

HFG RESEARCH AND POLICY IN BRIEF

The White Power Movement at War on Democracy

KATHLEEN BELEW

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HARRY FRANK
GUGGENHEIM
FOUNDATION

The people who forced their way into the U.S. Capitol building on January 6, 2021, intent on a show of force to disrupt the certification of the 2020 presidential election, represent several strands of rightwing activism. There were ardent partisans of President Trump. There were people recently radicalized by fantastic QAnon conspiracy theories. But there was a third segment of this crowd, one that poses a substantial threat to democratic systems: participants in the organized white power movement.

The Capitol attack was not just a protest, and given the discovery of undetonated pipe bombs and Molotov cocktails, the fact that several people carried restraints, and the erection of a gallows, it is surprising that the body count was not higher. But we must recognize that this action was meant not to produce a high number of casualties but rather as a demonstration of power, intended to recruit and radicalize others to the cause. The white power movement is not new; it has long toiled to undermine American democracy, its institutions, and its people. Grasping the historical contours of the movement is essential to understanding its role in political violence—past, present, and future.

By looking at the whole of the white power and militia movement landscape, it is immediately clear that we are in the midst of a rising tide of activity—one likely to result in further violence, and perhaps even in mass casualty violence.

On April 19, 2020, the United States quietly passed the 25th anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing. With its death toll of 168 people—including nineteen young children—and the injury of hundreds more, the bombing was the largest deliberate mass casualty incident on mainland American soil between Pearl Harbor and 9/11. It was a cataclysm, a shock, a horror in the heartland of America. Yet despite its historical significance, most people remember the bombing as the work of a lone wolf or a few bad apples. People who visit the memorial in Oklahoma City, view documentaries on Netflix, or read more casually about the 1990s might easily come away with no story of the white power movement: a generations-long groundswell with a complex ideology that continues to propel mass violence in the present.¹

What is the white power movement? An array of activists that is, in all ways but race, remarkably diverse. Since the late 1970s, it has convened people of a wide variety of belief systems, including Klansmen, neo-Nazis, white separatists, proponents of white supremacist religious theologies, and,

starting in the late 1980s, racist skinheads and militia movement members. These activists represent a wide range of class positions. The movement has long included men, women, and children; felons and religious leaders; high school dropouts and holders of advanced degrees; civilians and veterans and active-duty military personnel. They have lived in all regions of the country. They have lived in suburbs, cities, and rural areas.

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This reveals how important it is to understand something central to the white power movement's organizational style: it is inherently opportunistic. Here, it borrows from a playbook of Ku Klux Klan strategy. These groups have long calibrated their rhetoric to prevailing frustrations of the communities they were trying to radicalize, as in the 1920s when the Klan was anti-Black, but also anti-immigrant in the Northeast as immigrants arrived there, anti-labor in the Northwest as unionization moved through the region, and anti-Mexican on the border. They have also adapted to prevailing cultural forms. In the 1980s, white power activists donned camouflage fatigues in part because of tactical readiness and post-Vietnam War paramilitarism, and in part because people they wanted to recruit thought camouflage fatigues were cool.

We see this in today's movement, as activists don polo shirts, as in the 2017 Unite the Right protest in Charlottesville, Virginia, or Hawaiian shirts, as in the 2020 surge of "Boogaloo Boy" activity. In every case, we should be attuned not to the specifics of cultural presentation, or even to the specific beliefs or organization of any one of these groups, but to their interrelation. By looking at the whole of the white power and militia movement landscape, it is immediately clear that we are in the midst of a rising tide of activity—one likely to result in further violence, and perhaps even in mass casualty violence.

This opportunism also lends itself to a common misappraisal of the seriousness of white power movement activity. The present moment features deep social frustration around the COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant quarantines and mask laws; around the mass protests of racialized police violence in the United States; and around the increasing divisiveness of, and hateful rhetoric within, American politics. There are through lines in all of these issues to white power activity, but so, too, do these issues mobilize a wider array of frustrated actors. In one key example—as was the case in

the militia movement of the early 1990s—not all Boogaloo activists are white power activists, but many white power activists are involved in Boogaloo. And while all of Boogaloo is interested in bringing about the collapse of society, the white power contingent envisions race war where others simply wish for civil war.

