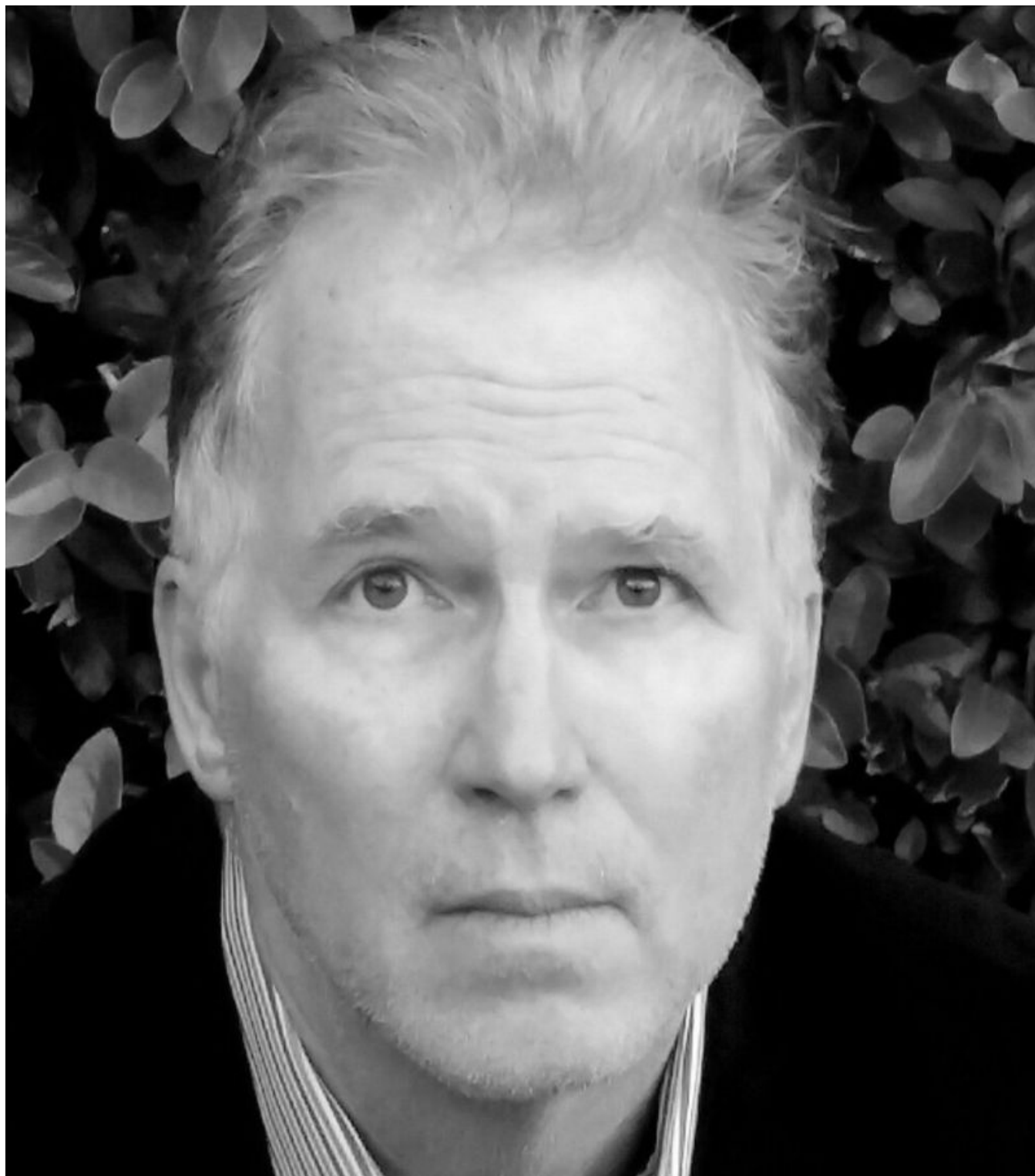


Behind Steve Sailer's Rise

[Helen Andrews](#)



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Photo: Wikipedia

If you ask OpenAI's artificial-intelligence chatbot ChatGPT to generate a Steve Sailer tweet, it will respond, "I'm sorry, I cannot generate a Steve Sailer tweet, as his tweets often contain controversial and divisive content, which goes against OpenAI's values of promoting kindness and respect." Major publications are afraid to cite him. Journalists I know are afraid to be seen interacting with him on Twitter. A Florida professor was [disciplined](#) by his university for linking to a Steve Sailer article on his personal Twitter account.

