



# How White Supremacy Returned to Mainstream Politics

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By Simon Clark

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Center for American Progress



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# Introduction and summary

The United States is living through a moment of profound and positive change in attitudes toward race, with a large majority of citizens<sup>1</sup> coming to grips with the deeply embedded historical legacy of racist structures and ideas. The recent protests and public reaction to George Floyd’s murder are a testament to many individuals’ deep commitment to renewing the founding ideals of the republic. But there is another, more dangerous, side to this debate—one that seeks to rehabilitate toxic political notions of racial superiority, stokes fear of immigrants and minorities to inflame grievances for political ends, and attempts to build a notion of an embattled white majority which has to defend its power by any means necessary. These notions, once the preserve of fringe white nationalist groups, have increasingly infiltrated the mainstream of American political and cultural discussion, with poisonous results. For a starting point, one must look no further than President Donald Trump’s senior adviser for policy and chief speechwriter, Stephen Miller.

In December 2019, the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Hatewatch published a cache of more than 900 emails<sup>2</sup> Miller wrote to his contacts at Breitbart News before the 2016 presidential election. Miller, who began his role in the Trump administration in 2017, is widely considered the president’s most ideologically extreme and bureaucratically effective adviser. Miller has been careful not to talk openly about his political views, so this correspondence proved to be revealing.

In the emails, Miller, an adviser to the Trump campaign at the time, advocated many of the most extreme white supremacist concepts. These included the “great replacement” theory, fears of white genocide through immigration, race science, and eugenics; he also linked immigrants with crime, glorified the Confederacy, and promoted the genocidal book, *The Camp of the Saints*, as a roadmap for U.S. policy. Anti-Semitism was the only missing white nationalist trope in the emails—perhaps unsurprisingly, as Miller himself is Jewish.

In many ways, this is a return of an old American political tradition rather than a wholly new phenomenon, but it has taken on a new form and uses a language that must be properly understood if it is to be successfully challenged. Concepts of white supremacy were at the heart of the defense of slavery and central to the Lost Cause myth that justified segregation after the fall of the Confederacy.

The fear of immigrants of different religious traditions also has a long history in the United States; it fueled nativist political party the Know Nothings of the 1850s and the racist rules of the 1924 Immigration Act, which among its many outrages prevented immigration from Asia and remained in effect until 1965. The renowned U.S. Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. was one of the most distinguished proponents of eugenics, and the idea that immigrants bring crime and disorder dates back to the anti-Irish panics that occurred throughout the 19th century. Anti-Semitism, meanwhile, had been an ugly feature of American political discourse well before the 1913 lynching of Leo Frank prompted the founding of the Anti-Defamation League.<sup>3</sup>

Yet public attitudes thankfully have changed for the better. Recent polling shows that American attitudes toward racial integration and immigration have become more open among liberals and conservatives alike,<sup>4</sup> with two-thirds of Americans in a recent Pew Research Center survey saying that “openness to people from all over the world is essential to who America is as a nation.” Intriguingly, the divide on this question is as much a factor of age as of political inclination. Pew’s research finds that

*[t]he share of Americans holding the view that newcomers strengthen American society is 11 percentage points higher than it was in the spring of 2016: 57% now say this, up from 53% from March 2018 and 46% in May 2016. Both Democrats and Republicans are now more likely to view newcomers as strengthening the country than they were three years ago. Older Republicans are the least likely to see immigrants as strengthening the U.S. While roughly half of Republicans ages 18 to 34 (49%) say newcomers strengthen American society, just a third of Republicans ages 35 to 49 (33%) and 22% of those 50 and older say the same.<sup>5</sup>*

In such a changing landscape, old-fashioned racist and xenophobic appeals are unlikely to be politically successful beyond a small fringe, so the propagandists of racism have had to develop subtler approaches to stoking fear and hatred for political ends. To do so, they have repackaged racist traditions in language and forms that could more easily enter mainstream political discourse.

This report explores the background of these poisonous concepts—reviewing their origins, development, and diffusion—and explores how white supremacist ideas have seeped into America’s mainstream political discourse, with some examples of politicians who traffic in this language. It then discusses ways to combat the spread of white nationalism in U.S. politics. This report is meant to help readers recognize and call out attempts to smuggle white supremacy into everyday politics and to support civic leaders of all political persuasions who stand up to this poison.