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Sounding the Alarm

White power and militia movement activists now constitute the greatest threat of domestic terrorism in the United States, outstripping not only the relatively small casualty counts of leftist violence but also Islamist extremist violence. As *The Guardian* reported in July 2020, citing a database of nearly 900 politically motivated acts of domestic terror since 1994, only one attack by a so-called antifa activist led to fatalities. In that case, the one person killed was the perpetrator.² “Over the same time period, American white supremacists and other rightwing extremists have carried out attacks that left at least 329 victims dead. ...More broadly, the database lists 21 victims killed in leftwing attacks since 2010, and 117 victims of rightwing attacks in that same period – nearly six times as many. Attacks inspired by the Islamic State and similar jihadist groups, in contrast, killed 95 people since 2010, slightly fewer than rightwing extremists, according to the data set. More than half of these victims died in a single attack on a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, in 2016.”³

To be sure, this dataset includes the Oklahoma City bombing, and the last piece of information excludes the attacks of 9/11. But if reasonable people can agree that both Islamist terrorism and white power terrorism are significant threats to the American public, this data should give them pause about thinking of “antifa”—more properly an ideology than a movement—or Black Lives Matter, which at the time of writing had no attributable casualty count, in the same terms. Some politicians would have us consider white power and antifa as two sides of the same coin. But one of these, white power, has an organizational structure, cell-style violence, armament, and generations of activity behind it. One of them, white power, has a casualty count. The other does not.

Even more concerning are deliberate attempts to distract from white power activism in the aftermath of mass attacks on civilians, and when there is incontestable evidence about the motivation of the attackers. Several recent mass shootings carried out by white power attackers have been described in other ways. For this reason, we still read stories of lone wolf gunmen attacking Muslims in Christchurch, New Zealand; attacking Jewish people at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh; attacking Black Bible-study worshippers in Charleston; attacking Latinx people in El Paso. These *were* acts of Islamophobic, anti-semitic, racist, and anti-immigrant violence. But they were *also* carried out by white power activists, all of whom shared the same core motivating texts, ideology, concerns about white reproduction, and list of targets. They are all part of a single movement.

Efforts to equate the violence of this movement with that of left-wing activists, such as a political talking points memo circulated after the El Paso massacre advocating the conversation be steered “away from white nationalism to an argument that implies both sides are to blame,”⁴ not only ignore the threat of the most violent domestic terrorist movement targeting American civilians but attempt to aid it in its work of disappearance.

Historians are, of course, reluctant to predict the future. But here I wish to note a chorus of others raising this alarm: whistleblowers leaving federal law enforcement agencies, deradicalizers struggling with the volume of people entering and leaving fringe groups, and monitors at watchdog agencies and tech companies. Combined with a steady stream of news stories—evidence of the outcome of organizing, even if we don’t yet have the archive to see the backstory—this surge in white power and militia movement activity is inarguable.

Origins in the 1980s

Although we lack, in many cases, the specifics on membership numbers, intergroup linkages, and the circulation of activists between groups, the earlier history of the movement provides ample context for concern. We are decades, if not generations, into the problem of white power activism. The history of the earlier movement reveals a great deal about how these groups and activists work in the present.

The most significant legacies of the white power movement evolved from its 1983 revolutionary turn to declare war against the federal government and other enemies. The strategies that stem from that pivotal shift include, first, the use of computer-based social network activism. The movement got online with proto-internet message boards in 1984, pioneering a social network activism that has only amplified in the present. The second strategy: Leaderless Resistance, perhaps most easily explained as cell-style terror. Leaderless Resistance was implemented in large part to foil the many government informants who infiltrated Klan groups in the 1960s and to stymie court prosecution.

But it has had a much more durable and catastrophic effect in its clouding of public understanding. It has allowed the movement to disappear, leaving behind a fiction of lone wolf terrorists, bad apples, and errant madmen.

The 1983-1995 period featured many episodes of white power coordination, social networking, and spectacular violence, yet at no point in this period was a significant impediment brought to bear on this movement's organizing. Even in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing, there was no durable shift in public understanding, no major prosecution that hobbled the movement. There was no meaningful and permanent response to white power activism, at least in its American form, in surveillance by law enforcement, juror education, prosecutorial strategy, or military policy (even though active-duty troop involvement in the white power movement has been a persistent problem). The piecemeal responses in each of these areas utterly failed to contain white power as a growing and broad-based social movement. Not even lawsuits, which were in many ways the most effective measure attempted, delivered a full stop to white power organizing and violence—and several activists temporarily constrained by lawsuits later carried out other attacks.

