

WHITE NATIONALISM OUT OF THE CLOSET

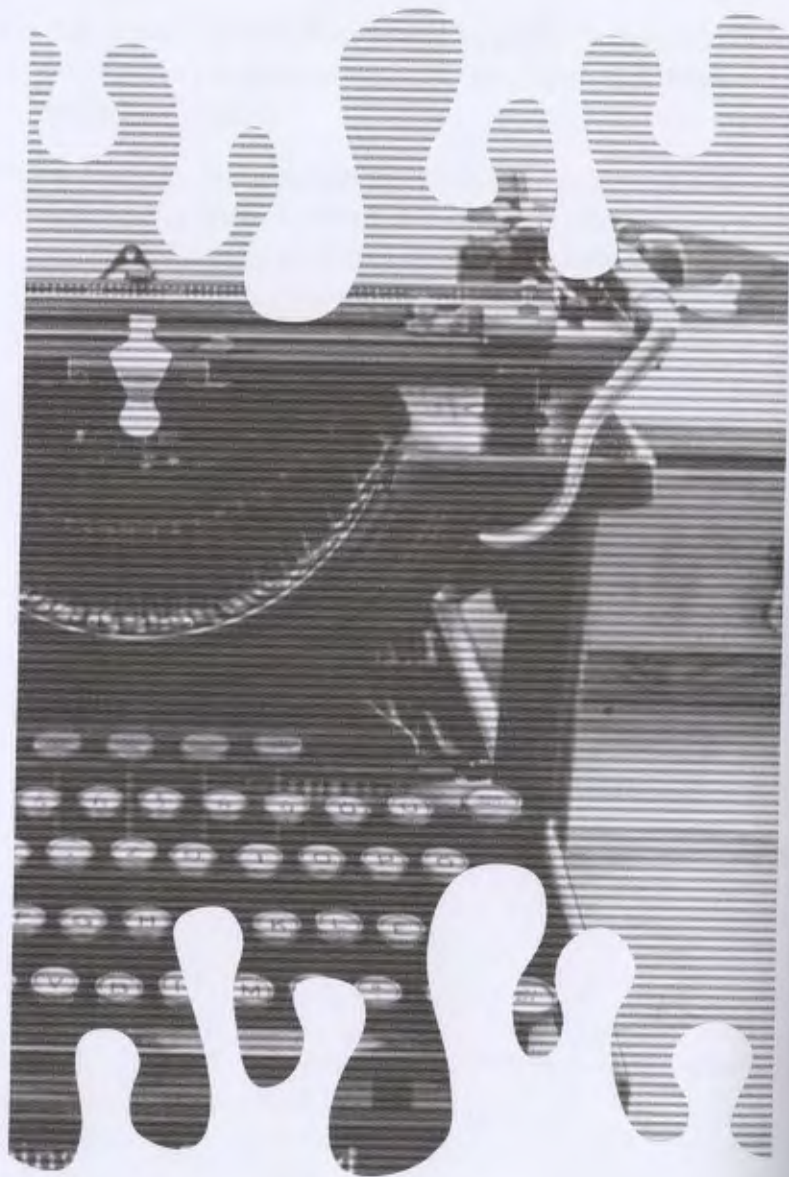
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Increasing White Nationalism since 2008

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Since 2008, the United States has experienced an expansion of, and, increasing aggression from White Nationalist, or Alt-Right members. From the volatile “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, where violent clashes culminated in one woman’s death and dozens of injuries, to the murder of eleven Jewish individuals in a Pittsburgh synagogue, the events of the past two years make this rise especially evident. In fact, since 2008, a majority (71%) of fatalities caused by extremist ideology were affiliated with either the far right or White Nationalistic ideologies (Reitman, 2018). The White Nationalistic ideology has made its way onto the political scene as well, as politicians have openly associated with white nationalists and may identify as white nationalists themselves (Tenold, 2018). Although white nationalism, or white supremacy, has been around since before the Civil War, this sudden expansion is cause for concern. This essay will demonstrate that because of fear and anxiety due to immigration and rising minority groups, Right Wing Authoritarian attitudes and lack of quality contact with minority groups have attracted individuals to become White Nationalists. The Realistic Conflict Theory and having leaders in prominent political offices espousing their minority viewpoint help to explain the sudden explosion in both violent and political activity of the White Nationalist movement.

As shown in research, fear and anxiety are powerful motivators, especially when it comes to voting and political behavior (Obschonka, Stuetzer, Rentfrow, Lee, Potter & Gosling, 2018; Hartzell 2018).



