetoric proves to have apparent roots in the anti-discrimination

paradigm outlined by Watkins, gesturing to opportunities created through anti-discrimination legislation, and resulting cultural attitudes, as proof of sufficient progress with respect to race and gender.

She reiterates much of what she has said in her previous memoir, sure to center her racial identity in order to legitimize her neoliberal perspective. In particular, she begins by emphasizing her identity as not white and not Black, framing her experiences such that it appears both Black and white populations were prejudiced in comparable ways. This begins in the prologue, where she first mentions her Indian American identity. She writes, “I’m not blind to America’s faults...I was born a brown girl in a black-and-white world,” before describing moments in which her family faced racism in her childhood, particularly suspicion from those who witnessed her father in his turban. Another example of her framing strategy is shown when she writes, “And when I ran for governor, the pain was bipartisan. An African American Democrat denounced me as not a ‘real minority’ but ‘a conservative with a tan.’ And a white Republican called me a ‘raghead’”. Here, the bigotry of Jake Knotts’ comment is framed as equivalent to the comment made by a Black legislator, a slur being akin to “a conservative with a tan”. In doing this, Haley once again renders herself a racial exception in a way that is more complex than distancing herself from other Indian Americans. Rather, she appears to distance herself from any minority who asserts that white hegemony exists. She also highlights a key component of her narrative: that she is an “outsider” in all cases, uniquely positioned to describe her own experiences as isolated

incidents rather than systemic. Haley's framing also has roots in the anti-discrimination cultural framework. By denying white hegemony and describing prejudice as occurring equally from Black and white individuals, Haley denies that discrimination and racial prejudice is rooted in a persistent white supremacy, and is rather able to locate systemic racism as part of a past now over. Thus, when she asserts that she is "not blind to America's faults," it becomes unclear what she is referring to. This straddling of the tension between denouncing racist incidents while denying a systemic problem persists throughout the memoir.

The first chapter, titled "The Murders in Charleston," entirely centers the Mother Emanuel shooting, and segues into a discussion of Haley's own racial identity. On June 17, 2015, a white supremacist went into Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, known among South Carolinians as Mother Emanuel, and prayed with churchgoers before opening fire, killing nine of them. His intention was to find a place where large numbers of Black people gathered, and he chose Mother Emanuel because it was the oldest AME church in the South. Haley outlines in detail both the events during the killing and her experience of the events as governor. She highlights how national media approached the incident, claiming that the media was sensationalist in their coverage, and asserting that, "Before all the names of the victims were even known, mostly out-of-state voices were raising issues like the death penalty, gun control, and whether South Carolina had really left its history of racial animus behind" (*With All Due Respect* 13). Central to Haley's defense is how she isolates South Carolina and its people

from the rest of the country, both in terms of its suffering in the wake of the incident, and in terms of the shooting's repercussions; what the shooting might indicate about white supremacy's enduring presence seems to be located only in South Carolina, according to Haley. In doing this, she once again positions herself as a defender of Southern conservatism.

Another example of this approach appears when she describes President Obama's speech the morning after the shooting:

But toward the end of his remarks, President Obama made a historical analogy that I thought was wrong. He mentioned the four little African American girls who were killed in a church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. Their deaths had shocked the conscience of the nation and been a significant motivator to the civil rights movement. President Obama quoted Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who said of the 1963 victims, "We must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers"

I felt even more strongly than the president about the need for understanding exactly why the killer took the lives of nine people in a Charleston Church. I wanted justice for the victims and to make sure something like this never happened again in my state. But I also knew a lot had changed in the South since 1963. (*With All Due Respect* 14)

From here she segues into a description of her defining childhood stories, repeated from her first memoir: growing up in Bamberg to Indian parents, arriving at a kickball field as a child to find

Black and white kids telling her to pick which side she was on, The Wee Miss Bamberg pageant, and so on. After recounting these stories, she recycles the same assertion from her memoir seven years prior: that these stories remind her that, “the same thing would never happen today. South Carolina is a different place. My story is proof of that” (*With All Due Respect* 15). Remarkably, while using the exact same line from her previous memoir, she once again compares her own experiences of racial stigmatization to the well-documented, pervasive act of state violence toward Black populations perpetuated by the police. She continues:

So I thought President Obama was wrong after the Mother Emanuel murders when he implied that the South was somehow to blame. I didn’t believe then and I don’t believe now that our ‘way of life’ or our ‘system’ created the killer. I would not have been elected governor if South Carolina were a racially intolerant place. Tim Scott would not have been elected senator if South Carolina was consumed with racial hatred. (*With All Due Respect* 15)

It is important to point out the ways in which Haley remains consistent over the course of time. She appears firm in her conviction that the success of politicians of color, namely her own and that of Tim Scott, are indicative of a post-racial South Carolina. Despite acts of racism that have occurred during her tenure as governor, including the murder of Walter Scott and the Mother Emanuel murders, Haley remains steadfast in the same assertions, once again pointing to her



family's eventual success in the Bamberg community and her own exceptionalism as indicators of an apparent cultural rule that, along with the racism that she experienced in her childhood, anything systemically racist about South Carolina or the South was in the past. This is at the core of her defensive approach to Southern conservatism. Haley contorts Obama's use of the Martin Luther King, Jr. quote such that he appears to be referring *only* to the "system," "way of life," and "philosophy" of the South, rather than the country as a whole. In doing this, she is again able to position herself as a defender of the South and its culture. Of the media, Haley writes, "It was clear to me how strong a hold the worst stereotypes about the South had on some in the media. It was as if they, too, believed nothing had changed since 1963. I knew it was my job to push back, and I did" (*With All Due Respect* 15).

