

*Unpacking Our History Article Packet*

# White

**THURS, JAN 9**

**7-8:30 PM, ON ZOOM**

**ID: 823 648 5349 | PW: 691353**

# Nationalism

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Hosted on Zoom

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### **Unpacking Our History Interviews**

The Unpacking Our History Interviews with national and international academics, authors, and lawyers first focused on the topics raised by the *New York Times*' 1619 Project. Over time, the interview topics expanded to include current events around policing and criminal justice.

## ON THE ORIGINS OF WHITE NATIONALISM.

Published in: New Scientist, 6/9/2018

By:Byrne, Peter

**What motivates far-right extremism? Sociological studies are giving new insights and ways to tackle the phenomenon. Peter Byrne investigates**

TIM ZAAL hurt a lot of people in his time: blacks, Mexicans, gays. Strung out on drugs and propaganda, he fitted the toes of his engineer boots with razor blades, all the better to kick the scum and save the white race.

Zaal has since recanted, but others continue to follow in his footsteps. After decades largely under the radar, race-based violence and extremism is back in the news. In June 2015, white supremacist Dylann Roof killed nine black worshippers at a Methodist church in Charleston, South Carolina. In August 2017, the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, saw youths on the streets giving Nazi salutes, and one counter-protestor killed, deliberately mown down by a car.

It's not just in the US. In June 2016, British politician Jo Cox was murdered by a white nationalist. Last November, tens of thousands rallied by torchlight in Warsaw, Poland, waving banners that advocated deporting refugees and making Europe white again, while chanting "Sieg Heil" - in the once -Nazi-occupied land where Auschwitz was built.

For most, the motivations of such hate seem unimaginable. But pioneering work in the US is beginning to reveal its roots. What it is uncovering turns a conventional view of terrorist motivations on its head - with implications for how all societies should deal with the phenomenon.

IT IS a cold night in January, and I'm eating hamburgers with Zaal in a mall restaurant at the border of Orange County and Los Angeles. A big, affable man in his early 50s, he talks easily about his life as a violent white supremacist during the 1980s and 1990s. Also at the table is Pete Simi, a sociologist at Chapman University in the city of Orange who researches white supremacist extremism.

Simi first met Zaal when he disengaged from organised racism at the turn of the millennium. Since then, Simi has interviewed Zaal about his life history, as he has done scores of active and former far-right extremists. The two have common acquaintances, and casually drop names. "Did you know that so-and-so is dead?"

White supremacy has a long tradition in the US. From the 1860s, after the southern Confederate states lost the US civil war, white workers found themselves competing with freed slaves for economic resources and social status. The backlash was often murderous: thousands of black men, women and children were lynched, shot, stabbed, tortured and burned alive, and their property often expropriated with impunity. Racial segregation was the law of the land, not just in the agrarian south, but also in the industrial north as millions of black people fled the cotton fields for factory ghettos. By 1925, membership of the Ku Klux Klan approached 6 million, about 5 per cent of the US population.

Orange County is best known as the home of the Disneyland theme park. Its affluent suburbs were long a bastion of old-school Republican conservatism. Richard Nixon was born there and it is where Ronald

Reagan kick-started his political career. Until the 1970s, the county was almost exclusively white, before African-American, Hispanic and Asian incomers changed its complexion.

Like similar places nationwide, Orange County became a centre of a small but hardcore white supremacist backlash. Zaal viewed himself as a patriot fighting against a Jewish-orchestrated plot to commit genocide on the white race. "We saw it as doing what police wouldn't do," he says. "We were cleaning up our neighbourhoods of the scum."

Just days before I met Zaal, white supremacist Samuel Woodward was charged with stabbing to death a Jewish gay man called Blaze Bernstein, whose body was found buried in an Orange County park. Woodward has pleaded not guilty to the charge. The murder was cheered online by Woodward's comrades in the neo-Nazi group Atomwaffen Division.

IN THE wake of the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, counter-terrorism expert Erroll Southers at the University of Southern California wrote an opinion article for USA Today, which linked the violence to Donald Trump's racialised rhetoric. The next day, someone shot out his front door.

Southers is black. A retired FBI agent, he teaches courses on homegrown terrorism to law enforcers. "White nationalists are a greater threat to Americans than jihadists," he says.

The Anti Defamation League reports that in the US, white supremacists were responsible for 18 of 34 terrorist murders in 2017. Seven of the remaining 16 were anti-government extremists, leaving nine tied to Islamist terrorism.

Since 2002, there have been three times as many deadly far-right terrorist attacks than jihadist attacks in the US, although the jihadist attacks have claimed more victims overall, reports the New America Foundation.

In the UK in the year to March 2017, right-wing extremists made up around one in six of over 6000 referrals to the country's counter-extremism programme, Prevent, and almost 40 per cent of 332 people entering Prevent's "Channel" process, which supports individuals considered vulnerable to be drawn into terrorism. In February this year, police said that they had foiled four far-right terrorist plots in the UK in the previous 12 months.

In the US, the Southern Poverty Law Center, which monitors hate groups, has catalogued more than 600 active neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups and hundreds of anti-government militias that either have a stated intention to overthrow liberal democracy or historically engaged in armed struggle.

Southers sees similarities between the white extremist and Islamist terrorists: both fit the prevailing notion among researchers that most terrorists are not psychopaths, but relatively typical people motivated by circumstance to protect their "ingroup" from dangers, real or imagined.