The marketing researcher-turned-online gadfly has long been a fixture of conservative internet commentary. After receiving his MBA at University of California, Los Angeles, in 1982, Sailer spent almost two decades in the business world working on such things as consumer data from grocery scanners before becoming a full-time journalist. His interests in typical company-barbecue topics—golf, sports, real estate—turned out to intersect in provocative ways with his more esoteric interests in genetics, history, and anthropology, especially on the issues of race and sex. This has made Sailer's writing too controversial for most right-of-center publications.

Yet everybody reads him. Stories that Sailer broke can be traced like blue dye as they seep through the rest of the media. One was the University of Virginia rape hoax. For 10 days after *Rolling Stone* published its story about a violent gang rape at a fraternity at UVA, the internet was abuzz with praise for the author, journalist Sabrina Rubin Erdely. Jeffrey Toobin of CNN called the story "amazing work." Jeffrey Goldberg of *The Atlantic* tweeted, "Superb reporting job." The president of UVA suspended all Greek activity on campus for the rest of the year on the basis of the article.

Journalist Richard Bradley was the first person to raise questions about Erdely's reporting in a post on his personal blog. Sailer commented on Bradley's post adding some doubts of his own, then came back a few days later to see that he was still the only commenter. At that point, on Nov. 29, 2014, he linked to Bradley from his own blog, iSteve, which started a cascade of scrutiny into the story's implausible details. Erdely's story fell apart and had to be retracted, eventually leading to multiple lawsuits against *Rolling Stone*, resulting in multimillion-dollar jury awards and settlements.

Go back and look at the earliest skeptical articles in the mainstream media, those by Robby Soave of *Reason*, T. Rees Shapiro of *The Washington Post*, or Hanna Rosin of *Slate*. They are all dated December, well after the story was published on Nov. 19. Some of those very same reporters had earlier [published articles](#) taking the *Rolling Stone* article at face value, using it as evidence of a rape crisis on American campuses.

If Sailer hadn't opened the floodgates, would the *Rolling Stone* hoax ever have been exposed? The rest of the internet had almost two weeks and did nothing. Without Sailer, my guess is we would have ended up regarding the *Rolling Stone* story today the way we do the allegations against Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh: She says she was raped; the men say nothing happened; the truth must be somewhere in the middle; clearly *something* happened to her that night, even if some of her details are wrong. In other words, it may be factually false, but it is morally "true." The

political campaign the story was intended to support would have rolled on, instead of suffering a black eye.

So Sailer is a widely read columnist who can break stories of national importance almost single-handed, yet his name is forbidden to be mentioned out loud.

“I have this odd status as a sort of underground cult figure notorious for bizarrely sensible views based on careful analyses of standard social science data,” he tells me. “Probably a more accurate term for my status than ‘canceled’ would be ‘shadowbanned.’” For example, Sailer’s Twitter follower count has grown massively since Elon Musk’s takeover bid was first floated and especially since the purchase went through, gaining almost as many followers in that period as in his previous 12 years on the platform combined.

The reason for this odd semi-pariah status is that Sailer writes about race. To be fair, so do a lot of other people. We are living through a period when the topic of race is introduced tirelessly into every sphere of life. Sociologist Zach Goldberg has [documented](#) a rise in the use of loaded phrases like “white supremacy,” “privilege,” and “racism” in the media starting around 2014, the year the Black Lives Matter movement emerged. In a town-hall meeting with staff in 2019, *New York Times* editor Dean Baquet [confessed](#) that “race and other divisions” were going to be made deliberately central to the paper’s coverage: “We built our newsroom to cover one story,” Russiagate, which fizzled, so “now we have to regroup and shift resources and emphasis to take on a different story.” One staffer at the meeting elaborated, “I just feel like racism is in everything. It should be considered in our science reporting, in our culture reporting, in our national reporting.”

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The underlying premise of this growing national race obsession is that only one side gets to speak. There are progressives who love talking about race, and conservatives (plus a classical-liberal remnant) who think race shouldn’t matter, that politics should be colorblind. It is absolutely forbidden to express the third position, that race is interesting and sometimes does matter, but not always as a story of white oppressors and innocent victims of color. That is the rule that Sailer violates. And for so long as the dominant liberal culture insists upon a simplistic, Manichaeian narrative about race in America, Steve Sailer will gather a subterranean strength—by boring empirical holes in that narrative.

In his one published book, a study of Barack Obama released in 2009, Sailer describes how he became a pundit:

During a sick leave for chemotherapy in the 1990s, I realized that I wanted to spend the rest of my life, however long that might be, as a writer. Looking around for a market niche to specialize in, I noticed that among topics of great importance, the weakest journalism, in terms of quality of evidence and logic, was found in discussions of race. I set out to become the most intellectually sophisticated writer in that field.