She moves into her decision to take down the confederate flag in South Carolina's statehouse grounds in the second chapter, titled, "The Flag Comes Down." Here, Haley ties her motivation specifically to the Charleston killer's affinity for the flag. Prior to this incident, she claims to have perceived discussion around the flag as an argument: on one side, the flag was the symbol of "heritage and ancestry" and on the other, of "hate and oppression" both sides of which she "could understand" (*With All Due Respect* 18). She also discusses the Walter Scott shooting that had happened months prior in this section, describing the police officer who shot him as "a tragic exception" to the majority of South Carolina police officers who were "fair and dedicated public servants" (*With All Due Respect* 20). Central to the discussions of white

supremacy—the Mother Emanuel shooting as well as the shooting of Walter Scott—is that Haley’s goal is to diffuse tension, and that she seeks to voice her belief that the media sensationalizes these incidents and fuels racial animus and division between people. She expresses multiple times that she wanted to avoid incidents such as the Ferguson, Missouri uprising. This is how she justifies her efforts to take down the confederate flag from its place of prominence, citing the killer’s use of the flag as having ruined the symbol of Southern heritage that it could represent, and rendering the flag a symbol of division among South Carolinians. In order to prevent further division, according to Haley, the flag needed to be removed. Interestingly, she uses the story of the police being called on her father at a fruit stand to justify taking down the flag, citing the pain she still feels upon passing the stand to this day.

Haley’s approach to the flag debate, and her expressed goal to diffuse tension and prevent further protest in her state, speaks to how she positions herself at the center of Black-white relations. In centering her efforts to prevent “another Ferguson” throughout the chapter, Haley maintains a narrative of keeping balance and order, seeking accountability while once again placing responsibility not on systemic racism, but on individuals and on what she views as a cultural war between Black and white communities, bolstered and fueled by the national media (*With All Due Respect* 20). She also makes her stance on forms of acceptable protest clear, praising South Carolina’s response to racist incidents as a “healthier way,” and framing protests like Ferguson as counterproductive and only divisive (*With All Due Respect* 25). This can be

viewed as a leveraging of her racial identity in that Haley, from her vantage point as neither white nor Black and as governor, claims an authority to determine which responses to racism are appropriate and which are not.

Similarly, Haley uses her parents' story of immigration to claim authority on matters of immigration policy. She writes:

Immigration is a topic that is personal to me. My parents left behind lives of privilege in India to come to America, and they struggled when they got here...My parents came legally. So it is no surprise that they are offended by those who try to come here illegally. America is a generous and open country; my family experienced that firsthand. But it makes no sense to allow people to break out laws and in return get education, health care, and housing, all at the expense of Americans who are here legally...As long as immigrants outside of our country know there are ways to circumvent and take advantage of the system, many will do it (*With All Due Respect* 27).

Consistent with the narrative that she tells of her parents' immigration in 2012, Haley details the wealthy and highly-educated background from which her parents' came, and frames their narrative such that they did not benefit from these privileges upon entering the United States. She fails to mention the specific immigration laws that allowed her parents a pathway to citizenship, including the aforementioned 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, enacted in the wake of the Cold War and America's need for highly-educated individuals in the sciences (Mishra 26-27).

Instead, Haley focuses on the binary of legal and illegal immigrants, claiming in the name of fairness that those who circumvent immigration laws are doing so at the expense of legal immigrants. This establishes a narrative that excludes any existing issues of exclusive immigration laws that do not include opportunities for the poor and those lacking higher education, and fails to acknowledge the current exploitation of undocumented immigrant labor in the United States. By framing undocumented immigrants as simply those who are “taking advantage of the system” rather than as people who are marginalized and exploited by that system, Haley appears to maintain a narrative of equal opportunities for all who wish to legally navigate American immigration. She is then able to make a case for decreased intervention on the part of the state to assist those facing economic hardship at the hands of such systems, leveraging her own experience of privilege as an example of an apparently unbiased immigration process and the unlimited possibilities provided in America. This, too, can be found to have roots in anti-discrimination rhetoric of the 1960s and 1970s in that it perpetuates a narrative of racial progress and transcending hardships relating to race while dismissing issues of class.

She later on complicates this point by stating that, while she is proudly the daughter of immigrants and understands people’s desire to come to the United States, the country must not “let anyone” in, and must prioritize “people with skills, not just with family connections,” and claimed that a distinction must be made between “people who need international protection and those who just want to escape poverty or crime” (*With All Due Respect* 96). This rhetoric implies

that immigration should preserve existing social stratification, only prioritizing the most skilled or those who the United States deems to be the most oppressed in their home countries, and that avenues for those seeking to escape poverty or crime should not be prioritized. Again, by advocating for some minority and marginalized communities' entrance into the United States, including that of her own group, Haley distracts from the negative impacts existing immigration policies have on racialized groups through exclusion of economically disenfranchised communities.

She bolsters this narrative by explicitly promoting model minority ideals regarding Indian and Indian American populations, when she writes:

The United States has a partnership with India that is strong and getting stronger... Most important, our partnership is based on shared principles. Our two countries share a belief in democracy, hard work, family, and achievement. Indian Americans have been very successful in the United States. We are the minority group that is the most educated, has the highest per-capita income, and, most important, is one of the most charitable in America. There are a number of reasons for Indian Americans' success in the United States. But mostly, we're just good at being Americans. And that says as much about America as it does about us. (*With All Due Respect* 95)

The sweeping generalizations that Haley makes about Indian Americans overlooks multiple histories, detailed by Sangay Mishra. Mishra's analysis clearly outlines how American

immigration laws curate the immigrant population to fit America's economic and geopolitical needs, which has privileged the existing Indian American population that Haley describes. This population is composed largely of highly educated professionals with access to a legal pathway toward citizenship and economic opportunity provided through the American immigration system.