"Given their belief systems, both types of terrorists are acting rationally," he says. "Most terrorists are 'altruists' who view themselves as soldiers fighting for a noble cause." The calling to enact political change precedes the calling to violence: the ends justify the means.

Simi's research suggests that is not the whole story.

SIMI and I are hiking with "Chuck" (not his real name) on a rocky beach north of San Diego. Chuck is a 50-year-old electrician who used to advocate Christian Identity, the idea that white Europeans are the lost tribe of Israel.

As an adolescent, Chuck listened to white power punk, hung out with swastika-tattooed neo-Nazi bikers and was into weed, amphetamines, LSD, magic mushrooms and alcohol. He was discharged from the US Navy after he was sentenced for assaulting a Mexican man - for being Mexican, he adds.

On release from prison, Chuck joined the San Diego branch of the Hammerskin Nation, an ultra-violent neo-Nazi group with international branches. He ran in the same head-slamming circles as Zaal, but he was more enamoured of the cross than the swastika. "I did not consider myself to be a national socialist, but a Christian patriot ready to start a race war and take the country back from the Jewish communists."

As Chuck grew older, raising a family, he began distancing himself from violent extremism. There was no blinding light, just a fading of interest until one day he no longer believed in a world conspiracy. He has been active with Life After Hate, a group that offers "off-ramps" and counselling to far right extremists who want to heal.

Simi has a professional background in mental health assessment. His interviewees start by talking about themselves in an unstructured way, to uncover their life priorities and emotional impulses. This is followed by more structured, factual questioning about past events, which probes subjects' emotional motivations.

It is rare to get such an insight into the minds of those who hold these kinds of extreme views. When terrorist suspects are interviewed about their pasts it is usually by intelligence and police agencies, often in prison and with a focus on ideology and operational methods.

Simi and his team record the emotions associated with events the subjects mention such as family traumas, hurting people, or joining or leaving a violent group. They can then determine the intensity of pleasure or pain the events evoked, as revealed in the language used. The results are digitised for statistical analysis to uncover the extent of shared motivations between the people he interviews. The aim is to avoid fitting the data to pre-existing theories of causes and effects.

The first results from this programme were laid out in 2016, in a 260-page paper from the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), principally authored by Simi, with the title "Recruitment and Radicalization among US Far-Right Terrorists". The analysis revealed that white extremists, while not necessarily psychopathic, are often violent before they join extremist groups. Only after joining are they generally schooled in ideologies that justify channelling pre-existing urges into violence towards Jewish people, non-white people and anti-racist groups. The ideology is the excuse for ultra-violence, not the reason. "Far right ideologies channel a pre-existing need to express violence by narrowing the selection of victims," says Simi.

That insight challenges thinking on the origins of extremism, says ethnographer Kathleen Blee at the University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, whose research focuses on female white supremacists (see "Women of the right", page 39). "It shows that the embrace of those really terrible ideas could be a consequence of an immersion in the culture, rather than the cause of an attraction to the culture," she says.



Simi's analyses tease out the possible driving factors. About 80 per cent of his interviewees have experienced childhood traumas: violence, sexual abuse and broken homes (see "What makes a racist?", left). Many had horrible, shame-filled childhoods that morphed into lonely, self-hating adulthoods. White power groups can provide angry loners with a sense of pride in community and conveniently dehumanised targets to blame. White supremacist propaganda is filled with references to collective shame related to feelings of cultural, racial and economic dispossession, from the Confederacy's defeat in the civil war to the election of Barack Obama as the first non-white US president.

"The behavioural problems represent lives spinning out of control," says Simi. "Resorting to violent extremism can be a coping mechanism for these people. They are drawn toward violent extremist groups for non-ideological reasons, for shelter, protection, a sense of family."

As happened with Chuck. His parents, he says, were pot-smoking hippies who failed to recognise that the male babysitter was sexually molesting him on a regular basis. "I just kind of buried that, and it turned into shame and then anger and then self-hatred that got projected onto the world."

The sun sets and he rides away on his motorcycle. "Most of these guys are not crazed lunatics," says Simi. "But neither are they socially or psychologically healthy. They carry invisible scars."

SOCIOLOGICAL research on extremists is difficult to design. Researchers cannot advertise for "Nazis" or "violent white supremacists" to join a scientific study. Simi developed his volunteer cohorts of active and former extremists by gaining the trust of his often paranoid subjects one interview at a time. Interviewees then suggested others for him to contact in a method called "snowballing".

This is not a randomised process. It is subject to ethical review by institutional boards, and Simi's studies are required not to cause harm to his subjects. His studies of individual life histories differ in method and level of detail from his previous real-time, ethnographic observations of active white supremacists.

Starting in the mid-1990s, Simi was a guest in the noose-draped homes of white extremists for days and sometimes weeks. He attended white power music festivals in the wilds of Idaho and birthday parties in honour of Adolf Hitler, encounters detailed in a 2010 book, *American Swastika*, coauthored with sociologist Robert Futrell. Simi's entry ticket was an easygoing demeanour, an ability to drink lots of beer and the colour of his skin.

White power families can seem like any other from the outside. They live in suburban homes, mow the lawn, do run-of-the-mill jobs. But the Christmas tree is often topped with a swastika, not a star. They give their kids racist colouring books. They rally around burning crosses, an ancient Scottish war signal. Armed with automatic weapons, they train to exterminate non-white people.