To see his point about lack of sophistication and logic in mainstream coverage of race, consider the case of Rachel Dolezal. She would have been a perfect occasion for ridicule. Here was an absurd woman with a tan and a weave whose fraud seemed to vindicate Sailer's assertion that privilege in modern society is not to be found in embracing whiteness, but in fleeing from it. Pundits like *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow [abused her in print](#) in the most savage terms, signaling open season on the poor woman. It would have been easy to join in the mockery. On the contrary, Sailer wrote of Dolezal sympathetically as a human story. His blog was the first place where I learned that Dolezal had grown up with adopted black siblings and had married a black man with whom she had a biracial child. "It's not unnatural to identify to some extent with your adoptive siblings' race," Sailer wrote.

Sailer's tone is unfailingly polite. His affect as a writer is that of a benign boomer dad, which, if you watch video clips of interviews with him, appears to be what he is in real life, too. The substance of what he says is academically mainstream. A [survey](#) of intelligence experts rated his blog No. 1 in the accuracy of its reporting on their field, ahead of *The Economist* and *The New York Times*. His commentary on the genetics of race may be taboo among journalists, but it reflects the scientific consensus as found in the works of geneticist [David Reich](#) and science writer [Nicholas Wade](#), both of whose latest books were published by mainstream imprints.

So why is he so controversial? Partly, it's because he falls on the wrong side of a division within the right. There was a time when Sailer was welcome in the pages of *National Review*, back when John O'Sullivan was editor there. Then Rich Lowry took over the magazine in 1997. "Rich and I had a falling out in the early 2000s due wholly to my knuckle-headedness," Sailer tells me. He insisted on being credited in his byline as a columnist for the hard-line anti-immigration publication VDARE, and Lowry didn't want to publicize VDARE in the pages of NR. "My considered judgment today is that Rich was being perfectly reasonable, and I was being a jerk. I apologize."

"The Iraq War made the divide within conservatism more poisonous."

The 9/11 attacks and the Iraq War made the divide within conservatism more poisonous. What Sailer calls "the dissident right" already tended to take a different side than the neoconservatives on issues such as immigration. When those same figures expressed skepticism of the Iraq War, the neocons seized on the opportunity to issue anathemas, most famously in David Frum's 2003 article "Unpatriotic Conservatives," which Sailer says "formalized the breach that has tended to persist ever since."

"I continue to see much of the division on the right as going back to the unforced error of the Iraq War," he says. Sailer made his own distinctive contribution to the case against the war with his January 2003 article in *The American Conservative*, "[The Cousin-Marriage Conundrum](#)," which argued that a country where as many as half of marriages are between first or second cousins would be anthropologically too clannish to become a thriving liberal democracy. The essay was original and compelling enough to make *The Best American Science and Nature Writing* of 2004, but some neoconservatives attacked the argument as racist against Iraqis, just as they attacked

the paleoconservative position on immigration as racist against Hispanics and on law and order as racist against blacks. The divide between the two sides was hardening, and the charge of racism was a tool the neocon side was more than happy to wield against its enemies.

Sailer was vulnerable in this turf war because, as he puts it, “I suffer from an urge to be extremely clear.” Sailer puts complex and controversial ideas in layman’s terms. Nor does he bury them in caveats and disclaimers as liberal science writers like Reich and Wade do. His coinage for the neoconservatives’ ideology of endless war plus high levels of immigration, “invade the world, invite the world,” is so pithy and perfect that even Peggy Noonan has [borrowed it](#). That’s why he is treated as being especially dangerous. Because clarity on these issues is a threat to the plans the ruling class has for America.

Why is it so important that we be able to talk about race? If the left talks about race way too much, then isn’t the answer to talk about race less? Also, aren’t some of these truths about race ones better not mentioned? It may be true that the gap in test scores and crime rates between races is persistent. But if we treat every person as an individual and take him on his own merits, then why bring it up at all, especially if there is a chance such talk could demoralize a bright black kid who gets it into his head that he must not be that smart?

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Because many powerful people are using race as a pretext for turning the country upside down.

An early showcase of Sailer’s brand of statistically informed punditry was the housing crisis. The average American looking at the mortgage bubble figured that it might well have had something to do with the massive push to pump up home ownership rates among racial minorities in the early 2000s, a bipartisan effort that united such disparate forces as the George W. Bush administration and the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (Acorn). In the years since the crash, enormous energy has been expended by mainstream economists to prove that, actually, those attempts to put a thumb on the scale in favor of minority loan applicants in order to compensate for prejudice or past injustice had nothing, absolutely nothing to do with it.