White Power, White Supremacy, and White Nationalism

White power should not be confused with “white supremacy.” Although this certainly *is* a white supremacist movement, the activists I describe here are one very small and violent component of that broad and complex category. White power should also not be called “white nationalism,” which carries with it a distortion that threatens to contribute to public misunderstanding. That term may suggest merely an overzealous patriotism. But the nation in white nationalism since 1983 has not been the United States but rather a transnational “Aryan nation” that connects white people around the world. The interests of white nationalism were and are fundamentally opposed to those of the United States, at least insofar as the United States is imagined as an inclusive constitutional democracy.

Nor should we confuse white power with the alt-right, a specific and recent subset of organizing, even though it has large overlaps with the white power movement. The alt-right is new, and is perhaps already outmoded; white power is decades, even generations, old.

“White power”—which is also the most common phrase used by these activists in self-description—most accurately conveys this movement. “White supremacist extremism,” which has come into more frequent use in the aftermath of Charlottesville—especially among scholars who study this groundswell outside of the United States—also conveys both its seriousness and its specificity but was not used by white power activists or their opponents in the earlier period.

The Myth of the Lone Wolf

We have also failed to understand perpetrators on their own terms. For example, a large part of the scholarly work on the white power movement has attempted to categorize and quantify the various branches of the movement—trying to establish how many Klansmen, how many neo-Nazis, how many Skinheads, etc. In fact, this question is often irrelevant to the way that white power activists understand their own participation in the movement. The historical archive reveals that people regularly circulate between groups and belief systems, that they often hold concurrent memberships, and that they use a wide variety of flexible and interchangeable symbols and ideologies.

Many of the purportedly inexplicable acts of violence in the present are motivated by a coherent and deliberate ideology. The March 2019 attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand that left forty-nine people dead and scores more injured was not a lone wolf attack or the work of a few isolated radicals. It was, again, part of the white power movement, a broad groundswell that has joined people together in common purpose, social relationships, and political ideology. This movement formed in the United States after the Vietnam War, using narratives of violence and the symbols and weapons of that conflict to bring together Klansmen, neo-Nazis, skinheads, and other white radicals.

White power activists share views with other conservatives on many social issues, but they understand these issues as deeply related to racial extinction and have written about this in precisely this way for decades.

The materials left behind by the Christchurch attacker—not just the manifesto, but also the social media posts and the messages scrawled on the weapon and magazines used in the attack—definitively locate his ideology in this movement. He references the Fourteen Words, a slogan written by the U.S. white power activist David Lane, who was incarcerated in the late 1980s after his participation in a white power terror cell called the Order. That group robbed millions of dollars from armored cars to distribute to white power cells around the country, assassinated enemies, and attacked infrastructure targets in an attempt to foment race war.

The Fourteen Words refers to the central mission of the white power movement, which is to ensure a “white future” and the birth of white children. The Christchurch gunman also refers to a “future

for our people,” expressing the apocalyptic fear of racial annihilation that has animated white power activism for decades. His manifesto ends with highly stylized, idyllic images of white mothers and children. This focus on women is a mainstay of the white power movement and its intense emphasis on white reproduction, worries about hyperfertility of people of color, and the fear of racial extinction.

These ideas about genocide against whites and population replacement aren't new, nor do they constitute a conspiracy theory responding only to growing populations of Muslim immigrants. White power activists share views with other conservatives on many social issues, but they understand these issues as deeply related to racial extinction and have written about this in precisely this way for decades. They oppose interracial marriage, abortion, and gay and lesbian movements, they say, because these would decrease the white birth rate; they oppose immigration because they fear they will be overrun. They frame these issues with ideas about the purity of white women—who they say would have to bear three children each in order to avoid racial extinction—and with hateful invective about hyperfertile racial others.

A Transnational Movement

The white power movement is profoundly transnational, motivated by ideas that have long roots in the United States and elsewhere but are not bounded by nation. As with many transnational movements, white power was both shaped by inflows from other places—like skinhead culture from Great Britain—and outflows to others. Aryan Nations, a white separatist group, sent their materials around the world in the 1980s and 1990s, and activists in Australia and New Zealand could read white power newspapers from the United States and send for materials. White power churches like Wotansvolk and the World Church of the Creator even set up chapters and memberships in other countries. Wotansvolk had representation in forty-one countries by 2000, and the World Church of the Creator had chapters in a multitude of places, including New Zealand, Canada, Norway, and South Africa. The language and strategy of white power also spread through such books as *The Turner Diaries*, a 1970s novel-turned-manual-turned-lodestar that traveled to many countries and sold more than 50,000 copies in the few decades after it was released.⁵ The places white power activists chose to pollinate map onto an idea of whiteness that transcends national boundaries.⁶

Violence as a Trigger for War

The future envisioned by the white power movement is profoundly radical. Indeed, the casualties wrought by this movement are not, in themselves, the movement's goal. They are means to an end, a way to awaken a broader white public to what these activists see as obvious: the threats posed to

the white race by immigration and racial others. The violence is meant to mobilize white people around the world to wage race war.