The history that Haley ignores to instead promote a model minority image of the Indian American is apparent. In describing how Indians are simply "good at being American" while condemning all undocumented immigration, Haley exposes a racialized perspective of who undocumented people are, as she seemingly asserts that they could not possibly be of Indian origin. By only highlighting the Indian Americans who are high-income and highly-educated, she ignores the American immigration system that allows for curated waves of immigrants that meet America's needs at a given moment, falsely ascribing to them something innate that renders them model identities that anyone could aspire to be.

In a study of far-right Indian diaspora Twitter users, Eviane Leidig speaks to the reproduction of the "good immigrant" narrative, which relies on describing those who obtain citizenship through legal means and often working professional-class jobs as "good" and vilifying undocumented immigration. This narrative is connected to the model minority myth, and these ideas are shown to be perpetuated by Indian Americans and Indians in the UK on the far right. Leidig explains that Indian diaspora Twitter users on the right tend to identify

themselves as “good” and “assimilated,” asserting their coexistence with Western culture (Leidig et al. 310).

Leidig, citing examples stated by Haley of high education and income along with low criminality and high familial stability, asserts that model minorities, praised for their “societal integration” maintained through socio-economic metrics, perpetuate the “good immigrant” narrative (Leidig et al. 310). This is the narrative that Haley’s rhetoric serves. The assimilationist rhetoric stems from an anti-discrimination approach, as model minorities, perceived to have integrated into hegemonic capitalist society, serve as proof of a functioning system in which any individual should be able to take part.

True to the logic of her first memoir, in which Haley argues against systemically aiding marginalized groups, she argues that “rights that benefit everyone” are seen by the left as “tools that perpetuate inequality” (*With All Due Respect* 97). She writes, “As an Indian American woman, I am keenly aware of the discrimination that has existed and continues to exist in our country. But we mustn’t elevate identity politics to the absurd heights that the left takes it. In South Carolina, as in many other parts of America, there are white communities that in many ways are a forgotten part of our country” (*With All Due Respect* 97). This passage includes multiple of Haley’s rhetorical approaches. First, she uses her identities as an Indian American and as a woman to claim an awareness of American discrimination and authority to speak on whether “identity politics” has been taken too far. She then asserts that the left has spoken about

race in terms that has ignored poor and working class white communities, and she has once again placed emphasis on South Carolina, reinforcing her protectiveness of the South. This again renders her a racial exception; the statement serves to make white conservatives comfortable, and assert a narrative in which racialized communities on the left are victimizing themselves, thus absolving white conservatives of responsibility for perpetuating systemic oppression.

While Haley discusses her experience as a minority woman in politics throughout her memoirs, echoing the anti-discrimination rhetoric that Watkins describes both in terms of race and gender, Haley more clearly details her approach to leveraging womanhood in politics, and using it to justify right-wing politics, in her most recent book.

*“If You Want Something Done...”*

Published in 2022, *“If You Want Something Done...”* chronicles the lives and efforts of ten women who, Haley asserts, are bold leaders from whom women can draw inspiration. Each chapter is dedicated to one of these women, with an introduction that centers a part of Haley’s experience and connects it to the story of the woman she highlights. Before the beginning of each story, a quote by the featured woman is followed by one of Haley’s own quotes. Haley uses these stories to describe her own politics, often using assimilationist and anti-discrimination rhetoric. Much as in her last memoir, she employs rhetoric that emphasizes gratitude for being in



America, and further illustrates the point here by featuring women who she believes persevered in the face of the existing status quo.

The women highlighted here include expressly right-wing figures such as Margaret Thatcher and Jeane Kirkpatrick, the former ambassador to the UN under Ronald Reagan, and figures such as Claudette Colvin, a civil rights activist, and Amelia Earhart, all of whose stories Haley employs to promote a narrative of pushing back against the status quo, while paradoxically defending American institutions. Importantly, multiple of these women rose to prominence between the late 1960s into the 1980s, in the aftermath of liberationist and civil rights movements' transformations to efforts to integrate women in workplaces and anti-discrimination legislation. In discussing each of these three women, Haley's rhetoric once again adapts to contemporary discussion around race and class, along with socialism, Zionism, and conservative conceptions of freedom. She also includes discussions surrounding existing cultural phenomena and conversations surrounding systemic privileging of some groups over others.

The most illuminating passages include her discussions of socialism, cancel culture, the Black Lives Matter protests following the murder of George Floyd, and feminism. Haley weaves these discussions into the stories of her subjects and draws connections between conservative political ideas and feminism or women's empowerment where such a connection is not salient.

Ultimately, Haley prioritization of individualism is made most apparent, consistent with that of Tea Party feminists described by Deckman and with Haley's rhetoric in her memoirs.

### Margaret Thatcher: Stand For Principle

Haley uses Margaret Thatcher's famed quote, "If you want something said, ask a man. If you want something done, ask a woman," as the title for the book, and begins the body of work with Thatcher's story, where she highlights the administration's dismantling of Britain's socialist structures. Haley paints Thatcher's conviction in the face of popular discontent surrounding her policies as a mark of strong, principled, and courageous leadership. She writes, "Thatcher's rejection of socialism and communism wasn't just economic. It was a moral crusade against an existential threat. Communism denied people their God-given rights to freedom. Therefore, it had to be eradicated" (*If You Want Something Done* 9). Haley describes Thatcher's view of socialism as the stripping of people's rights "to make economic choices, to own property, and build better lives for themselves and their families," and asserts that socialism insists on equality of results for every individual (*If You Want Something Done* 9). Ultimately, Haley asserts that Thatcher pulled Britain out of economic hardship through enacting neoliberal policies, and that this would not have been achieved had Thatcher succumbed to popular opinion. Haley asserts that Thatcher understood "the British people were tired of weak-kneed leaders," implying that previous leaders who had acquiesced to calls for collectivism had displayed weakness. So too,

she argues, women should remain in their fight on the side of principle rather than what is popular (*If You Want Something Done* 11).