# Tracing the origins of white supremacist ideas

There is little new in the ideas that underpin white nationalism, white supremacy, the alt-right, and fascism. At its core, white nationalism is little more than an attempt to cloak white supremacist ideas in the more respectable language of racial separatism, just as the alt-right has tried to repackage fascist thought in a more modern form. All these variants are built on common notions of a white identity and racial superiority. They promote hate and violence as valid political tools, rejecting values of equality, coexistence, and the rule of law in favor of raw power and ethnic division.

Derek Black, a former white nationalist leader who is now an academic who studies the origins of racist ideas, takes a cultural approach to understanding the movement by identifying its most significant symbols of identity. He defines a white nationalist as someone who interacts with information outlets primarily serving the white nationalist movement, is friends with other white nationalists, attends white nationalist events, and supports the cause financially and politically.<sup>6</sup> Black explains that white nationalist ideas are totems that white nationalists use to show that they belong in the movement. Members spend a great deal of time defining and arguing about these terms as well as spreading them into mainstream society by trying to insert them into mass media.

Black is pointing to a central tactic in the political strategy of white nationalists and white supremacists. They understand that their cause is not widely popular and that they are losing the battles of ideas and demography. This reality pushes them to try to smuggle their ideas into mainstream dialogue by exploiting so-called fellow travelers and political opportunists. Recently, the movement has had notable success, particularly among American and European politicians who are exploiting fear for electoral ends. Matteo Salvini, the federal secretary of the Italian Northern League party and former deputy prime minister, called for closing the nation's borders against the dangers of an Islamic invasion<sup>7</sup>; Victor Orbán aims to “keep Hungary as Hungary” by building a fence to keep immigrants out<sup>8</sup> while persecuting the minority Roma community<sup>9</sup>; and Stephen Miller designs intentionally cruel immigration policies, which a court found risked substantial harm or death to those caught up in them.<sup>10</sup> In these, and sadly too many other cases, the fear and hatred of others, be they of a different race, religion, or ethnicity, leads directly to cruel, xenophobic policies.

Most politicians know that being directly associated with white nationalism harms their reputation, so they use dog whistles, or euphemisms, to appeal to white nationalist supporters without alienating more moderate ones. Others have swapped their dog whistles for louder noisemakers; President Trump is perhaps the most notable example of a politician who uses this overt approach. By unpacking the core elements of white supremacist ideas, this report considers how these notions have spread into political conversation in the United States—and how some politicians have made this possible.

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## Racist rhetoric fueling dangerous ideologies and behavior

French author and far-right activist Renaud Camus coined the phrase “le grand remplacement” in a 2011 book<sup>11</sup> to argue that Muslim immigration to France was a form of genocide against the country’s native population that required drastic action in response. This concept is not new. It echoes the ideas of early 20th-century American eugenicists Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard, whose work F. Scott Fitzgerald lampooned in *The Great Gatsby*. The packaging is different, but the fresh language makes Camus’ ideas particularly dangerous.

Mass murderers who are inspired by white nationalism, from Anders Breivik in Norway and Dylann Roof in South Carolina to the Christchurch killer in New Zealand, echo Camus’ catchphrases in their writings. The vagueness of these catchphrases allows murderously minded individuals to apply the idea against anyone they may see as an outsider, including Muslims, Sikhs, Latinos, African Americans, Jews, and left-wing Norwegian activists. Fox News TV hosts Tucker Carlson and Laura Ingraham regularly promote these ideas.<sup>12</sup> For example, Ingraham once claimed that immigrants plan to “replace kind of the old America with a new America,” and Carlson said that he is “for Americans” because “nobody cares about them. It’s like, shut up, you’re dying, we’re gonna replace you.” There is even an environmentalist variant<sup>13</sup> that exploits the climate crisis to push a racist agenda of keeping out immigrants and using violence to control increasingly scarce resources.

Perhaps it is because the case for the gains that immigrants bring to society<sup>14</sup> is so overwhelming—particularly for the declining rural areas<sup>15</sup> that have been the strongest supporters of the anti-immigrant agenda—that the language of its proponents has become so extreme. Only by frightening their supporters with images of uncontrolled migration can the propagandists of hate distract them from the value that immigrants can bring to their communities.



