

“What’s Up With Woke”

By Allan Dodds Frank

Welcome everyone. Thanks for being “woke” enough to get out of bed this morning and make your way here.

Double thanks to those of you who were turned away last week and persevered.

Please join me in giving a hand to Melissa, who has been busy reinvigorating the Library as a place for thought by instituting many programs on intriguing subjects. When she encouraged me to give a talk about the media and the current political situation, she asked for a title and I blurted out “What’s Up With Woke?” That’s how we settled on this special four-letter word.

Many thanks too to my wife Lilian King who provided immense help with the graphics, the content and overall sanity.

I wonder if this rowdy looking crowd of well-informed citizens would qualify -in some politicians’ eyes – as “A Woke Mob.”

I promised the librarian I would not swear but would explore the history of woke, how its usage has evolved and what influence it has on society.

For those of you who do not know me, I retired to Lyme after a long career as an investigative correspondent. I spent 20 years in print, 20 years on television and the time since on the internet writing for The Daily Beast and others. I specialized in following the money and digging into complex financial transactions and crime. I have covered and investigated many politicians of both parties, perhaps most notably the Clintons and Donald Trump.

After I trace the many permutations of Woke, I will outline how I believe the media, the justice system and politics fit in. We will explore how the word “Woke” has gone from positive to negative connotations as politicians, especially on the right, utilize prejudice to gin up fear.

To complete your Welcome to the Culture Wars, we also will take a peek at the evolution of a few other politically significant words.

Before I ramble across the battlefield of language, let’s start with some audience participation. “Who would like to take a shot at telling us what “Woke” means ?

AUDIENCE:

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The best definition from the audience came from a lady who said: “Woke is awareness of injustices in society that we did not think about 30 years ago.”

The permutations this word has undergone encapsulate the bigger cultural and political picture. The word is now a lightning rod with wildly divergent meanings for people of different political persuasions. It is a word that has been repeatedly appropriated, distorted and corrupted, so much so that sometimes it is used in contexts that are contradictory or nonsensical.

Lately, I have been asking many people, including our 28-year-old twin daughters, about “Woke.” The answers are wide -ranging.

Our daughter Melissa framed the discussion this way:
She said: “Being adamant about it is not productive, but not being open to discussion is also non-productive. Arguing about wokeness is outdated and a waste of time.”

At a golf outing, I asked a Republican friend to define woke and he replied: “My definition of Woke is very liberal people who are offended by everything - except their own behavior.” The man sitting next to him at dinner then uttered “Amen.”

Another version comes from our daughter Katy who says: “My definition of Woke is someone who does not take things at face value, someone who questions why the Supreme Court reached the decision they did...”

To me, language is the ultimate determinant in how we think as a society and what actions we take.

Let’s take a journey tracking ‘Woke,’ a word that until 1938 was used only in the context of someone who was no longer asleep. So, I urge you - as religious leaders and philosophers over the centuries have done – to “Awaken!” We shall march through the etymology of Woke to see how it has morphed.

SLIDE 1

Here is the Merriam-Webster Dictionary Definition of “Woke”:

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Chiefly US slang:

“Aware of and actively attentive to important societal facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice”)

(SLIDE 2)

B. Reflecting the attitudes of “Woke” People

2. Politically Liberal (as in matters of racial or social justice) especially in a way that is considered unreasonable or extreme.

“Woke” first appeared in the American vernacular in 1938 in a recording of the great Bluesman Huddie William Ledbetter, the man known as “Lead Belly.” The song -called “Scottsboro Boys”- was a warning for “colored people” who “better watch out” or “they gonna hang you” in Alabama.

(SLIDE OF LEADBELLY)

Lead Belly was singing about nine young black men in Alabama who hopped on a Southern Railways freight train in Chattanooga and were provoked by insults into a fight with white boys who also had jumped aboard as hobos. The black boys threw the white boys off the train. Those white boys then got a station master to assemble a posse and have their assailants taken off the train and arrested.