The Christchurch manifesto talks about just this strategy. In a section about the use of guns, the attacker writes that he hopes to spur a seizure of guns that would then enrage the right in the United States and provoke further conflict.

This strategy is directly out of *The Turner Diaries*. This novel is the crucial text in understanding the way futurity works in the white power movement. It sets out to answer the question that undergirds the entire project: how could a tiny fringe movement hope to overthrow the most powerful militarized superstate in the history of the world? The narrator describes the problem as “a gnat trying to assassinate an elephant.” The novel then lays out a plan in which white power cells and undercover operatives carry out assassinations, attacks on infrastructure targets, and sabotage to awaken a broader white public to their cause. Through guerilla warfare and cell-style terror, they are able to seize an air force base with nuclear weapons, provoke a nuclear exchange between the U.S. and the Soviet Union (and Israel), and take over first the nation and then the world in its aftermath. The details are worth understanding, and I have explored them elsewhere.⁷

An Apocalyptic Vision

Here I want to focus on the inherent apocalypticism braided through these beliefs and on the role of the white bystander and broader white public in the future imagined by the movement. Beginning in the late 1970s, apocalypticism has been enormously important not only to the white power movement but in the broader American political culture. In the rising evangelical congregations of the 1980s and 1990s, the ones that read the *Left Behind* novels and planned for “the rapture,” the fears of the Cold War became intertwined with faith belief.⁸ After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 there was a fundamental crisis of narrative—people with these ingrained fears of the end of the world still held them but now operated without a clear narrative enemy or agent of the end.

This worked in an even stronger and more direct way in the white power movement, where activists connected ideas of a radical political future with their belief in imminent apocalypse. Christian Identity, one of the movement’s two most prominent theologies, foretold the impending end of the world. But whereas evangelical belief offered the promise of the rapture—in which the faithful would be peacefully transported to heaven before the bloodshed of the tribulations—Christian Identity called its adherents to arms. The faithful would either have to outlast the tribulations to see the return of Christ, becoming survivalists, or would have to take up arms to clear the world of nonbelievers in the End Times. Nonbelievers, in Christian Identity, included all nonwhite people. In other words, Christian Identity transfigured race war into holy war.

These views of the world—perceived threats against the white population, the idea of demographic transformation as racial extinction, and the looming fear of the coming end of the world—came to impact mainstream political formations in all sorts of new and overlapping ways in the 2000s (preceding the 2016 election).