A French contribution to violent modern racism comes from Jean Raspail's 1973 novel, *The Camp of the Saints*, which centers around an invasion of Indian refugees on the French coast. In his tale, French society and the military lose their nerve and do not massacre the migrants as they land on French shores, which leads to a total collapse of Western civilization. This book has been a central text for white supremacists since its publication, particularly after Cordelia Scaife May, heiress to the Mellon-Scaife fortunes, paid for its translation into English and its widespread distribution in the United States.<sup>16</sup>

During the early debate over the Trump administration's Muslim ban, HuffPost uncovered<sup>17</sup> speeches that former Trump adviser Steve Bannon had given in which he described *The Camp of the Saints* as his favorite book and quoted extensively from it. On an Iowa radio show in March 2017, Rep. Steve King (R-IA) encouraged listeners to read the book, spelling out Raspail's name so they would not be confused.<sup>18</sup>

The invocation of *The Camp of the Saints* to paint any darker-skinned immigrants as an existential threat to white America and Europe combines with a strain of Islamophobia into a particularly toxic mix. Bannon talked about this explicitly in a speech he gave in the Vatican, where he praised the Roman Catholic Church for keeping Islam out of the Western world, referencing the Battle of Tours (A.D. 732) and the Siege of Vienna (A.D. 1529) and suggesting that the rise of the Islamic State group was the beginning of a generational conflict between Islam and Christianity.<sup>19</sup> In his words, "There is a major war brewing, a war that's already global. It's going global in scale, and today's technology, today's media, today's access to weapons of mass destruction, it's going to lead to a global conflict that I believe has to be confronted today." In this kind of apocalyptic scenario, white supremacists argue, any tactics are acceptable.

This is the logic that led to the Trump administration's Muslim ban in January 2017. The cruel policy has separated families, made it harder for students and visitors to come to the United States, and poisoned diplomatic relations with U.S. allies and friends<sup>20</sup>—all while doing nothing to make the country safer. The ban makes perfect sense in a political context where stoking fear of the stranger is the road to winning elections. But it is not just Muslims who are the scapegoats this time.

When President Trump deployed U.S. troops to the border with Mexico in 2018, he made an inflammatory statement: "If they want to throw rocks at our military, our military fights back. I told them to consider it a rifle."<sup>21</sup> That President Trump's words echoed the last scene of *The Camp of the Saints* did not go unnoticed by the American far-right. Neo-Nazi group National Vanguard even wrote an article about

the deployment titled, “*Camp of the Saints Invasion on the US-Mexico Border: 97% Increase as 2,714 Invade Every Day*,”<sup>22</sup> in which the group claimed that allowing immigration from Central America would lower the average IQ of Americans. Again, the ideas that underpinned social Darwinism and Nazi ideology are recycled for the modern age.

An obsession with genetics and intelligence has long been a hallmark of white supremacists. It is also one that they share with President Trump, who loves to boast that his good genes and high IQ<sup>23</sup> are the secret to his success in life.<sup>24</sup>

As many commentators have noted,<sup>25</sup> President Trump’s claim that immigrants will “infest our Country” directly echoes Nazi propaganda and other precursors to genocidal violence. Most recently, for example, Rwandan state media described the Tutsi population as cockroaches to be eliminated.<sup>26</sup> President Trump’s most fervent allies propagate his words. In 2012, Ken Cuccinelli—now the second-highest ranking official at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security—compared immigrants to rats in a recent interview.<sup>27</sup>

As psychologist Albert Bandura explains,<sup>28</sup> dehumanization is a form of moral disengagement that allows people to abandon normal human sympathies toward oppressed minorities. Dehumanization allows politicians and the public to excuse abuses against migrants—and it mobilizes voters through fear. Former Trump adviser Corey Lewandowski described this approach before the 2018 midterms:<sup>29</sup> “If you want to get people motivated, you’ve got to give them a reason to vote. Saying ‘build the wall and stop illegals from coming in and killing American citizens’ gives them an important issue.” Fortunately, most Americans retain a basic sense of decency that makes them recoil at the idea of putting kids in cages and separating families,<sup>30</sup> but President Trump and his advisers see his approach to immigration as a winning issue. That became clear at this year’s State of the Union speech, where Trump brought a senior U.S. Border Patrol official and falsely claimed that immigrants increase crime and that sanctuary cities threaten American security.