SLIDE OF SCOTTSBORO BOYS

A white mob at Scottsboro Alabama nearly lynched the black boys before the sheriff imprisoned them. Then – to avoid arrest as suspected prostitutes -two white women who had hopped on the train dressed as male hobos falsely accused the blacks of raping them. An all-white jury quickly convicted the boys and the judge ordered executions of all but one 13-year-old defendant. The cases became a national cause celebre and went on for years. After 16 trials, retrials and two Supreme Court decisions, the defendants were finally released after years behind bars.

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GRAPHIC OF LEAD BELLY QUOTE:

In a spoken afterword following the song, Lead Belly says “I advise everybody, be a little careful when they go along through there – best stay woke, keep their eyes open.”

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In this context, Leadbelly’s use of “Woke” was a caution to blacks about being on guard in the Deep South and a prompt to white audiences everywhere to be aware of racial injustice.

(SLIDE OF WILLIAM MELVILLE KELLY)

The first writer to put “woke” into print, according to researchers, was Harlem novelist William Melville Kelly in a 1962 article in the New York Times headlined: “If You’re Woke, You Dig It.”

His essay traced how Negro slang from jazz migrated into mainstream white English. “Woke” in those days did not have a nasty tone. Triggered by a conversation he overheard on the subway, his story detailed how white people known as “hipsters” or “Beatniks” spread the usage of words such as “hip” and “cool.”

On a podcast called “Origin of Woke” by Elijah Watson, Kelly’s daughter Jessica explains: “It means to be aware—It can be a serious joke. Usually when someone says “Stay Woke”, the other person chuckles.”

A similar progression occurred with Woke which next popped up in a 2008 pop song called “Master Teacher.” .

(SLIDE OF ERYKAH BADU ALBUM)

That song was recorded by Erykah Badu,” on her album “New Amerykah Part One (Fourth World War). The chorus is “I Stay Woke” and our daughter Katy says it was the first time she ever heard the term.

In 2012, Badu tweeted support for “Pussy Riot”, the all-woman Russian rock band threatened with prison by Vladimir Putin.

SLIDE OF TWEET

Badu tweeted:

“Truth requires no belief.

Stay woke. Watch closely.

#FreePussyRiot

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Twitter users began following that formulation by using the hashtag #staywoke to talk about racial justice. (7 sec)

(SLIDE #staywoke twitter shot)

The real acceleration of the word “Woke” followed the racially based nation-wide protests that began in Ferguson Missouri in 2014 when a white police officer shot a young black man named Michael Brown who lay bleeding in the streets for hours.

(SLIDE of PICTURE OF MICHAEL BROWN)

That protest began the “Black Lives Matter” movement and -as it spread across the country – it generated an ensuing counter-reaction dubbed “Blue Lives Matter.”

The essence of the moment transformed “Woke” into a word that was shorthand for a concept – or a political action philosophy.

As turmoil at Ferguson unfolded on television and social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, the phrase “Stay Woke” spread like wildfire.

SLIDE OF TEE SHIRTS

Tee-shirts imploring people to “Stay Woke” were seen all over the nation. Discussions about “Being Woke” became part of the national conversation. The call for introspection about racism in America spread to educational institutions, libraries, museums and businesses.

At that moment, it became a rallying cry for white people to pay attention – to “Stay Woke’ – to racial injustice and police brutality.

Pause for a minute. Let’s examine the phrase “white backlash” and how it is often used to describe the political reaction to minority groups feeling abused. But is it accurate? Are the people seeking improvements in racial or gender justice really the trigger for “white backlash?”

Or – as the new book “Whitelash” argues: Is the real issue simply white resistance to doing anything to mitigate racism? Is the issue about any change to the status quo?

Maybe you recall the phrase “blue lies,” a term that was intended to justify mistruths uttered by police.

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Often “Blue Lies” were falsified arrest reports which protected officers from charges of misconduct or resulted into unfair charges against defendants. “Blue Lies” were supposed to be justifiable as a way to preserve the public’s faith in the integrity of police departments.

