

# What's the Matter with White People?

*author: Joan Walsh*

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## Synopsis

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author	Joan Walsh
readBy	Joan Walsh
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The size and stability of the American middle class were once the envy of the world. But changes unleashed in the 1960s pitted Americans against one another politically in new and destructive ways. These battles continued to rage from that day to now, while everyone has fallen behind economically except the wealthy. Right-wing culture warriors blamed the decline on the moral shortcomings of "other" Americans - black people, feminists, gays, immigrants, union members - to court a fearful white working- and middle-class base with ever more bitter "us vs. them" politics. Liberals tried, but mostly failed, to make the case that we're all in this together.

In *What's the Matter with White People?*, popular Salon columnist Joan Walsh argues that the biggest divide in America today is not about party or ideology, but about two competing narratives for why everything has fallen apart since the 1970s. One side sees an America that has spent the last 40 years bankrupting the country providing benefits and advantages to the underachieving, the immoral, and the undeserving, no matter the cost to Middle America. The other sees an America that has spent the last 40 years bankrupting the country providing benefits and advantages to the very rich, while allowing a measure of cultural progress for the different and the downtrodden. It matters which side is right, and how the other side got things so wrong.

Walsh connects the dots of American decline through trends that began in the 1970s and continue today - including the demise of unions, the stagnation of middle-class wages, the extension of the right's "Southern Strategy" throughout the country, the victory of Reagan Republicanism, the increase in income inequality, and the drop in economic mobility.

Citing her extended family as a case in point, Walsh shows how liberals unwittingly collaborated in the "us vs. them" narrative, rather than developing an inspiring, persuasive vision of a more fair, united America. She also explores how the GOP's renewed culture war.

## Reader's comments

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