Haley's account of Thatcher's administration highlights not only Thatcher's stance against socialism and Britain's Labour Party, but the conviction with which she held her stance in spite of the economic hardship her policies may have caused, particularly for the working class. Haley highlights Thatcher's ability to stand alone in her fight to promote individualistic values, echoing Deckman's exact language surrounding the Tea Party's desire to hold the "weak-kneed" Republican establishment accountable. In doing this, Haley employs her discussion of Thatcher's persona as a way of portraying collectivist policies as damaging, and is able to situate socialism in historical context such that, as a principle, it can be described as a failing set of policies from which Britain needed to be saved by a strong, capitalist woman. This illuminates how Haley aims to incorporate discussions of contemporary political debate, and her own political stances, in her description of women leaders. This becomes increasingly clear throughout the work.

#### Jeane Kirkpatrick: Don't Apologize

In her description of Jeane Kirkpatrick, Haley centers what, she asserts, was Kirkpatrick's display of strength as US Ambassador to the United Nations under Ronald Reagan. Emphasizing how Kirkpatrick, "never apologized," Haley argues that Kirkpatrick's leadership in "defending Israel, denouncing the Soviet Union, [and] calling out the United Nations's hypocrisy," during

the Cold War (*If You Want Something Done* 12). Haley asserts that, following the Carter administration, “the world saw America as weak because we saw ourselves as weak,” and that Kirkpatrick’s unapologetic voice was the antidote to this displayed weakness. In perseveringly holding the Soviet Union accountable at the United Nations for an attack of a Korean Airline, Haley argues, Kirkpatrick defied the status quo of “business as usual” at the United Nations, and displayed America’s strength. In this context, Haley asserts:

We live in a time when we are expected to apologize for everything— as individuals and as a nation. Cancel culture demands ideological conformity by squeezing apologies out of people who dare to disagree with woke orthodoxy...An entire philosophy has emerged around the ridiculous idea that America is inherently evil and we must constantly atone for our collective sins. This national self-loathing permeates our lives. In school, young children are taught to feel guilty for being American. In corporate America and even the halls of our government, workers are forced to undergo “training” sessions to correct their “privileged” misconceptions. In this new woke religion, we are all tainted by America’s original sin. Moral redemption is only possible through our public mea culpas. (*If You Want Something Done* 17).

Haley connects her sentiments in the present day to those of Kirkpatrick, who, Haley explains, was “disgusted” by the Left’s “anti-Americanism,” in the 1960s and 1970s, which led her to shift from the Democratic to the Republican Party, in 1984 (*If You Want Something Done* 17). Here,

Haley frames the efforts of today's Left as the status quo, a "religion," whose ethic is so pervasive that it is overtaking America with weakness and "self-loathing." Haley frames the Left wing's efforts to acknowledge the history of American racism as an "orthodoxy" that demands conformity in order to compare what women face today to the challenges faced by Kirkpatrick in the United Nations. Haley appears to urge women readers against the "woke" ideology, using the term "woke" in keeping with its use among right-wing political commentators critical of the Left's approach to social justice. Rather than conform to "wokeness" Haley seems to ask, women should choose to stand apart from it as independent voices.

Similar to the Tea Party women described by Deckman, Haley is able to discuss the "outsider" status of women within institutions, pointing to a difference in treatment of women in the world of establishment politics and society, but pushes back on systemic accommodation for such differences. To call for systemic change, according to Haley, is damaging for America, urging consensus and conformity rather than a willingness to stand alone. This can be viewed as a tactic in keeping with Tea Party feminism that encourages women to display their equality by proving oneself and being independent, both of the government and of preconceived societal notions. According to Haley, it appears that it is an individual woman's job to transcend sexist and racist notions ascribed to her. How Haley chooses to address the intersection of race and womanhood is more apparent in her description of civil rights activist Claudette Colvin, and the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020.

Claudette Colvin: Stand for What's Right Even If You're Standing Alone

Haley establishes the tone for this section by beginning with, “Over the spring and summer of 2020, I watched America burn...rioters used the mantle of Black Lives Matter to destroy American cities, businesses, and lives. It was heartbreaking knowing the wave of violence would do nothing to improve civil rights in America” (*If You Want Something Done* 41). Here, Haley is vague in describing what she means regarding civil rights, and is firm in her prescriptive ideas of what the correct form of protest and civil rights activism entails, as well as what forms of activism yield results. Consistent with right-wing beliefs on the efficacy of Black Lives Matter protests, Haley asserts that the protests only led to disunity and destruction. She continues, “The America I know allowed a brown girl with Indian parents to become the first female minority governor in the country. The America I know is marked by mistakes, yes, but also incredible, awe-inspiring progress” (*If You Want Something Done* 100). This is a familiar example from her previous memoirs, where Haley leverages her brownness and womanhood to assure the goodness and progress inherent to American culture. These indicators of progress are presented so as to negate other forms of oppression that occur. It is also presented as evidence of why those who experience racism should replace their anger with gratitude for the progress that has been made and with a drive to prove their detractors wrong through individual success. Thus, according to Haley, destroying corporate business fronts and protesting in the street is ungrateful

and ineffective. This plays into model minority ideals, and neoliberal ideas of needing to prove oneself in order to transcend racial prejudice.