One good example of such a counter-narrative is “Blue Lives Matter”, a movement that started after Ferguson as a defense of police behavior. It quickly devolved into a symbol for white supremacists.

(SLIDE OF BLUE LIVES FLAG)

The “Blue Lives Matter” flag these days substitutes for the Confederate Flag as an anti-black symbol. Naturally, these people style themselves as “anti-woke”. To these people, calling someone “woke” is the dog whistle equivalent of labelling them as a minority worthy of contempt.

As the striking writers in Hollywood know, a great protagonist needs an antagonist to produce spectacular drama and intrigue. Thus, it has become with “Woke.”

In 2017, the Oxford English Dictionary added this new definition of “Woke”
Oxford English Dictionary

woke, adjective: Originally: well-informed, up-to-date. Now chiefly: alert to racial or social discrimination and injustice; frequently in stay woke. also in *stay woke* (often used as an exhortation).... In more recent use sometimes *derogatory*, esp. as a means of characterizing such vigilance (or the political and social views stereotypically associated with it) as doctrinaire, self-righteous, or pernicious.”

At the same time, the Oxford Dictionary added another word, one that is increasingly applicable to politics today.
It is “Post-Truth, “(An adjective).”

“post-truth (adjective): relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping political debate or public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.

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The day after the inauguration of Donald Trump in January 2017 also was a big day for “Woke” and the extension of its meaning as a call to political action on behalf of women.

(SLIDE OF DC MARCH)

That was the day more than five million people around the world protested Trump’s views on women. Many of those pussy hat wearers also declared themselves “Woke” as its meaning expanded to gender in addition to being sensitive about racial issues.

Of course, what had ignited the 2020 wave of Woke was the killing in Minneapolis of George Floyd by police as a bystander videotaped the murder in real time.

(GEORGE FLOYD ON GROUND SLIDE)

The pictures did not lie. There were no “alternative facts.”

Another phenomenon also was gaining steam among liberals – and that was making “woke” a test of allegiance – or betrayal. What we call the “cancel culture” sprung up and peoples’ reputations began being set on fire on the internet as their past intolerant acts were unearthed.

While it is hard to put an exact time on what happened next, “woke” mutated into some form of catch-all litmus test about “politically correct” behavior. Some people even got fired for making “incorrect” jokes, racially insensitive remarks or sexist behavior.

(SLIDE OF MCWHORTER BOOK COVER)

In 2020, Columbia University linguistics professor John McWhorter, a black scholar who does not shy from controversy, put out a book called “Woke Racism” How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America.”

His argument is that there are people who, with fervor, have made holding others to a Wokeness Litmus test an intolerant religion.

(Slide of partial MCWhorter quote)

He says these are people “who have innocently fallen under the impression that pious, unempirical virtue signaling about race is a form of moral enlightenment and political activism.”

I know Professor McWhorter so I emailed him in preparation for this talk.

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He replied, in part:

“Since 2020 when I wrote “Woke Racism”: the current usage as a pejorative was well set in at that point, such that the "woke" I was referring to was what De Santis is referring to now.

But the Professor continues:

SLIDE

Dr. John McWhorter, Columbia University

“Of course, he and I have different issues. I abhor the punitive facet; DeSantis’ issue is the cultural “permissiveness” (not an issue of mine.) “

SLIDE OF OBAMA

Even former President Barack Obama checked in on “Woke” in 2022: He said: “I do get a sense sometimes- especially among certain young people- and this is accelerated by social media, you know this idea of purity and you’re never compromised you’re always politically woke and all that stuff. You should get over that quickly.

SLIDE OF THIS QUOTE

“There is this sense sometimes of the way of me making change is to be as judgmental as possible about other people and that’s enough. That’s not activism. That’s not bringing about change.”

Slide of Rupert Murdoch/Fox News logo

It did not take long for the conservative media – led by commentators on Fox News – to begin attacking “Wokeness.”