The post-9/11 era is especially important, as anxiety disorders increased in the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks, persisting years after the attacks, as did American xenophobia (Kung, Liu, Goldman, Huang, Wand, Kim K., Kim P., Yanh, 2017; Jones, 2011). Many Americans who still felt the effects of the attacks, years after they happened, found individuals who espoused similar views in the message boards of white supremacist groups. Meddaugh and Kay found in analysis of the White Nationalist forum Stormfront, that fear and anxieties were validated and reinforced, as they were told that the September 11th attacks were hoaxes and were perpetrated by globalists or Americans who wish to see the downfall of "White" United States. Although these claims may seem outlandish to most individuals, they serve as validation to those individuals who could not shake their post 9/11 anxieties. On Stormfront, "Non-Whites" are portrayed as waging war with the United States and are attempting to commit cultural genocide against "white culture". These forums also tell individuals of an "anti-White" agenda where the United States government is eroding their freedom of speech and due process (Meddaugh & Kay, 2009). The reason that those who have anxiety resulting from the September 11th attacks are so attracted to this is that they are praised and validated for feeling anxious years after the attacks happened, as they are told that they should feel that way, confirming the bias of those anxious individuals. This anxiety had existed long before the September 11th attacks however, manifesting itself in as a fear of immigrants, or Xenophobia.

Xenophobia remained a source of fear and anxiety for many Americans, continuing well into the post 9/11 era. Once again, this fear attracts many Americans into the White Nationalist movement, where they are told that immigrants are overpopulating the United States, taking American jobs and attempting to eliminate "white culture" (Bowman-Grieve, 2009). On Stormfront, forum members dispense another common myth to the White Nationalist community, that those who follow the Tenants of Islam are trying to take over the country and implement "Sharia Law," and are doing so through im-

migration and by seeking refugee status. To many Americans who experienced some anti-Muslim sentiment following the terrorist attacks, these forums confirm their biases and further entrench their viewpoints (Meddaugh & Kay, 2009). This sort of xenophobia is particularly dangerous, in that is so strong that research has shown it predicts aggressiveness better than holding racist attitudes towards minorities (Baker, Cañarte, & Day, 2018). This is in part due to a perceived threat to the tradition that Muslims and other immigrant minorities supposedly pose. These perceived threats to the so-called tradition of the United States also attract another group of individuals to White Nationalism; the Right-Wing Authoritarians (Baker et al., 2018).

Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) describes individuals who believe that conformity, submission to authority, keeping tradition, and following social norms are vitally important (Altemeyer, B. 1982; Stenner, 2009). These individuals are prone to aggression and hostility to those who violate what they consider the natural order, tradition, and social conventions. One of the groups of individuals that find White Nationalism particularly appealing includes those who desire to restore the European, Protestant "Christian heritage" that the US is perceived as being founded upon, particularly within the viewpoint of white, conservative Christians. Research has indicated that the more evangelical and conservative white individuals are, the less likely they are to support contact and intermarriage with other races, in part due to the belief that intermarriage will reduce the purity of their religion and, in turn, the United States (Perry & Whitehead, 2015). As these Evangelicals are religiously intolerant and believe that keeping social stratification is vital, and therefore entrench their status at the top, they provide an excellent example of Right Wing Authoritarianism. The idea of keeping the United States white, traditional and of wanting to protect of the 'purity' of their culture are the core tenants described by White Nationalists on the Stormfront forums (Bowman-Grieve, 2009). These ideas, from both movements, are core tenants of the RWA personality, which then provides an excellent environment

for the spread of White Nationalistic Ideology. Although many of those who hold RWA beliefs are not explicitly racist, many do hold implicit biases, as would occur when they feel as though minorities and political opponents are violating and eroding the traditions of a country that is historically white. White Nationalists then validate, confirm, and strengthen these biases, as they desire a return to a traditional White America. The RWA views that attract individuals to White Nationalism would not be as powerful however, if people who held RWA ideas encountered the other cultures, as quality exposure to other cultures reduces intolerance (Kanas, Scheepers, and Sterkens, 2015).

The lack of exposure to minorities and other cultures contributes greatly to the intolerance of other cultures, particularly from the White Nationalist movement, as a complete misunderstanding of the other culture is perpetuated amongst the members of the movement (Hartzell, 2018). Research has shown that even those who hold extremist conservative views, such as the aforementioned "Christian Nationalists," having even only one minority individual that they consider a friend greatly reduces intolerance and bigotry (Perry & Whitehead, 2015). In fact, having minority members in a religious congregation causes a reduction of the intolerance of the other members of that congregation (Johnson & Jacobson, 2005). Interaction with minorities in an educational setting also reduces the overall bigotry exhibited by individuals, providing further support for the Contact Hypothesis (Johnson & Jacobson, 2005). However, if the contact with the minority outgroups is not quality contact, it does not have an impact upon tolerance of other cultures, even if an individual works with, or lives near the outgroups (Johnson & Jacobson, 2005). For the contact to have a significant impact on levels of intolerance, groups must be equal and have cooperation (Kanas et al., 2015). This indicates that individuals who have very little contact, especially quality contact, are more likely to exhibit intolerance and biases, and could find comfort when discussing these ideas with White Nationalists, as they perpetuate false beliefs that individuals may exhibit without exposure, such as an innate

fear of Islam due to the September 11th attacks. Although these factors may explain what attracts individuals to support White Nationalism, it does not explain the sharp rise in both political and violent activities exhibited by White Nationalists, as the movement has been around since the Civil War (Reitman, 2018).