Some of Simi's field subjects had been convicted of attempted lynchings, aggravated assaults and murder. They would happily have stomped him if they had smelled a rat, he recalls. He made a point of identifying himself upfront as a scientist studying their culture, appealing to vanity, perhaps. Not everyone was thrilled by his presence; he did not pretend to agree with racist politics. But he didn't argue with his hosts either, or ask the wrong kind of questions about weapons or criminal acts. He kept conversations tracked on cultural and ideological issues, while observing the interplay of relationships in the environment.

In the late 1990s, Simi spent time with an itinerant Hammerskin musician named Wade Michael Page. He had been recruited into organised racism while in the US Army after the first Persian Gulf war. Years later, in 2012, Page gunned six Sikhs to death at a temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, before being killed by police.

Simi didn't see it coming specifically, he says, but he was not shocked. The bass guitarist had many risk factors for violent behaviour, including chronic depression, alcoholism and suicidal ideation. Adding in white supremacy proved to be a recipe for terrorism.

But not every white supremacist with these risk factors opens fire on a minority church congregation, or points their car at an anti-fascist protester and accelerates. "The idea of predicting something as complicated and as rare as terrorism is just not realistic," says Simi. Terrorism is primed when an emotionally damaged person meets the wrong people in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Zaal did jail time for his violent deeds, and now regularly tells the story of how he deradicalised at the Los Angeles Museum of Tolerance.

But the Charlottesville march triggered something deep inside him. The chant "Jews will not replace us" horrified most people. For a moment, Zaal thrilled at the prospect that the revolution might finally be on. "Such momentary relapses are not uncommon," says Simi.

In 2017, Simi and Blee, together with colleagues Matthew DeMichele and Steven Windisch, presented a study of 89 former white supremacists in *American Sociological Review*. They wrote that "the habitual and unwanted thoughts, feelings, physiological responses, and behavior that can follow exit" from active status mirrors the effects of withdrawing from opiate addiction. It may be no coincidence that, as Simi's earlier studies showed, many white supremacists are also substance abusers: the reward of hate may be dopamine, too.

In an unpublished pilot for a future study, Simi and collaborators at the University of Nebraska and the National Institutes of Health have taken fMRI and EEG scans of the brains of five repentant white supremacists and a control group of five mixed martial arts fighters whose brains were likely to show similar signs of trauma.

The volunteers were shown symbols and images designed to be neutral or to activate the former white supremacists' previous identity and ideological orientation. The experiment found significant activation in the emotion processing regions of the brains of the former white supremacists in response to racially charged images, such as of an interracial couple. No such regions were activated for the control group. The researchers conclude that "the inherent racial bias in former white supremacists happens before more active cognitive processing".

In her 2002 book *Inside Organized Racism*, Blee observes that, "The mainstay of any substantial racist movement is not the pathological individual but rather a pathological vein of racism, intolerance, and bigotry in the larger population that the movement successfully mines". Unconscious bias towards protecting our in-groups is a natural, evolutionarily adaptive feature of the human psyche, and the wellspring of racism. Shortly after the violence in Charlottesville, an ABC News/ Washington Post poll reported that 9 per cent of adults in the US surveyed, equivalent to about 22 million people, said it is acceptable to hold neo-Nazi or white supremacist views.

In a roundabout way, that answers the question why only very few people with horrible childhoods and other risk factors for violence end up kicking people with razor-blade-tipped boots: they are the extreme values in a Bell curve that covers all forms of social racism. That provides at least some handle on how to counter the problem, both through tackling childhood trauma and rooting out racism in society as a whole.

For Zaal, the path out of his addiction to hatred opened up unexpectedly after he became a parent. "I was with my 3-year-old son at a grocery store. And he says, 'Look, Daddy, there's a big - and he dropped the 'n' bomb in the store. The black guy just walks away, shaking his head. But all of these little white ladies are screaming and hollering at me, I mean old ladies. 'Oh, how dare you! How dare you teach your child these things!' And my son looks up at me and says: 'Aren't you going to beat them up, Daddy?'. That was my moment of clarity."

### **WHAT MAKES A RACIST?**

Pete Simi's research among former white supremacists has shown that many experienced childhood emotional trauma and are predisposed to crime. Of the 103 people he studied

- \* Half report witnessing serious acts of violence growing up
- \* Half report experiencing physical abuse during childhood
- \* One-quarter report being sexually abused during childhood
- \* Half report being expelled or dropping out of school
- \* Three-quarters report a history of physical aggression before they got involved in far-right politics
- \* Half report exposure to parental racism
- \* More than three-quarters report parental divorce
- \* Half ran away from home during childhood or adolescence
- \* Half were shoplifters or petty criminals
- \* Slightly less than half report a family history of mental health problems
- \* Two-thirds report substance abuse issues
- \* Two-thirds report attempting suicide

### **Verbatim quotes from Pete Simi's interviews with current and former white supremacists**

"I believed I was doing something noble, altruistic, that I was dedicating my life to my people, to my race. It wasn't like, 'Hey, I'm a hater and I'm proud of it!'"

(Donald, White Aryan Resistance)

"We're here to defend God and defend the people not oppressing or taking over."

(Callie, American Front)

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"Fighting is a lot like a hug. It makes you feel good. It's always been that way. Ever since I got the s\*\*\* beat out of me as a teenager."

(Stanley, United Society of Aryan Skinheads)

"It wasn't about the racism. I knew the whole time that it wasn't right. But to be accepted, to feel like I belonged."

(Kevin, Blood and Honor)

"It was more fashion than politics by a huge factor."