Haley cites South Carolinians' response to the Mother Emanuel shooting, which she characterizes as unity and care for one another rather than protests, as the correct response to the tragedy. She continues to describe the story of Claudette Colvin, an activist who, at fifteen years old, refused to give up her bus seat to a white woman in Montgomery, Alabama and was put in jail in 1955. Haley describes what later became the Montgomery bus boycotts and the legal battle that ensued against segregationist policy. Throughout this section, Haley discusses institutional and internalized racism, from internalized attitudes that Colvin faced regarding her skin and hair to the racist attitudes of the police officers who arrested Colvin (*If You Want Something Done* 42-43). Still, Haley centers Colvin's bravery in standing up for her "constitutional right," and centers the legal battle that hinged on the unconstitutional nature of the segregated bus system in Montgomery (*If You Want Something Done*, 44). Haley ultimately emphasizes that Colvin stood alone, acting as a catalyst for the Montgomery bus boycott, centering her independent thought and her belief in what was right. However, her inclusion of Colvin in the collection, and her description of Colvin's story, provides further insight into Haley's approach toward addressing racism. She centers Colvin's form of protest, and the legalist approach taken in the pursuit of justice, as a courageous and commendable form of civil rights activism, contrasted with her portrayal of 2020's Black Lives Matter protests. Haley explains her view that, "America is about

opportunity for all citizens—regardless of race, gender, or circumstances—to work hard and make a life for themselves and their families, ” and explains that Colvin’s story is one of a girl who had a vision of what America “should be” (*If You Want Something Done* 41). It appears that Haley seeks to convey how Colvin’s story is more similar to her own, that both reflect stories of people of color who are successfully integrated into an aspect of hegemonic society. Haley is able to frame Colvin’s act of courage, and boycotts and legal battle that followed, in the context of anti-discrimination, securing a constitutional right that Haley frames as in keeping with the nation’s founding principles. Meanwhile, Haley argues, “Angry mobs and shattered cities are not what America is about” (*If You Want Something Done* 41).

The line between acknowledging racial injustice and the ways that it persists in modern American society and condemning protests and anti-racist education is blurred and complicated in Haley’s later rhetoric. The way that she employs her own identity to bolster her case often involves reminding readers of her success, and asserting that her success is a testament to American progress and the accessibility of such success to all Americans, despite the fact that she can at times acknowledge different forms of persistent racism. However, central to her approach to the issue of racism is finding legal and legislative solutions, such as removing the confederate flag from South Carolina’s state capitol grounds, mandating body cameras for police officers, or battling the constitutionality of segregationist policy. Policies implemented in reaction to specific incidents are Haley’s approach, and she appears to draw a line between this



and what she referred to as “woke orthodoxy” and “riots.” She appears to have a similar approach to feminism, which she goes on to articulate with clarity.

Amelia Earhart: If You’re Going to Do Something, Do It Well

In her discussion of feminism, Haley greatly reflects Deckman’s findings on women affiliated with the Tea Party and their attitudes toward feminism, namely in their emphasis on individuality, and abstaining from what Haley often describes as “victimhood.” Haley begins the section by asserting that feminism “should mean simply that women are granted the same legal rights and protections under the law as men have—not more, not less,” articulating almost exactly the anti-discrimination rhetoric of the 1970s articulated by Watkins (*If You Want Something Done* 56). By specifying that feminism must only be asserted through a legalist approach, Haley affirms that it should not extend to remedying what Srinivasan described as those forms of oppression faced by most women today in the way of poverty and a lack of resources. It also, as Haley articulates, does not extend to certain cultural shifts challenging masculine hegemony. Haley describes modern feminism much as she did the “woke orthodoxy” and cancel culture, claiming that feminism has been “twisted” into a way to “browbeat people into sticking to a preapproved script” (*If You Want Something Done* 56). She calls to “reclaim” feminism, arguing

that it appears many feminists today are too angry, and that she found the best way forward upon experiencing sexism was to show people that they were wrong (*If You Want Something Done* 56).

Feminism today is filled with tropes about what men should do to empower women.

They should interrupt less, go out of their way to ask women what they think, rephrase questions to be more inclusive. That is a vast overreach and is often unfair to men. I

prefer to focus on how we can teach young girls and women to empower

themselves... Victimhood should never be the answer. Working hard and proving you deserve to be in the room is what will improve your life and the lives of women who come after you.

To Haley, the onus is on the woman, much as the onus is on the minority throughout her memoirs, to prove themselves capable and deserving, in keeping with the right of the 1970s era of anti-discrimination and later Tea Party politics.

The ways in which Haley's rhetoric throughout her three books can be situated in the context of a legalist approach to progress as well as enduring ideas surrounding the model minority and what it means to be a worthy immigrant. The way that Haley relates to her identity as an Indian American woman proves to be consistent over the course of her three memoirs, prioritizing her successes as an individual and espousing a belief that one should not expect the state to address issues beyond discrimination with respect to race, gender, and class. Thus, she leverages her identities to promote a capitalist status quo, along with right-wing cultural ideas

regarding societal handling of race and gender. Her rhetoric also follows a trend of assuming a defensive position on behalf of Southern Conservatism.

This rhetoric proves to remain present in her latest materials, produced during her campaign for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination.

### **Chapter 3: A Story of America**

On February 14, 2023, Nikki Haley published a three-and-a-half minute video announcing her candidacy for the Republican nomination in 2024's presidential election. Haley's story of herself, her upbringing, and her accomplishments is inextricably linked from the story that she tells about America. How she continues to use her identities during her campaign for president can provide illuminating insights into the direction of the modern Republican party and its relationship to gender and race, particularly in the wake of more volatile discourse with respect to social justice in the post-Trump era. The extent to which Haley, now faced with more contemporary political adversaries and discourse, must adapt her narrative in her bid for the Republican nomination can be explored in her campaign announcement video.