Sailer was [competent enough](#) as a [number-cruncher](#) to [collect data](#) in support of the common-sense position. He [noticed early on](#) that mortgages to Hispanics in the so-called Sand States played an outsize role in the housing bust. Saying that diversity set off the financial crash “is narrow and simplistic,” [he wrote](#), just as “the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor was hardly the sole cause of America getting into WWII. Hitler, for instance, was also involved.” But saying Pearl Harbor kicked off American involvement in World War II makes a decent start if you have to boil history down to one sentence.

In this case, the naïve targeting of racial disparities played an underreported role in precipitating the most severe economic disaster in almost a century. One can hold to

the view that race is, on balance, a topic better not talked about and still think it would have been worth a bit of awkwardness to have a better sense of the risks at play.

Unfortunately, under current civil-rights law, everywhere there is a racial disparity, left-wing activists have a tool to bend the world to their will, regardless of any democratic majorities in their way. The kinds of policing that stop violent crime tend to have a racially disparate impact, so we abolish those kinds of policing, leaving everyone less safe. Test scores show that blacks and Hispanics are less likely to be academically qualified for highly selective colleges than whites and Asians, so we make the SAT optional for college admissions or, in the case of the University of California system, abolish the SAT completely.

This dynamic plays out even in areas remote from crime, education, and other traditional points of racial friction. Social-media discussion of the lab leak theory of the origin of the novel coronavirus was censored because of the possibility that it might lead to racial hate against Asians. I was told this explicitly by an executive of a prominent tech company. Stringent Covid measures were repeatedly justified because of the disease's disproportionate impact on communities of color—which, [according to a November 2021 study](#), wasn't even statistically real. Blacks and Hispanics weren't more likely to die of the coronavirus than whites, controlling for comorbidities and extending analysis beyond the initial summer 2020 surge. But the justification continued to be used.

Say you don't care about race. You don't want to talk about it, and you're put off by people like Sailer who do. But you want to buy a house in a safe neighborhood. Or you want to evaluate the lab-leak theory. Or dissent from the lockdown regime. Or hire a recent graduate based on assumptions about their college resume. If you want to do any of those normal things and want for your children to be able to do the same, then the fanatical left-wing "anti-racists" have to lose and Sailer has to win.

In November 2020, Sailer [broke a story](#) as consequential as the UVA rape hoax. He noticed an interview with a Pfizer executive [in StatNews](#) where the executive let slip that Pfizer had halted lab processing of samples in its vaccine trials from late October 2020 until the day after the election, "leaving the samples in storage." If Pfizer had released its results according to its own published protocols, according to the interview, "the data would likely have been available in October, as its CEO, Albert Bourla, had initially predicted." Sailer calculates that the boost from the announcement of a successful vaccine [could easily have been enough](#) to push Trump over the line to re-election.

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But unlike the Erdelyi fraud, this story didn't catch on. Data journalist Nate Silver [mentioned on Twitter](#) in August 2022 that he personally believed more people should entertain the possibility that the Pfizer trial pause was politically motivated: "The late 2020 push from liberal public health elites that persuaded Pfizer to *change* its original protocols—and had the convenient side-effect of delaying any vaccine announcement until after the election—deserves more scrutiny." But no mainstream journalist has taken up Silver's suggestion.

Why not? Sailer says it's because the Pfizer story is more complicated than the lurid details of the *Rolling Stone* gang rape. "That's pretty easy for average Americans to grok: If there's a broken coffee table on the floor, I'm not going to trust my hands, much less something I have only one of, to the broken glass. On the other hand, the arithmetic inherent in the Pfizer story is daunting."

It could also be that the media have gotten better at suppressing inconvenient stories. The same forces of tacit coordination and groupthink that have pushed Sailer to the margins of discourse have been used against other targets. Between the swarmlike nature of social media and the deliberate actions of tech giants to censor inconvenient stories, as seen in the [Twitter Files](#), the mental landscape of the ordinary American media consumer today is probably more tightly controlled and susceptible to manipulation than ever before.

But Sailer's perspective is more needed now than ever. The "racial reckoning" of the summer of 2020 led to a 30 percent jump in the homicide rate over 2019. Traffic fatalities also rose 19 percent between 2019 and 2021, a concurrent jump that Sailer was the first to [publicize](#). In the face of this ongoing crisis, national pundits have revealed themselves to be ill-equipped to confront the causes or develop useful solutions. Figures as prominent as Chris Hayes, Paul Krugman, Rick Perlstein, and James Surowiecki regularly echo long-debunked claims such as that the difference between the black and white murder rates is caused by greater poverty among blacks. Week after week, with frankly astounding patience, Sailer corrects them. But he remains a lonely figure in that effort.

"I recently turned 64, and I'm not getting any smarter," he says. "On the other hand, the conventional wisdom is getting dumber even faster, so I suspect I'll hang around until I drop dead."

Helen Andrews is a senior editor at *The American Conservative*.