(Jacqueline, Society Skin Nation)

"You're running by yourself in the streets. It's the camaraderie that draws you in, at first. And then once you see what's really going on in the world politically, you're like, well, now, I've got something to believe in, something to defend, the white race! You feel invincible even when you are getting all beat to s\*\*\* by cops or anti-racist skins."

(Logan, Public Enemy No 1)

## **WOMEN OF THE RIGHT**

White nationalism is often portrayed as a male affair. But while most white supremacist organisations hold that God created women to cook, clean the house and make babies, that doesn't mean they are wall flowers, says Kathleen Blee of the University of Pittsburgh. Male leadership in white nationalist organisations is often dependent on the adoration of followers. Female influence is more informal, indirect and personal - and so potentially more effective, she says.

Researching her 1991 book *Women of the Klan: Racism and gender in the 1920s*, Blee found that millions of middle-class white women, including suffragettes, joined the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan supported voting rights for white women to diminish the electoral power of non-white people.

It is a pattern repeated among women Blee has interviewed who are involved with today's white power skinhead, Christian Identity, neo-Nazi and Ku Klux Klan groups. Most of them are educated, middle class and were raised in relatively typical families. Ideology is not the primary attraction for joining what many initially view as a social club, a place to have fun.

Some women find the violent images of racist culture to be personally empowering. "It gives them a feeling of mastery and of female potency, however illusory, that they rarely find in other social settings," says Blee. Once inside an organisation, women are socialised to adopt the idea that white people are at risk of extermination and must fight back (and produce more babies) before it is too late.

"The racist movement can construct an ideology of extraordinary racism by using dystopian themes from everyday discourse," says Blee. Take a seemingly race-free slogan such as "family values are under attack". What distinguishes this sentiment in the mouths of extremist women is not the belief that the family is dying, but who they believe are responsible for its downfall: Jewish people, black people, Mexicans, gay men, lesbians and liberals.

## **Trump promises a crackdown on diversity initiatives. Fearful institutions are dialing them back already**

theguardian.com

Alice Speri December 5, 2024

Protesters in Washington in June 2023, when the supreme court ruled against affirmative action. Photograph: Kent Nishimura/Los Angeles Times/Getty Images

As the president-elect and his allies plan a multi-pronged attack on DEI policies, companies and campuses are complying with threats even though they don't have to

In 2020, Donald Trump signed an executive order against "race and sex stereotyping and scapegoating" which would have set the stage for sweeping attacks on diversity initiatives in the public sphere. In January 2021, on his first day in office, Joe Biden rescinded Trump's anti-DEI order and signed one promoting "racial equity and support for underserved communities".

Now Trump is returning to office, he expected to restore his directive and double down on it. The people that run diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives at public and private institutions are expecting mass crackdown. Project 2025 has labeled them "woke culture warriors" and pledged to wield the full force of the federal government against their efforts to create a more equitable society.

Trump and his advisers have already threatened the funds and accreditation of universities they have labeled the "enemy", and pledged to dismantle diversity offices across federal agencies, scrap diversity reporting requirements and use civil rights enforcement mechanisms to combat diversity initiatives they see as "discrimination".

The multi-pronged attack is certain to be met with major legal challenges, but while they prepare for those, advocates warn about the ripple effects of an administration declaring war on inclusivity efforts.

"The concern is the bigger footprint and symbol," said Nina Ozlu Tunceli, chief counsel of government and public affairs at Americans for the Arts. "Federal policies do have a domino effect on other states, on foundations, on individual donors."

Last week, Walmart became the latest in a series of high-profile companies to announce a rollback of its diversity initiatives following a campaign of legal challenges by conservative groups. Other businesses and institutions small and large are trying to keep a low profile to avoid becoming the target of anti-DEI campaigns, those who work with them say.

There are already concerns that institutions fearful of losing funding or facing lawsuits may overcorrect and dial back their programmes before they are required to do so, advocates warn.

### **A climate of fear**

Even before Trump was re-elected, "educational gag orders" seeking to limit discussion of race and LGBTQ+ issues in school classrooms had been introduced in at least 46 states. Last spring, conservative legislators linked campus protests against the war in Gaza to DEI initiatives. Virginia Foxx, the chair of the House committee on education and the workforce, told the presidents of several colleges that her

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committee would be “steadfast in its dedication to attacking the roots of antisemitic hatred, including anti-Israel DEI bureaucracies”.

Questioning by Foxx’s committee ultimately led to several resignations by college presidents.

“That got everyone terrified, including private university presidents who previously had been pretty brave about these things,” said Jeremy Young, director of the Freedom to Learn programme at the free speech group PEN America. “It was just this sense that, they’re coming, they’re headhunting for leaders, and you just have to do everything they say or they’re going to fire you or they’re going to cut your budget.”

Even where no laws have been passed, a broad fear of repercussions has prompted some campus leaders to cut back on DEI initiatives, noted Young.

“A number of states have engaged basically in jaw-boning, where the lawmakers will go up to a university president and encourage them or threaten them to close their diversity office while dangling a threat of funding cuts or passing a law the following year,” he said. “So we’re seeing universities trying to comply with these restrictions, or with these threats, even though there’s no law compelling them to do so.”

Young cited the University of Missouri, for instance, where campus leaders in July dissolved its division of inclusion, diversity and equity citing nationwide measures against DEI even though no such law was passed in the state.

In Texas, where state law does ban DEI offices but exempts academic course instruction and scholarly research, the University of North Texas system began scrutinising course materials in search for references to DEI, in what Young called an example of overcompliance and a “complete overreaction”.