Through an analysis of the rhetoric and imagery displayed in the video we can view both the enduring strategies Haley employs to make herself a racial exception and espouse reactionary right-wing politics as well as the ways she has adapted such rhetoric to fit the contemporary political landscape. Most striking is the way that she continues to center her experience as an Indian American in Bamberg, South Carolina as a proxy for what America can and should be, and the new ways she cites her experience in the UN to frame the left wing as ungrateful and proponents of critical race theory as un-American.

The video hinges on three different narratives: Haley's upbringing and racial identity, Haley's defense of the United States in contrast to what she describes as the Left's criticism, and

Haley’s desire for a renewed American identity that is unified and strong, with South Carolina as a model for what this could look like.

### Racial Identity

“The Railroad tracks divided the town by race. I was the proud daughter of Indian immigrants. Not Black, not white. I was different,” Haley said in her 2024 Presidential Announcement (00:00:00-00:00:13).<sup>5</sup>

A home, Haley’s modest childhood home, is first to appear on screen. The words “Bamberg, South Carolina” appear underneath it, and on the sidewalk in front of the house, a framed photo comes into focus: it is a commonly-used old photo of Haley and her family. Pictured are her siblings and herself, young, surrounding her parents. Her father is wearing a turban and a suit. Her mother is wearing a sari. Another framed photo comes into focus in front of the house: this time, it is a photo of a young school-aged Haley and her class in a classroom. A brightened circle highlights her face, differentiating it from the rest of the students. Of 34 students, 10, including Haley, appear to be students of color. Then, the sprawl of Bamberg is displayed from above, with the railroad tracks in the center of the frame, and then fades to present-day Haley, walking alongside the railroad track, the voiceover now revealing her speaking to the viewer. Her name flashes across the screen next to her as she speaks. She is

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<sup>5</sup> Haley, Nikki. “Nikki Haley 2024 presidential announcement: full video.” *YouTube*, uploaded by News 19 WLTX, 14 February 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qITO7H1UVnc>.  
*Nikki Haley 2024 Presidential Announcement: Full Video*, 2023,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qITO7H1UVnc>.(0:00-0:13)

wearing a necklace displaying the South Carolina flag's symbols, the palmetto and crescent, and as she walks she says, "But my mom would always say, 'Your job is not to focus on the differences, but the similarities.' And my parents reminded me and my siblings every day how blessed we were to live in America" (Nikki Haley 00:00:13-00:00:27).

Haley's parents moved to Bamberg in 1969, and she was born in 1972, following Jim Crow. Additionally, her parents' arrival in the U.S. followed the 1965 immigration act, which expanded access to special immigrant visas and a pathway to citizenship for immigrants from Asia. Haley appears to emphasize that the town was segregated by race to then highlight how she and her family did not fit into the segregated structure. She even walks alongside the track, at the center of the division that it causes. In doing this, she asserts both her "outsider" status and her desire to be a unifier. This is how she is able to set the stage for a prejudice that she has claimed, throughout her career, came from both white and Black communities.

She does not focus here on the systemic segregation of Black and white communities, the enduring presence of Jim Crow, only on the fact that her family existed outside of such a dichotomy. She then uses the familiar quote from her mother, the instruction that she was to focus on similarities rather than differences between herself and her peers. This assertion appears in the beginnings of her memoirs, along with the line on her parents' reminding her of the blessings America brings. All of the images in the first thirty seconds of the video—the photos of her parents, the divided railroad tracks, the framing of herself as an outsider of any racialized

community—are articulations of what she has repeated over the years through her memoirs, and they lend themselves to her position as a racial exception, as discussed by Tsukerman. This visualization of her rhetoric displays the type of enduring strategies that she is taking with her into the future of her presidential run amidst contemporary racial politics.

In her first memoir, she describes her reasoning for using the line, “I am the proud daughter of Indian immigrants,” in her campaign speeches as both an expression of pride and as, “a warning, a shot across the bow of those who thought they could make being different—my being different or anyone’s being different—a disqualifying factor for leadership...My opponents, I thought, might as well know that up front” (*Can’t Is Not An Option* 1).

The context in which she is making this assertion “up front” appears to have shifted. Where the opponents to which Haley was referring in 2012 was the South Carolina Republican establishment, the “good old boys,” marked by their age and whiteness, she appears to express the same pride in 2023 as a signal to the political Left; she claims her parents’ immigration and her racial identity in a way that is not only for herself, but for the Republican party. She frames herself as an outsider by being “not Black” and “not white,” such that she is the right amount of both being an outsider, while being enough of a person of color to claim an insider’s knowledge on America’s relationship to race. Additionally, she appears to use her mother’s advice to “focus on similarities” as a prescription for people of color: do not focus on the oppression that you

face, rather focus on ignoring it or transcending it, echoing a remarkably consistent sentiment across all three of her memoirs.

In beginning the video with a description of Bamberg, and her experience in Bamberg, Haley sets the stage for situating her story and the story of America in the context of South Carolina. This is shown in her shots of the town, the way the video highlights Bamberg, and even the constant presence of references to South Carolina throughout the video, including her ever present necklace with the South Carolina palmetto and crescent in view.

#### Framing of the Political Left

Looking directly at the camera, Haley says, “Some look at our past as evidence that America’s founding principles are bad. They say the promise of freedom is just made up. Some think our ideas are not just wrong, but racist and evil. Nothing could be further from the truth” (Nikki Haley 00:00:27-00:00:46). A TV screen flashes images of a news segment covering the NYT magazine project “1619” which traces America’s legacy of slavery, a sign that reads “Racism Is A Pandemic” held up at a protest, an American flag burning during a protest.