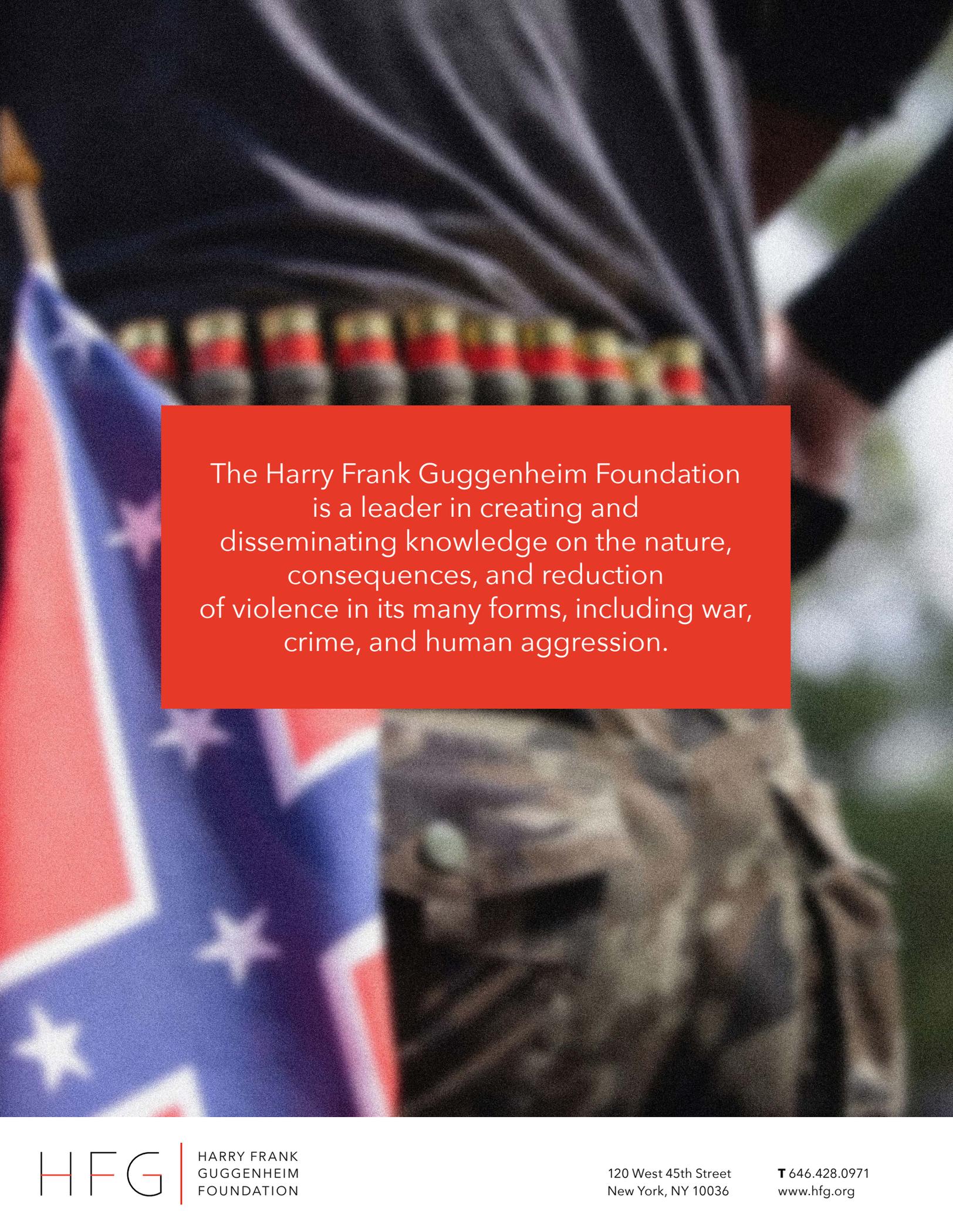
Conclusion

Historical context could pave the way to better specialist understandings of white power violence. There are no lone wolves. There are, from time to time, people who carry out acts of violence that are not motivated by political ideology, as in the case of the 1999 attack on Columbine High School. But in the assault on the Tree of Life Synagogue, the Anders Breivik attack in Norway, the El Paso shooting, and Dylann Roof's massacre of worshippers in Charleston, we need look no further than the manifestos to see that even those people who have never actually met another white power activist can become radicalized by a social network, imbricated in an ideology, and preceded in their beliefs and actions by decades of history.

Kathleen Belew is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Chicago. This article is based on research described in full in her book, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America*.

Endnotes

- 1 Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).
- 2 The fatal shooting in Portland, Oregon, in August 2020 of a participant at a rally of supporters of President Trump may be an additional case. However, the details of the incident have not been clearly established (and may never be, as the suspect was fatally shot by law enforcement days after the killing).
- 3 Lois Beckett, "Anti-Fascists Linked to Zero Murders in the US in 25 Years," *The Guardian*, July 27, 2020.
- 4 Steve Contorno, "Memo Reveals a House Republican Strategy on Shootings: Downplay White Nationalism, Blame Left," *Tampa Bay Times*, August 16, 2019.
- 5 *The Turner Diaries* was first printed in serial in *National Alliance, Attack!*, 1974–1976 (Stimely Collection, University of Oregon, Eugene, Box 31, Folder 9) and then published as Andrew Macdonald, *The Turner Diaries* (Hillsboro, WV: National Vanguard Books, 1978).
- 6 On transnational activity, see Robert W. Balch, "The Rise and Fall of Aryan Nations: A Resource Mobilization Perspective," *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* 34, no. 1 (Summer 2006); Mattias Gardell, *Gods of the Blood: The Pagan Revival and White Separatism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Abby L. Ferber, *White Man Falling: Race, Gender, and White Supremacy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998); Jeffrey Kaplan and Tore Bjorgo, *Nation and Race: The Developing Euro-American Racist Subculture* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998).
- 7 Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America*.
- 8 Ideas about outlasting the tribulations also appeared in mainstream evangelical accounts such as Tim LaHaye's popular *Left Behind* novels, the first of which appeared in 1995.



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120 West 45th Street
New York, NY 10036

T 646.428.0971
www.hfg.org