It’s a domino effect that anti-DEI activists are exploiting, for instance by sowing confusion about the 2023 supreme court ruling, which was fairly narrow but is sometimes cited as evidence that all DEI initiatives in higher education are illegal, said Leah Watson, a senior staff attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union’s Racial Justice Program, where she focuses on classroom censorship.

“We are very concerned about the broad chilling effect, and we see conservatives misrepresenting the status of the law in order to further the chilling effect,” Watson said. “Overcorrections are happening, and things are being cut that don’t have to be cut.”

Some institutions have attempted to protect their work by downplaying their language around diversity to ensure that members from states with restrictions in place can continue to access them. Others have changed language about eligibility requirements for fellowships initially intended to promote access to people of color so as to avoid legal challenges.

“There are institutions that want to continue their DEI programmes and they don’t want to be sued and they are really in a hard place with how to do that,” said Watson. “People are trying to fly under the radar at this point.”

### **The new administration**

Going forward, the Trump administration is “likely to be the most virulent anti-DEI administration that we’ve seen”, said David Glasgow, the executive director of the Meltzer Center for Diversity, Inclusion,

and Belonging, which helps institutions navigate an array of recent legislative restrictions on diversity work.

“People who do this work are nervous and anxious about what might be restricted but their commitment is still there, so it’s really about trying to figure out what they’re going to be able to do,” he added.

So far, four states – Florida, Texas, Iowa and Utah – have banned diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives or offices in universities, a primary target in the battle against DEI. A fifth, Alabama, has severely restricted them.

In Florida, the Republican governor, Ron DeSantis, also erased nearly all already approved state funding for the arts, ostensibly over a festival promoting inclusivity, which he dubbed a “sexual event”.

That may offer a blueprint for attacks on what conservatives see as “woke” culture under the incoming administration, said Tunceli, of Americans for the Arts.

Institutions anticipating a similar backlash at the national level are already planning to emphasise projects the incoming administration may be more supportive to – like those celebrating the 250th anniversary of American independence, in 2026 – and to turn to alternative funding for those they expect will lose out on federal support.

Many now believe that institutions will have to show bravery to uphold their values, even if it means risking funding. “What they need to do is find a backbone, and I say that with a lot of understanding and empathy for the situation they’re in,” said Young, of PEN America.

“I worry when I see a university roll over for funding,” he added, calling on administrators to leverage their influence with alumni and their communities to stand up to legislators’ attacks. “A university that doesn’t have a new building is still a university, it’s just a poor university. A university that has lawmakers banning ideas and restricting the actions of the administration is really not a university at all.”



## **Donald Trump's Nick Fuentes dinner comes after a history of white nationalist enabling**

vox.com/policy-and-politics/23484314/trump-fuentes-ye-dinner-white-nationalism-supremacy By: Nicole Narea covers politics and society for Vox. She first joined Vox in 2019, and her work has also appeared in Politico, Washington Monthly, and the New Republic.

Former President Donald Trump revived his familiar flirtation with white extremism last week after he dined with the rapper Ye, who has recently come under fire for his antisemitic comments, and prominent white supremacist and Holocaust denier Nick Fuentes at his Florida club, Mar-a-Lago.

Over the years, Trump has repeatedly egged on white supremacists — who believe that white people are inherently superior — and white nationalists, who desire a physical or symbolic white nation, with racist dog whistles. At times, he has even overtly defended them. His affiliation has given a bigger platform to hate-based movements broadly, and they, in turn, have become an indispensable part of his base. The groups became emboldened in the Trump era to make their views more explicit: For instance, during the January 6 insurrection, protesters carried a Confederate flag into the US Capitol, erected a gallows and noose on the lawn, and evoked a seminal white nationalist text.

Trump has never said explicitly that he supports white nationalism or white supremacy and, as president, repeatedly denounced antisemitism, though he later criticized American Jews for not showing enough gratitude for his support of Israel. (His daughter Ivanka Trump and her husband, Jared Kushner, are Jewish.) On the record, he has disavowed the Ku Klux Klan and its former leader David Duke, who endorsed him for president in 2016, as well as condemned white nationalists, neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and other hate groups. Still, he's continually taken pains not to alienate white extremists, leaving himself room for plausible deniability such that his supporters find no need to question their fealty.

Last week's dinner, which occurred just a week after Trump announced his 2024 bid for the presidency, should dispel any doubt that Trump had left his alliance with white extremists behind him. His advisers reportedly told him that associating with people like Fuentes is political suicide, and he issued a statement claiming he didn't invite Fuentes and didn't know who he was. Notably, Trump's statement did not denounce Fuentes's or Ye's beliefs, but merely noted Ye "expressed no anti-Semitism," and that "I didn't know Nick Fuentes."

Fuentes is both a white supremacist and a white nationalist who has praised fascists and authoritarian leaders, has connections to American neo-Nazism, and believes that the US should have a white Christian majority. He attended the August 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, and was present at the Capitol insurrection. Ye, formerly known as 2/3 Kanye West, has publicly embraced antisemitism in recent months, losing his contract with Adidas over comments such as his statement that he would "go death con 3 [sic] on JEWISH PEOPLE," seemingly referencing the "defcon" military alert. And after wearing a T-shirt that read "white lives matter," he was accused of abusing the language of Black power to promote white supremacy.