As Haley refers to “some people” who believe ideas are not only wrong, but racist, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez speaking at a Bernie Sanders rally appears, followed by another news clip discussing the 1619 project with the headline “NY Times Magazine Publishes Stories About



U.S. Slavery.” The visual then flashes back to Haley’s face when she says, “Nothing could be further from the truth.”

Haley’s language here is markedly defensive of the country, positioning herself, and “our,” ideas as Americans against a fringe “some” who believe such ideas are “wrong,” “racist,” or “evil,” approaching the issue of American racism in particular from a place of defense rather than from a desire to redress. By using such language and claiming with conviction that those who take a critical approach to America’s history could not “be further from the truth,” Haley is able to appeal to Republican voters who aim to preserve the notion of American meritocracy, and echoes the defensive “political whiteness” described by Kirk. Once again, per Tsukerman’s explanation of the racial exception, Haley is able to demonstrate a dissimilarity from her peers of color, who are typically on the left, in order to gain privileges from the white Republican power structure by keeping insiders of the Republican party comfortable (Tsukerman 16).

Twice, the visuals reference The 1619 Project, a project that, according to its authors, “aims to reframe the country’s history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of our national narrative” (The 1619 Project). The project spurred some controversy among historians, and sparked political backlash from the right, with Donald Trump criticizing the project and starting his own initiative, claiming to begin investigation into the use of the project in schools and revoking federal funding, and announcing the “1776 commission,” favoring a “patriotic” curriculum in schools. This sort of response was

reflected in from multiple states' legislatures, including Florida's 2021 ban of teaching critical race theory in schools, which explicitly bans material from The 1619 Project from being taught. The project has come to represent critical race theory, and, in this video, appears to represent the political aversion by the right wing to it.

Placing visuals referring to the project alongside Haley's words frames the project, and initiatives like it, to be false claims of racism rather than rigorous historical analyses. The sign that reads "Racism Is A Pandemic" amidst a protest during COVID-19 following the murder of George Floyd is shown while Haley dismisses the notion of systemic racism. Visuals target AOC at a Bernie Sanders rally in reference to the "some" who believe in systemic racism, and, true to her Tea Party and Trumpist roots, target them as faces of socialism and untenable change. While arguably more tempered than Trump's approach, Haley's rhetoric paired with visuals of prominent left-wing figures plays an important role in a right-wing reactionary and conspiratorial framework employed throughout the video.

### The UN and Framing the Left as Ungrateful

At another point in the video, Haley's voice-over reads, "I have seen evil. In China, they commit genocide. In Iran, they murder their own people for challenging the government. And when a woman tells you about watching soldiers throw her baby into a fire, it puts things in

perspective” (Nikki Haley 00:0:45-00:01:03). Imagery of news segments on Iranian executions appears, along with video of Haley visiting children with a hijabi woman, followed by video of Haley in a helicopter, presumably in her role as UN Ambassador. Again, Haley of present day emerges to say, “Even on our worst day we are blessed to live in America” (Nikki Haley 00:01:05-00:01:10).

This is quoted almost verbatim from her second memoir, and uses a familiar tactic following her time in the UN, which is to insist that one should be grateful for the United States by keeping in mind the oppression faced by those in other countries. According to Haley, America needs to have things “put in perspective” by comparing its oppression relative to the suffering of others. She does this while dismissing America’s history of racism as false history. Haley has used multiple strategies over the course of her career to frame the Left as ungrateful for the freedoms allowed in the United States, with her time in the UN as the latest iteration of this tactic.

### South Carolina As a Model for America

As shots of South Carolina towns and cities appear on screen, Haley says, “I was born and raised in South Carolina, so I have seen the very best of our country. People here threw out the old, tired political establishment and demanded accountability for their tax dollars” (Nikki Haley 00:01:11-00:01:24).

Old news articles of Haley begin to flash across the screen, one titled “Women’s wins mark change,” another of her and her husband Michael on a stage being cheered on by the crowd, with headlines flashing above the video clip, with titles such as, “South Carolina’s True Reformer,” “Gov. Haley calls for tax cuts, tort reform,” “Haley rips House budget” (Nikki Haley 00:01:11-00:01:24).

Here, Haley highlights her Tea Party values, positioning herself as a disruptor who demanded fiscal accountability from the establishment. Haley highlights early Tea Party rhetoric of newness and honesty. The articles highlight the Tea Party focus on fiscal conservatism, particularly tax cuts and limiting the state government’s spending in South Carolina.

Haley touts that reports called South Carolina “The Beast of the Southeast” in reference to the state’s economic prosperity, and an image of a child holding up the South Carolina flag appears as Haley says, “Children learned it was always a great day in South Carolina. We were strong. We were proud” (Nikki Haley 00:01:37-00:01:47).

The music then slows as overhead shots of Mother Emanuel AME church appear, followed by a shot of a sign that reads “Mother Emanuel Way Memorial District,” and a CBSN news segment covering the breaking news, “Church Shooting in Charleston, SC.” Visuals appear of Haley speaking to the media, Haley in the church, Haley speaking at a podium, Haley in pews with her hands crossed and joined with two men. Overlapping audio plays a news segment, in which an anchor says, “Police in South Carolina are looking for a gunman following a shooting

at a church.” Meanwhile, Haley in a voiceover says, “And when evil did come, we turned away from fear, toward God, and the values that still make our country the freest and greatest in the world” (Nikki Haley 00:01:55-00:02:14).

Here again, Haley highlights the shooting at Mother Emanuel as an incident in which she asserts that South Carolina handled racism differently, upholding American values in a way she argues that the Left does not, and juxtaposing imagery of herself in a church, holding hands with community members with the earlier scenes of protests during the pandemic.