Copying his British newspapers’ approach, Fox News owner Rupert Murdoch changed American media by deciding to market directly to a clearly-defined political group – conservatives. Fox News flourished as hundreds of cable channels fragmented the tv audience. At the same time, Craig’s List and the

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internet were killing newspapers profitability by siphoning off ads and news content.

Murdoch’s hire of Roger Ailes, a man whose political chops were honed as the media whiz kid for Richard Nixon, was a brilliant business stroke. Ailes labeled Fox News “Fair & Balanced” although it was anything but.

In fact, Fox increasingly has abandoned facts for fiction – as the Dominion Voting Machines case demonstrated. On Fox.. and other conservative media outlets – notably the Elon Musk-owned Twitter, Woke is a favorite punching bag.

Referring to his SpaceX venture, Musk said on Twitter last year,

SLIDE: ELON MUSK

"Unless it is stopped, the woke mind virus will destroy civilization and humanity will never reached Mars."

On another occasion he called Yale University “the epicenter of the woke mind virus attempting to destroy civilization.”

A watchdog group called Media Matters has catalogued Fox News personalities demonizing more than 200 different people, institutions and ideas for their “wokeness” during the last three years since George Floyd died. The Fox list is breath-takingly nonsensical since “wokeness” to them means anything and everything they dislike or despise.

It is an endeavor at negative political branding... making “Woke” a hot button that carries with it the stench of Marxism, Communism – and who can forget Donald Trump’s favorite left wing bogeymen – ANTIFA.

To Trump, Florida Governor Ron DiSantis and others - all enemies are “Woke” What better way to “Own the Libs” than heckling about “Wokeness?”

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By categorizing their enemies as an “orthodox mind set,” they manage to generate the outrage of “righteousness” among their own followers.

When Trump recently attacked DeSantis for his anti-Woke campaign, he claimed “woke” no longer can be effectively defined and has lost its punch. It was a new tune since in 2022 Trump told a crowd at the Heritage Foundation:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o5LmjV2iDaQ>

“Our Movement must continue to pursue a populist nationalist economic agenda that puts working families before globalist politicians and woke multi-national corporations who are mentally ill...”

So what was Trump talking about? Corporations that have begun to treat their work force better in terms of racial and sexual discrimination, equal pay for all, climate change or what?

Is Trump not on the same page of intolerance as DeSantis who repeatedly tries to one up Trump as he assaults immigrants, The Walt Disney Company and higher education in Florida on issues of race, gender equality and children’s books?

DeSantis has made “Florida is where Woke goes to die” his battle cry. I wonder if it will make millions of people avoid Florida whenever possible.

SLIDE ESG INVESTING- Based on Environmental, Social & Governance Principles.

On a broader scale, “Woke” is under attack on Wall Street as firms such as Blackrock profess to invest based on ESG Principles – that is environmental social and governance principles.

In red state legislatures, fossil fuel advocates try to roll back environmental protection, kill renewable energy projects and escape regulation.

In a recent column about how the Republican-controlled Texas state government is knee-capping wind generated renewable energy by terming it “Woke”, New York Times columnist Paul Krugman attributed it to “The anti-woke mind virus.”
(SLIDE OF KRUGMAN QUOTE)

He said this crowd “hates anything it considers woke – which in this faction’s eyes means both any acknowledgment of social injustice and any

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suggestion that people should make sacrifices, or even accept mild inconvenience, in the name of the public good.”

These politicians know language is the weapon that works. Words do have consequences, consequences that can be dangerous and deadly even if those outcomes were unintended.

Political symbolism – the simpler the better – is now the adhesive that binds groups. A word or phrase can be a rallying cry – and/or – an epithet. Call it “Identity politics.”

It means a goal of negative campaigning is to destroy the middle ground of compromise by creating the “us versus them” dynamic. Lying becomes an accepted weapon of war, not a reprehensible act.

Political scientists call the creation of such unwavering allegiances “identity enactment.” And psychologists have observed that the angrier people get, the more likely they are to accept the use of deception to obtain their political objectives.