Ye posted, then deleted, a video on Twitter Thursday claiming that Trump was "really impressed with Fuentes," whom he described as "actually a loyalist." CNN's Maeve Reston and Kristen Holmes reported that Trump found Fuentes's "abilities to rattle off statistics and data, and his familiarity with Trump world," particularly interesting, and that he said he "liked" Fuentes. But the former president has since

tried to distance himself from both Ye and Fuentes. He called Ye a “seriously troubled man” and claimed that Fuentes “unexpectedly showed up” as Ye’s guest to dinner, which he described as “quick and uneventful.”

Critically, Trump stopped short of denouncing Fuentes, apparently out of fear that he would alienate potential voters. And that’s a reminder of just how closely Trump is tied to Fuentes’s cause, and the extent to which he has been willing to cater to the white extremist agenda for his own political gain.

### **Trump has a longstanding relationship with white extremism**

Trump has made himself an icon of white extremists by time and time again surrounding himself with advisers sympathetic to their views. His disavowals of them, usually offered only when he was pressed by reporters, haven’t been overly forceful, and he’s made racist statements of his own, further normalizing their views.

His former White House adviser Stephen Miller, a proponent of the “Great Replacement theory,” described by the Anti-Defamation League as a philosophy of “fear that whites will become a powerless minority in the face of changing demographics,” was found to have recommended white nationalist websites and literature in private emails uncovered by the Southern Poverty Law Center. Miller remains in Trump’s orbit; he attended the former president’s 2024 announcement speech.

Steve Bannon, Trump’s former White House chief strategist and campaign head, tried to distance himself from white nationalists in the wake of the Charlottesville rally, but told a French far-right crowd in 2018 that they should wear the “racist” label proudly. During his time in the White House, he also pushed an agenda of “economic nationalism,” which, as my colleague Sean Collins noted, has been “criticized as rebranded white nationalism.”

As president, Trump praised prominent white extremist figures or at least declined to condemn them. In 2017, after a driver ran over counterprotesters at the Unite the Right rally and killed Heather Heyer, Trump said that there were “some very fine people on both sides.” He claimed that there were many people who attended the rally who were not white nationalists or neo-Nazis and that they had been treated “absolutely unfairly.” (He later clarified that neo-Nazis and white nationalists “should be condemned totally” and signed a joint congressional resolution that did so, but his remarks were seen as too tepid a condemnation and overly generous to the rally-goers.) President Joe Biden claimed those remarks were part of the reason he decided to run for president.

Later in his tenure, Trump defended Kyle Rittenhouse, the teen who killed two people and injured another amid Black Lives Matter protests in Kenosha, Wisconsin, in 2020. Rittenhouse — who was seen fraternizing with members of the far-right group the Proud Boys, and flashing a white power symbol — was acquitted of the murder charges against him after he argued that the killings were in self-defense. The far right rejoiced at the verdict, and Trump invited Rittenhouse to Mar-a-Lago, calling him “really a nice young man.” Trump refused to denounce the Proud Boys when prompted to do so at a 2020 presidential debate, telling them to “stand back and stand by.”

The January 6 insurrection was seen as, in part, a manifestation of white racial resentment that Trump attempted to harness to overturn the 2020 election, refusing for hours to call off his supporters as they stormed the Capitol. When he finally did tell them to go home, he said, “we love you, you’re very special.”

Trump's history of racism — which is a belief separate from but foundational to white nationalism and white supremacy — is well documented. It spans decades, from the US government suing him after finding evidence he refused to rent to Black people in the 1970s, to his first address as a presidential candidate in 2016, when he said that Mexico was “not sending their best. ... They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.” Notably, in 2018, he reportedly referred to Haiti and countries in Africa as “shithole countries” and called for more immigrants from places like Norway, which has a majority-white population. He's used and continues to use racist nicknames for Covid-19, and has suggested Vice President Kamala Harris “doesn't meet the requirements” to hold her office.

In his post-presidency, Trump has leaned even more heavily into white grievance politics. At a rally in Arizona earlier this year, he said that “white people” were being “denigrated” and “discriminated against.” And in reference to Covid-19 prevention and treatment, he falsely said that “if you're white, you don't get the vaccine, or if you're white, you don't get lifesaving therapeutics.”

What Trump has not done is make overt calls for a white nation. But his associations and statements align with white extremists and their goals. They have for some time, and his meeting with Ye and Fuentes only represents a continuation of that trend.

# Trump's Christian Nationalist Vision for America

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By Robert P. Jones

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Donald Trump's ambivalence on abortion is back in the news because of his recent flip-flopping on a November referendum in his home state of Florida. On August 29, Trump said he suggested he would vote for the referendum, which would expand abortion rights and overturn the state's current six-week abortion ban. After intense blowback from anti-abortion activists, Trump walked back his support the next day.

While Trump's about face on this referendum shows that the activist class still has some pull, it remains true that Trump has done something unimaginable in modern Republican politics. He has bullied the GOP into abandoning four decades of support for a national ban on abortion. Even more surprising, there's no evidence that Trump's renegotiation of the allegedly nonnegotiable has hurt him among the rank and file of the party.

This perplexing outcome is revelatory. Trump's cavalier treatment of this supposedly sacred issue has exposed the Republican Party's best kept secret: The connection between Republican voters and their leaders was never primarily about abortion. Rather, as Trump's "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) transformation of the party reveals, Trump's bond with his supporters is forged from different material: namely, his militant mission to return power to white Christian America.

Trump instinctively understands this reality. In contrast to his vacillation on abortion, Trump's rallies are filled with evocations of an idealized ethno-religious state that are articulate, energetic, and consistent. His nostalgic diatribes about reclaiming a lost white Christian past fueled his rise to presidential power, and he has continued this strategy in 2024.