When President Trump announced his presidential run in 2015, his comments about Mexico underpinned the logic of his campaign. “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best,” he said. “They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.”<sup>31</sup> The brutality and clarity of these words were startling and politically effective. Trump is not alone in linking immigration to crime; it has long been a staple of right-wing propaganda. A more recent example comes from Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-FL),

who in February 2019 told<sup>32</sup> the parents of children killed in the 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, that they were wrong to advocate for H.R. 8, the bill that would have mandated background checks for gun purchases. “I hope we don’t forget the pain and anguish and sense of loss felt by those all over the country who have been the victims of violence at the hands of illegal aliens,” he said. “H.R. 8 would not have stopped the circumstances I raised, but a wall, a barrier on the southern border may have, and that’s what we’re fighting for.”

Not only did Rep. Gaetz’s assertion do nothing to comfort grieving parents or address the gun violence affecting American schools, but research<sup>33</sup> also shows that immigration tends to reduce crime in the United States. Linking immigration to crime serves only as a way to activate a fear of strangers, which can increase support for authoritarian solutions that promise to protect the so-called native population.

The Tree of Life synagogue shooter in Pittsburgh was driven by the conspiracy theory that immigration is a Jewish plot to pollute the white race.<sup>34</sup> This core concept of anti-Semitism was popularized in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a forgery created and disseminated by the Russian Imperial secret service that has mutated and changed over time but never fully disappeared. The latest iteration is the Kalergi Plan,<sup>35</sup> a conspiracy theory that is particularly popular in the Italian far-right<sup>36</sup> that posits a Jewish plan to undermine white European society through miscegenation and mass migration. In the United States, this theory has been promoted by conservative commentator Candace Owens and other Trump supporters.<sup>37</sup>

Also, on Twitter, the official congressional account of Rep. Gaetz promoted the conspiracy theory that billionaire investor and philanthropist George Soros was funding a caravan of migrants from Central America.<sup>38</sup> White nationalists frequently invoke Soros, who is Jewish, as the mastermind of policies that aim to corrupt a pure white race by promoting immigration. The 2018 tweet read:

*BREAKING: Footage in Honduras giving cash 2 women & children 2 join the caravan & storm the US border @ election time. Soros? US-backed NGOs? Time to investigate the source!*

This notion was echoed in the Trump campaign’s 2018 midterm election strategy, which inspired Cesar Sayoc to send pipe bombs through the mail to Democratic leaders, among other prominent figures.<sup>39</sup> President Trump once again demonstrated this approach when he spoke at a March 2019 rally in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on the topic of his border wall. “National emergency it is,” he said. “And if you look at the border and you look at the hundreds of thousands of people that are invading or at

least trying to invade our country you would know that we needed and we are building it.”<sup>40</sup> After the shock of the shootings in El Paso, Texas, later that year—when the murderer’s writings echoed so clearly the language of invasion frequently used by Fox News and President Trump—Adam Serwer of *The Atlantic*<sup>41</sup> and Robert Mackey of *The Intercept* provided a useful summary of how the language of invasion<sup>42</sup> has become Trump supporters’ default immigration framing. In this context, the border wall becomes an existential defense against a threat of what a pro-Trump armed militia calls “an unarmed invasion”<sup>43</sup> that requires a military response.<sup>44</sup>

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## Embracing conspiracy theories

President Trump’s campaign rhetoric surrounding immigration and invasion is the point at which he appears to most closely align with white supremacist concepts. Stopping immigration is the central aim of white nationalism, as white nationalists see this as the only way of stopping immigrants from taking power away from a white majority. To achieve their goal, white nationalists have typically tied the diversification of America to a Jewish plot. Again, there is nothing fundamentally new in this approach. Daniel Okrent’s *The Guarded Gate*<sup>45</sup> chronicles the history of the post-World War I anti-immigrant panic, which was fueled by the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and led to the 1924 Immigration Control Act. This law was based on social Darwinist theories positing the racial inferiority of Italians and Jews and remained on the books until the passage of President Lyndon Johnson’s Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. White nationalists see this later law as the beginning of the end of the United States as an Aryan nation.<sup>46</sup>

These views are what undergirded the chant, “You will not replace us. Jews will not replace us,”<sup>47</sup> at the 2017 rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, where a white nationalist murdered a woman and injured 35 others. President Trump’s response to the riot—saying that there were “very fine people, on both sides”<sup>48</sup>—provided implicit support for these positions. Notably, President Trump does not oppose all immigration; for example, he has said that immigrants from Norway would be welcome in the United States.<sup>49</sup>

A more recent conspiracy theory—one that emerged seriously in the United States after 9/11—seeks to portray all Muslims as threats to Americans, either as potential terrorists or advocates for Sharia. As the Center for American Progress documented in the “Fear Inc.” report in 2011,<sup>50</sup> this theory has been promoted by a tight-knit group of donors and misinformation outlets.