One explanation for the rise in White Nationalistic activity is the Realistic Conflict Theory (RCT), which states that a group can become aggressive when there is threat of competition for resources, social status, or power, among other things (Sherif, Harvey, White & Hood, 1961). According to a New York Times article written by Janet Reitman, one of the events that led to more White Nationalistic activity was the presidential campaign, and eventual election of the first non-white president, President Barack Obama. During his presidential campaign, a couple assassination attempts were thwarted, and White Nationalists regularly threatened Obama and submitted racist posts regarding him online. Following his election, White Nationalist participation expanded even further (Reitman, 2018). This was due to one of the defining tenants of RCT, which is that the election of minorities are seen as threats to political power, and in reaction White Nationalists felt as though they needed to respond to what they perceived as threats (Krell, 2016). Although this 'threat' was not a legitimate concern, research has shown that symbolic threats cause stronger reactions than those that are realistic (Bouman, Zomeren & Otten, 2013). This explains the strong backlash from the White Nationalist community, following the election of the first Black President, even though he was not a danger to the personal wellbeing of any White Nationalists, they perceived him as a symbolic threat to White Supremacy, and the existence of the United States as a White country. Another purely symbolic threat that white nationalists had perceived as real, is that immigrants are menaces to the economic and social status of Whites in the United States (Baker et al., 2018). Once again, research has shown this perceived threat to have a real effect on the aggression of xenophobic White Nationalists (Baker et al., 2018). The rhetoric and words of certain political leaders further supported the symbolic threats

posed by immigration, giving White Nationalists a prominent voice at the national level, emboldening them and increasing their political activity and aggression.

Support, direct or indirect, for White Nationalists comes from the voices of political leaders giving their anti-minority ideals and thoughts a national and prominent stage. Even if unintentional, the campaign and presidency of Donald Trump has created a national voice, and caused a resurgence of the white nationalistic movement, with many white nationalists enthusiastically supporting him (Hartzell, 2018). One way his rhetoric has emboldened and strengthened White Nationalism is by reinforcing the xenophobic fear that white nationalists exhibit, often discussing how illegal immigrants are allowed to freely commit crimes, over estimating the number of crimes committed by illegal immigrants, and the number of illegal immigrants overall (Baker et al., 2018). President Trump, however, did more than just provide a voice to white nationalists, he appointed Steve Bannon who previously was the editor of far right and white nationalist news website Breitbart, as the White House Chief Strategist (Hartzell, 2018). These actions brought extremist right wing views into mainstream public discussion as well as the highest level of government in the United States, granting White Nationalism legitimacy in public discourse. Reitman chronicled how this led to many individuals openly exhibiting their views, and becoming aggressive to those who opposed their views, as they saw them as supporting those who white nationalists perceived as a threat to their status and wellbeing. This eventually culminated into a large rally in Charlottesville, North Carolina, dubbed the "Unite the Right" rally, during which there were several clashes resulting in dozens of injuries. The event eventually stopped when a self-avowed white nationalist rammed his car into a crowd of protestors at high speed, killing a woman and injuring many more (Reitman, 2018). This open aggression and political activity by white nationalists was encouraged by the statements and behaviors of President

Trump and Steve Bannon, because white nationalists and other alt-right groups see them as their heroes, even if they never intended to become their heroes (Hartzell, 2018).

Over the past decade white nationalistic activity and violence has increased, in part because attraction due to the anxiety many Americans have felt lead them to react more harshly and seek out validation of their anxiety. The American anxiety and fear of immigrants, in particular, has attracted many individuals to the White Nationalist movement, due to the hatred of immigrants already existent in the movement. Those with Right Wing Authoritarian views are also more attracted to the white nationalist movement due to a preference for tradition, and aggression towards perceived threats to their tradition. A third factor leading to the expansion of the White Nationalist movement is the lack of meaningful exposure to minority groups, as it leads to perpetuation of false beliefs and biases against minority outgroups. Although these factors may explain the attraction and expansion of White Nationalism, it does not however explain the sudden increase in exposure and activity. The Realistic Conflict Theory explains part of this aggression, as White Nationalists feel threatened by minority outgroups gaining political representation, more equal political power and fear of competition for status. Due to perceived threats, the White Nationalists have become more aggressive in order to preserve tradition and "natural order." White Nationalists have also increased their aggression in part due to the presence of leaders for their minority ideals, President Trump and Steve Bannon. The rhetoric of Donald Trump is close to the rhetoric spouted by White Nationalists, and Trump's appointment of alt-right icon Steve Bannon encouraged White Nationalists to publicly push their ideology into the mainstream. Although white nationalism is finally out in the open, and strongly opposed, it will likely not disappear for a while, in part due to the circumstances mentioned here. Xenophobia, as well as the desire for religious traditionalism are still issues that will continue to

attract individuals to the White Nationalist movement. It has also appeared prominently in public discussion and politics, meaning that this brand of racism is relatively new and now has legitimacy in national policy and government.

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