One of Trump's early re-election campaign stops was the annual meeting of the National Religious Broadcasters in Nashville on February 22, attended by leaders of the largest white evangelical communications outlets. In his rambling 75-minute speech to these Christian Right leaders, Trump spent a scant two minutes talking about abortion. He began strongly, stating, "From my first day in office, I took historic action to protect the unborn. Like nobody has ever done." He also touted his attendance at the March pro-life rally in Washington, DC. But then he hailed his achievement of sending "this issue" (he notably did not utter the word "abortion" in the speech) back to the states since "everybody agrees that's where it should be"—a position that is a clear abandonment of a nationwide ban on abortion. While there was no applause for that line, the crowd remained with him.

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The beating heart of the speech was the projection of a white Christian nationalist vision. Trump told the enthusiastic crowd—many of whom sported red hats emblazoned with the words “Make America Pray Again”—that he knew they were “under siege.” He declared that one of his first acts of his second term would be to set up a task force to root out “anti-Christian bias” and pledged to protect “pro-God context and content.” He received spontaneous applause for vows to promote school vouchers for private Christian schools and seal the United States’ southern border against “an illegal alien invasion by the world’s most sadistic criminals and savage gangs.”

He openly mentioned his four criminal indictments but transformed them into a messianic narrative. Echoing the evangelical theology of substitutionary atonement, he claimed, “I’ve been very busy fighting and, you know, taking the, the bullets, taking the arrows. I’m taking ‘em for you. And I’m so honored to take ‘em. You have no idea. I’m being indicted for you.” After he narrowly survived an assassination attempt in August, Trump mused that he was only alive because of divine intervention, making this messianic comparison quite literal.

Notably, his promises to the evangelical broadcasters extended beyond the realm of policy: “If I get in, you’re going to be using that power at a level that you’ve never used before.” He continued: “I really believe it’s the biggest thing missing from this country, the biggest thing missing. We have to bring back our religion. We have to bring back Christianity in this country.”

Trump’s deployment of the term “our religion”—one he regularly rolls out when addressing predominantly white evangelical audiences—is transparently an affirmation of an America of, by, and for white conservative Christians. This worldview, most frequently referred to as white Christian nationalism today, is an old one, predating the founding of our nation. It flows directly from the 500-year-old Christian Doctrine of Discovery—the idea that America was designated by God to be a promised land for European Christians—which justified the settler colonial project and lies at the ancient headwaters of our nation’s history.

A 2024 study conducted by PRRI, where I serve as president and founder, explored just how strongly white Christian nationalism is connected to Trump’s contemporary allure. Building on research by political scientists Paul Djupe, Phil Gorski, Sam Perry, and Andrew Whitehead, PRRI developed five distinct agree/disagree questions to measure support for Christian nationalism:

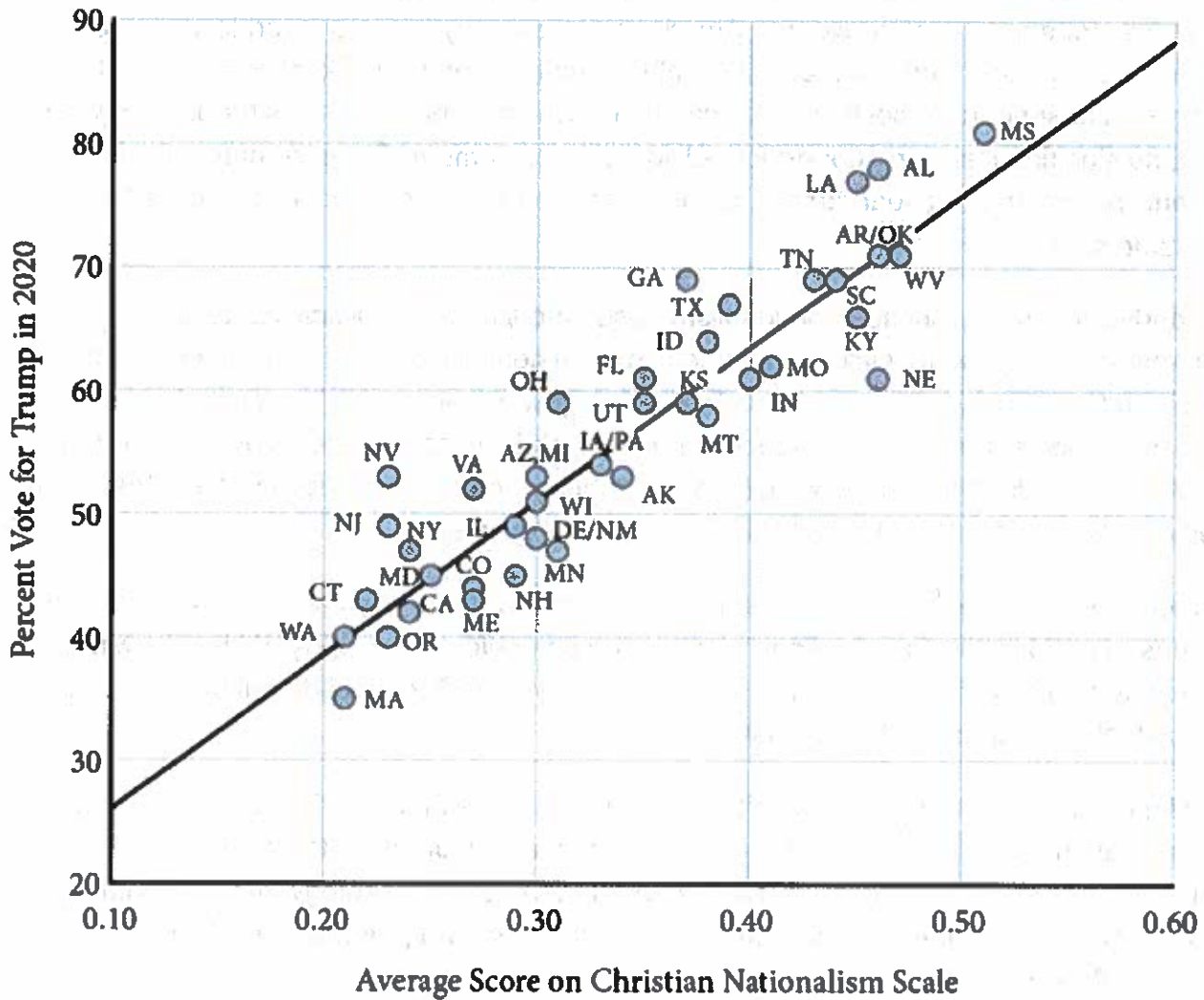
- God has called Christians to exercise dominion over all areas of American society.
- The US government should declare America a Christian nation.
- Being Christian is an important part of being truly American.
- If the US moves away from our Christian foundations, we will not have a country anymore.
- US laws should be based on Christian values.