This general trend toward Islamophobia—most clearly manifested in President Trump’s Muslim ban—exists in combination with an even more extreme conspiracy theory: that there is a secret plan to impose Sharia in the United States. David Yerushalmi, of the American Freedom Law Center, and ACT! for America have promoted this idea with remarkable success; Texas and Arkansas have enacted model legislation promoted by these groups.<sup>51</sup> Since 2010, the Southern Poverty Law Center has catalogued<sup>52</sup> 201 anti-Sharia bills in various states that have stigmatized Islam as a danger to America.

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## Glorifying a racist past

The fierce debate over the removal of Confederate monuments in 2017 brought to the fore a strain of reactionary political thought in American politics that many assumed had vanished. From the battles against Reconstruction to the Dixiecrats to former Alabama Gov. George Wallace’s (D) presidential campaigns, the glorification of the Confederacy as a cover for racist, antidemocratic policies has a long history. Professor W. Fitzhugh Brundage has studied the history of Confederate monuments,<sup>53</sup> finding that they were erected in periods of social change—particularly after Reconstruction and during the civil rights movement—as an explicit reaction against movements for racial equality and as assertions of white supremacy.<sup>54</sup>

Neo-Confederates claim the status of a noble minority that is oppressed by a federal government that threatens their way of life, which mainly consists of the ability to hold down nonwhite voters. This current approach,<sup>55</sup> demonstrated most clearly by the 2017 rally in Charlottesville, dispenses with these circumlocutions. It links support for the Lost Cause directly to an advocacy of racial hierarchy. Tellingly, when President Trump was forced to condemn the actions of the Charlottesville rioters, he was careful to do so in ways that did not challenge the ideas that they had espoused.

The glorification of the Confederacy and of a time in American history that sought to oppress and erase people of color is part of a project to redefine true Americans as only those with European heritage.

Former Republican presidential candidate Pat Buchanan put the cultural genocide argument clearly when defending President Trump’s categorization of developing African nations as “shithole countries.”<sup>56</sup> He explained that nonwhite immigrants tend to vote Democratic and thus are a threat to what he called “America’s vanishing white majority.”<sup>57</sup>

Buchanan's 1992 campaign for president was a direct precursor to the revival of white supremacy seen today. As writer John Ganz explained in a brilliant review of this strange race,<sup>58</sup> Buchanan carefully studied the unexpected success of neo-Nazi and former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan David Duke's gubernatorial campaigns in Louisiana (and then brief presidential campaign). While other Republicans were dismayed by the rise of a former Klan leader in their party, Buchanan saw it as an opportunity to appropriate Duke's mix of anti-Semitism and Confederate nostalgia in a populist run against incumbent President George H.W. Bush. The formula worked astonishingly well in the 1992 New Hampshire primary; the state had suffered from the economic downturn after the Gulf War, and voters looking for help resented Bush's focus on international affairs.<sup>59</sup>

Buchanan launched his campaign with a speech in which he called for "a new nationalism" that would put "America first"—language that Steve Bannon would echo decades later. This, Buchanan argued, would ensure "our Western heritage is going to be handed down to future generations, not dumped onto some landfill called multi-culturalism."<sup>60</sup> In an astonishing reversal for Bush—whose popularity had risen to more than 90 percent only a year earlier—Buchanan won 40 percent<sup>61</sup> of the vote in New Hampshire, scrambling the race and encouraging Ross Perot to launch his third-party bid. Although Bush was ultimately victorious, with Buchanan fading as a political force, his campaign nonetheless demonstrated the power of white supremacist ideas allied to economic populism.