Quickly, the video switches to upbeat music, and to Haley in the present day wearing a Blue dress with a necklace of South Carolina’s state symbols. An American flag raised next to two traffic lights flashes across the screen before she says,

“We must turn in that direction again. Republicans have lost the popular vote in 7 out of the last 8 presidential elections. That has to change. Joe Biden’s record is abysmal. But that shouldn’t come as a surprise. The Washington establishment has failed us over and over and over again.” (Nikki Haley 00:02:16-00:02:37)

The shot changes to Haley entering Rusty & Paula’s, a restaurant in Bamberg, South Carolina, as Haley’s voiceover says, “It’s time for a new generation of leadership, to rediscover fiscal responsibility, secure our border, and strengthen our country, our pride, and our purpose” (Nikki Haley 00:02:37-00:02:49). The words “New Generation,” “fiscal responsibility,” “secure border,” flash across the screen in succession as Haley says these words, followed by “strengthen

our country,” “strengthen our pride,” and “strengthen our purpose” while the camera follows her shaking hands with mostly white community members in the restaurant, her South Carolina necklace visible in the shot and American flags all around the room. Another shot shows her outside, shaking hands with police officers. The shot then changes to the Bamberg water tower.

Central to Haley’s rhetoric here is a “return” to an America she once knew: one that, according to her, turned toward God and unified upon a white supremacist shooting a Black church, and experienced economic prosperity under her leadership. This rhetoric mirrors that of Trump, with similar political proposals and cultural ideas. Throughout, she maintains the notion that she is outside of the “establishment,” part of a “new generation” of leaders despite a long career in politics.

The imagery and rhetoric highlight a desire to uphold a merit-based immigration system, promote model-minority ideas, and back police. She harkens back to the Tea Party ideals of “fiscal responsibility” while dismissing notions of racism, except for when a tragedy such as Mother Emanuel acts as a unifying force. Her rhetoric also reflects her final book, in which she emphasized the importance of displaying “strength” as a leader and pride in being American. So too, she continues to frame the Left wing as weak and self-loathing.

### Associating the Left with Weakness and Impending Threat

A graphic appears with images of four figures: Nancy Pelosi, Joe Biden, Kamala Harris, and Bernie Sanders in the foreground as Haley says, “Some people look at America and see vulnerability. The socialist left sees an opportunity to rewrite history” (Nikki Haley 00:02:54-00:03:02). She continues, “China and Russia are on the march. They all think we can be bullied, kicked around” (Nikki Haley 00:03:04-00:03:09). Alongside “China and Russia” is Joe Biden, an image of him waving next to an image of Xi Jinping waving, an image of Vladimir Putin speaking, and an image of the Chinese military marching, wielding the communist flag. Then, another clip of Joe Biden and a clip of Bernie Sanders, as though they are the antagonists who believe that Haley’s audience “can be bullied”.

Haley comes to the conclusion of the video by saying, “You should know this about me: I don’t put up with bullies. And when you kick back, it hurts them more if you’re wearing heels” (Nikki Haley 00:03:09-00:03:27).

The rhetoric evokes tactics used by the Tea Party in multiple ways, most evidently in Haley’s Palin-esque way of centering her femininity and aggression in one phrase, reflecting Deckman’s description of women in Tea Party leadership. Additionally, Haley not only groups many members of the Democratic party with disparate ideas together, branding all of them as “socialist,” while also grouping the American left with China and Russia. Echoing the rhetoric she used in defense of Margaret Thatcher and Jeane Kirkpatrick, Haley believes that the Left, along with China and Russia, view the United States as weak, and that the Left seeks to “rewrite

history,” likely again referring to left-wing emphasis on racial justice. The imagery along with Haley’s rhetoric suggest that America is under threat, both by the Left and by national adversaries.

The campaign announcement video distills much of the stories and arguments Haley makes in her memoirs, both in terms of her own narrative and the story she tells about America. She ultimately conveys a message of fiscal conservatism while adopting her rhetoric to combat the contemporary Left.



## **Conclusion**

This research aims to provide insight into how Republicans of color can more broadly claim authority on the subjects of race and gender to espouse conservative ideas on those very matters, and what the future of politicians like Haley might be in the Republican party, particularly following the Trump era.

Through an analysis of her memoirs and current campaign materials, we find that Nikki Haley has been remarkably consistent in the way that she leverages her identities as an Indian American woman to espouse right-wing ideas. By telling her story such that she omits the privileges of wealth, education, and immigration laws in her narrative, and frames instances of racism as painful indicators of a distant past, she is able to highlight model minority ideals and maintain the comfort of white Republican voters. She has also maintained a consistently defensive rhetoric, both of the South and later of the United States as a whole against accusations of systemic racism. Additionally, she is able to leverage her gender and racial identity to ground her rhetoric in an anti-discrimination framework that has its roots in a legalist approach to addressing discrimination while avoiding class. This framework is present in Tea Party ideas of fiscal conservatism and individualism to which Haley subscribes. This allows a consistent

defense of existing American principles and legislation, and an ability to acknowledge certain instances of racism without having to advocate for large-scale systemic change. These historical roots allow for Haley to, in her rhetoric, paradoxically be a “proud daughter of Indian immigrants” and highlight her uniqueness and struggles as a brown woman, while also asserting that feminism has gone too far and that efforts for systemic change are reflective of a toxic “woke” culture.

Much is left to be explored about the specific nature of Indian American conservatism. A more comparative analysis could be conducted between Indian American political figures throughout American history. In particular, Haley’s claims of outsider status are not uncommon when compared to those of other Asian American politicians, and more insights regarding racial politics among Indian American politicians could be provided.

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