The PRRI survey, the largest ever conducted on this topic, finds that 3 in 10 Americans can be classified as Christian nationalism Adherents or Sympathizers (those who either fully or mostly agree with these five statements), while two thirds of Americans can be classified as Skeptics or Rejecters (those who either mostly or fully disagree with these five sentiments). So, by a margin of two to one, most Americans oppose this anti-democratic worldview.

But the minority of Americans who affirm these sentiments wield disproportionate power because their voices are amplified through Donald Trump's MAGA movement and its takeover of the Republican Party. Today, a majority of Republicans (55%)—and fully two thirds (66%) of white evangelicals, the religious base of the GOP—qualify as Christian nationalist Adherents or Sympathizers.

The survey also reveals how tightly Christian nationalism is correlated with support for Donald Trump, not just at the national level but at the state level. The proportion of Americans who qualify as Christian nationalism Adherents or Sympathizers differs considerably across states, but there is a distinct pattern. Residents of red states are nearly twice as likely as residents of blue states to be Christian nationalism Adherents or Sympathizers. And among white Americans, the positive correlation between a state's average score on the Christian nationalism scale and the proportion of residents who cast votes for Trump in 2020 is a textbook example of a strong linear relationship. The more strongly white residents of a state support Christian nationalism, the more likely they were to have cast their votes for Trump in 2020.

## Relationship Between Christian Nationalism and Voting for Donald Trump in 2020 Among White Americans, by State



Source: PRRI, American Values Atlas, Mar. 9-Dec. 7, 2023.

Note: 2020 voter data retrieved from AP VoteCast Election 2020 public use dataset.

Courtesy of Robert P. Jones—PRRI/Simon & Schuster

Why should we be worried about this? There is, of course, the obvious answer that the overall vision of America as a promised land for European Christians is fundamentally anti-democratic. Beyond that, Christian nationalist beliefs are strongly linked to a range of other attitudes that are corrosive to democracy: white racial resentment and denials of the existence of systemic racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, anti-immigrant sentiment, homophobia, and support for patriarchal gender roles. In other words, white Christian nationalism evokes a set of hierarchies that positions white, Christian, heterosexual men as the divinely ordained ruling class. This assertion of white Christian entitlement and chosenness is toxic to the values of pluralism and equality on which democracy depends.

Most ominously, Christian nationalists are more likely than other Americans to think about politics in apocalyptic terms and are about twice as likely as other Americans to believe political violence may be justified in our current circumstances. Nearly 4 in 10 Christian nationalism Adherents (38%) and one-third of Sympathizers (33%) agree that "Because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence to save the country," compared with only 17% of Christian nationalism Skeptics and 7% of Rejecters. And support for political violence among Christian nationalists is hardening. While there is no significant shift in support for political violence among Christian nationalism Adherents across the last year, among Sympathizers support for political violence is up 11 percentage points.

The worldview of white Christian nationalism raises the stakes of political contests exponentially, transposing political opponents into existential enemies. Politics are no longer understood to be honest disagreements between fellow citizens but rather apocalyptic battles over good and evil, literally fought by agents of God against agents of Satan. From these illiberal assumptions, it easily follows that political rivals should not just be defeated in fair electoral contests; they should be jailed, exiled, or even killed.

This racist ideology thankfully no longer rests comfortably in the psyches of most Americans. But it has, paradoxically, found a final refuge in the shambles of the party of Lincoln. More than any other discreet moment in the last half century, the 2024 election will present us with a choice that is much more than partisan.

We will have an opportunity to choose between a regressive fantasy of America as a white Christian nation and an aspirational vision of America as a pluralistic democracy. Until we find the will to finally reject the dangerous, authoritarian political theology that now controls one of our two political parties, it will continue to undermine the potential for a truly democratic American future.

*Excerpt adapted from the paperback edition of The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy and a Path to a Shared American Future by Robert P. Jones, published by Simon & Schuster on September 10, 2024. Copyright © 2024 by Robert P. Jones.*