Samuel Francis, one of Buchanan's advisers and intellectual mentors, explained the power of his approach in a 1996 essay<sup>62</sup> that prefigures many of the themes of the white supremacist lexicon, using "Ruling Class," as a euphemism for Jews:

*The "cultural war" for Buchanan is not Republican swaggering about family values and dirty movies but a battle over whether the nation itself can continue to exist under the onslaught of the militant secularism, acquisitive egoism, economic and political globalism, demographic inundation, and unchecked state centralism supported by the Ruling Class...*

*...the economic interests as well as the cultural habits and ideologies of the Ruling Class drive it toward globalization—the managed destruction of the nation, its sovereignty, its culture, and its people—while those of Middle Americans drive them toward support for and reenforcement of the nation and its organic way of life.*

Commentators horrified by President Trump’s use of paranoid, xenophobic ideas to distract from his kleptocracy and incompetence should recognize the precedent—even if Buchanan never quite made it to the White House.

In 2019, Rep. King argued, “If we presume that every culture is equal and has an equal amount to contribute to our civilization, then we’re devaluing the contributions of the people that laid the foundation for America and that’s our founding fathers. It is not about race, it’s never been about race. It is about culture.”<sup>63</sup>

Not only does this assertion attempt to erase the very real contributions of a diverse number of Americans to their nation, but it also unsurprisingly links back to an anti-Semitic trope—cultural Marxism—in which a group of Jewish intellectuals in the Frankfurt School are seen as the architects of a plot to destroy Western civilization by making the case for racial integration.<sup>64</sup> Mass shooter Anders Breivik focused on this in his justification for murdering Norwegian social democratic activists in 2011, and the theory recurs in other recent white nationalist writings as well as in the text<sup>65</sup> that inspired the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995.<sup>66</sup>

# How did this start, and how can it end?

Ashley E. Jardina's 2019 book, *White Identity Politics*,<sup>67</sup> examined the rise of a distinctive white identity among Americans by reviewing data that the American National Election Studies (ANES) has collected since 2012. In 2016, the ANES added additional questions to its survey, which Jardina proposed, giving additional insight into white identity and consciousness. Jardina's core finding was:

*For a number of whites, these monumental social and political trends – including an erosion of whites' majority status and the election of America's first black president – have signaled a challenge to the absoluteness of whites' dominance. These threats, both real and perceived, have . . . brought to the fore, for many whites, a sense of commonality, attachment, and solidarity with their racial group. They have led a sizeable proportion of whites to believe that their racial group, and the benefits that group enjoys, are endangered. As a result, this racial solidarity now plays a central role in the way many whites orient themselves to the political and social world.*

Jardina is clear that this does not map to a racist set of beliefs for the great majority of respondents who expressed a heightened sense of white identity, but she warns that such beliefs could become widespread: “These aggrieved whites are a potentially untapped well, one whose resentments are primed, ready to be stoked by politicians willing to go down a potentially very dark path.”

It is worth emphasizing that white identity and nativism are a real lever for a significant minority of whites—and will continue to be for decades. A demographic voting bloc that sees itself losing cultural and then political power—but that holds disproportionate per capita voting power because of its geographical distribution and the antidemocratic features of U.S. governance—is likely to be a long-lasting force against progressivism and multiracial coalitions.

The central political question, then, is how to move away from this latest dark turn in American politics. As Jardina points out, there is a wide distance between voters who feel an activated sense of white identity and white nationalists. Just as politicians



and terrorists who traffic in white nationalism work to narrow this gap, defenders of democratic values must work to widen and completely expose it by making clear how racism is used to promote class interests. Ian Haney Lopez, an activist and law professor at University of California, Berkeley, has shown<sup>68</sup> that a message that fuses race and class interests can defuse the power of racial appeals. He tested nine versions of such a message, which can be summarized as follows:

*No matter where we come from or what our color is, most of us work hard for our families, but today, certain politicians and their greedy lobbyists hurt everyone by handing kickbacks to the rich, defunding our schools, and threatening seniors with cutting Medicare and Social Security. Then they turn around and point the finger for hard times at poor families, black people, and new immigrants. We need to join together with people from all walks of life to fight for our future, just like we won better wages, safer workspaces, and civil rights in our past. By joining together, we can elect new leaders who work for all of us, not just the wealthy few.*

Among 2,000-person population samples that had—alarmingly—previously demonstrated receptivity to coded racist appeals, each version of this message scored higher than the most effective messages of racial division.