(SLIDE OF USA TODAY POLL)

Yet, at least as of last March, a USA Today poll shows the positive meaning of “woke” still prevails. The poll said 59% percent of Americans still believe ‘woke’ means “to be informed, educated on and aware of social injustices” versus 39% saying it stands for being “overly politically correct.”

As we connect the dots between the complex and bewildering machinations dominating politics, you can pick any one of a half dozen words or phrases and analyze what is going on in essentially the same fashion.

The Republicans seem to be much better than Democrats in converting positive terms to negative ones with big political impact.

Start with Woke and go backward. Remember when anti-abortion was the term, not right-to-life? Or the term that succeeded it: Pro Life.

How about Global Warming reverting to Climate Change or the idea that nothing bad is happening to the environment? Why be worried that July 4th was the hottest day on earth in recorded history?

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Just take a look how the words “affirmative action” have taken on negative connotations and now have been rejected by the Supreme Court majority and the Republican Party.

Go back to 1896 and you find the Supreme Court deciding in “Plessey versus Ferguson” that “separate but equal” guaranteed equal rights to white and black citizens. I think you do not have to be “woke” to acknowledge that segregation obliterated equal rights.

Who first came up with the derogatory term “Deep State”? It was a catch phrase dreamed up by the Turkish President Reycip Erdogan to describe his opponents who failed to overturn him in a coup.

Now thanks to Trump, the likes of Congressman Jim Jordan and the so-called “Freedom Caucus” we are to believe that career government officials who make the agencies function properly are “weaponizing the Deep State” against ordinary citizens.

One of the few Democratic winners in the name game was the failed Republican effort to brand as negative affordable health care by labelling it “Obama Care,” a tag the former Democratic standard bearer gleefully embraced.

Race is the underlying heartbeat of politics in the United States today. However, may I suggest that an equally important yet amorphous battle – cutting across almost all the hot button issues today – is about trust. As important as the critical issue of racism is whether people can – and should - trust the government. In one key sense, the issues combine since the big questions revolve around what can- or should – various government institutions do about racial injustice.

The economic forces at work here mask their intentions by ginning up fear, anger and allegiance on what have become known as cultural issues: racial equality, sexual identity, religious liberty and gun control.

Donald Trump is exhibit A among politicians who have embraced bigotry in its many forms. I say this based on my experiences interviewing Trump, particularly for ABC News about the Connecticut Indian Tribes and casinos.

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As a candidate and a Presidential role model, his choice of words prompted many people to stop repressing their own prejudices and to give themselves permission to behave badly.

The effect of the thousands of lies Trump uttered was to confuse people and stoke anger. He did it so often that his followers largely recall only his repeated insults and his favorite slogans.

He left us with his lies about “Fake News” and the residue of the few slogans he drilled into the public consciousness such as “Make America Great Again”, “Drain the Swamp” and “Build the Wall.”

Now, as Trump claims the Witch-Hunters are coming to get him and his supporters, who can forget “Lock Her Up” for Hillary Clinton’s alleged crimes with classified documents?

My observations are based on my deep reporting on Trump and decades of watching him in action as a businessman.

To me, the media fails to understand that Trump’s hold on many average Republicans may be largely due to his long-running entertainment value as the top celebrity scofflaw. He is the OJ Simpson chase that never ends, the train wreck that keeps on giving... As he correctly notes, DeSantis is boring.

Perhaps at the same time, DeSantis may be ideologically the most threatening for democracy -since -as his main talking point - he may never let “woke” die.

Here lies the danger. A well organized, well-funded determined minority can through today’s fractured media and the internet dominate the political dialogue. Words such as “Woke” can be twisted beyond recognition. Lying repeatedly does warp discussions by creating doubt.

Finally, thanks to the unelected Supreme Court, it is now hard for the public to know who funds such efforts and what they hope to achieve. Certainly, recent press exposes of the undisclosed vacations Justices Thomas and Alito have taken with billionaires and Federalist Society powerhouse Leonard Leo have highlighted that problem.

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So let’s put “woke” to sleep for now, so I can take any questions you might have.