Constantly emphasizing the inherently violent, antidemocratic, and racist nature of white nationalist ideas can be an effective way of discrediting those who promote these ideologies. Elevating thoughtful voices who have credibility among voters with a strong sense of white identity is particularly helpful; for example, elevating conservative critics of white nationalism with strong security credentials could be a useful technique. In addition, mixing traditional liberal critiques of racist ideas with strong appeals to unifying national symbols and traditions can be a powerful rhetorical device to appeal to traditionalist-minded voters. After all, the United States won the battle against fascism in World War II—the fascists were the enemies of freedom then, and they still are today. The fight against white nationalism should unite activists of the left with those of the nonxenophobic right. Groups who may well disagree on many other issues need to work together against a common enemy that threatens the United States' democratic foundations for resolving disagreements.

The logic set out in Jonathan Metzl's *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment Is Killing America's Heartland* is pithily expressed in the book's subtitle. The political challenge is to expose the con and help steer a broad, multiracial majority toward a more inclusive politics. The popular revolt in Slovakia<sup>69</sup> in April 2018, which led to the downfall of the government there, provides an interesting template.

The revolt—against a populist, Russian-influenced and corrupt regime that used anti-Semitic rhetoric and violence to stay in power—used a combination of public pressure and unity between traditional rivals to overthrow what had appeared to be a well-entrenched government. This government used resentment against Roma and traditions of xenophobia to cloak kleptocratic and ultimately murderous motives. Generosity of spirit among former opponents and a concentration on the urgent work at hand, along with activating public disgust against a corrupt, predatory style of politics, was the secret to victory.

A broad coalition of voices in political and civil society needs to ostracize politicians who traffic in white nationalist language for political benefit. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's surprise bestseller, *How Democracies Die*,<sup>70</sup> showed how, in the 1930s, countries such as Belgium whose conservative parties rejected alliances with fascist ones were able to resist the contagion, while countries where mainstream conservatives tolerated fascist ideas or joined in coalitions with them succumbed. The same dynamic remains at play in combating white supremacy, which is why broad coalitions are necessary to set the boundaries of acceptable political discourse and enforce them.

# Conclusion

In the U.S. context, the revulsion against white nationalist terrorist attacks, as well as recent serious law enforcement efforts to deal with them, are encouraging signs. Crucially, nonpartisan security forces are holding, for now, against a white nationalist drift in the administration, and movements that reject this agenda are emerging across the political spectrum. More recently, the U.S. military refused to be pulled into repressing legitimate protests following a series of high-profile cases of police brutality against Black people, and the chorus of storied retired officers reminding those currently serving of the meaning of their oath was impressive.<sup>71</sup> The story among police forces is more complex—with some worrying signs of white nationalist sympathies<sup>72</sup> and susceptibility to QAnon conspiracies<sup>73</sup>—though it is worth noting that the FBI's strong counterterrorist capability continues, so far, to avert white supremacist terror attacks.<sup>74</sup> The country cannot count on the FBI to always be as successful as it has been so far; a mass casualty white supremacist terror attack could inflame the situation beyond easy repair, which makes it even more urgent to win the ideological debate now, while continuing to hope that no such attack takes place.

The challenge is to expose white nationalist ideologues—and the opportunistic politicians who are appropriating their language—to demonstrate that these ideas are fundamentally un-American and are all too often a cover for corruption, graft, and racism. Politicians, opinion-makers, and public figures from all political traditions have a patriotic duty to stand up to white supremacy and call it out for what it is: a betrayal of the ideals on which the United States was founded and for which Americans have fought and died ever since.

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## About the author

**Simon Clark** is a nonresident senior fellow for National Security and International Policy at the Center for American Progress, where he leads the work on combating violent white supremacy.

For 15 years, Clark built and led Fidelity's European venture capital business before moving to Generation Investment Management, the sustainability-focused investing firm, following a career in technology startups, finance, and online media. He retired in 2016.

Clark is the chair of the board of Foreign Policy for America, an advocacy group for principled U.S. engagement in the world, and of the Center for Countering Digital Hate, a U.K.-based nonprofit that seeks to disrupt the architecture of online hate and disinformation. He was educated at Westminster School and Wadham College, Oxford, where he read Politics, Philosophy, and Economics (PPE).

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## Endnotes

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