

Statement

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I wish to express my thanks to the Committee for taking on the important work of addressing the problem of white power violence. As one of the only scholars who has studied this troubling phenomenon deeply, and who has historical knowledge of its patterns and drivers, as well as the gaps in our knowledge about this activity, I hope I can be of use in helping you understand this threat to our democracy and how it might be effectively contained. This is a dark and troubling history that leads to grave concern about the present moment, but the historical archive also shows us that there is reason to hope that we'll be able to find solutions.

I have spent more than a decade studying the white power movement from its formation after the Vietnam War to the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing and into the present. This movement connected neo-Nazis, Klansmen, skinheads, radical tax protestors, militia members, and others. It brought together people in every region of the country, people in suburbs and in cities and on mountaintops. It joined men, women and children; felons and religious leaders; high school dropouts and aerospace engineers; civilians and veterans and active-duty troops.

It was a social movement that included a variety of strategies for bringing about social change, both violent and nonviolent. However, its most significant legacies have evolved from its 1983 revolutionary turn to declare war against the federal government and other enemies. The first is the use of computer-based social network activism, which began in 1984 and has amplified in the present.¹ The second is an operational strategy

¹ By "activism," I mean the work of people to bring about a political transformation through action.

In this statement, I draw on my historical monograph *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

called Leaderless Resistance. This is most easily understood as cell-style terror, in which a network of small cells of activists could work in concert towards commonly shared goals with no communication with one another, and with no direct ties to movement leadership. Leaderless Resistance was implemented in large part to foil the many government informants who infiltrated Klan groups in the 1960s, and also worked 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, making the violence white power activists commit seem to be the work of “lone wolf” actors and errant madmen. These designations leave very little room for enacting policy beyond mental health initiatives, which will not address the scope of this problem. Instead, understanding these acts of violence as politically motivated, connected, and purposeful represents a crucial first step toward a different response.

Beginning with the revolutionary turn in 1983, the white power movement has been defined by coordination, social networking, and spectacular violence—and by outright, declared war on the federal government and racial and political enemies. However, at no point has there been a meaningful stop to this movement’s organizing. Even in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing—the largest deliberate mass casualty on American soil between Pearl Harbor and 9/11—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 in surveillance organization and resources, juror education, prosecutorial strategy, or military policy. The piecemeal responses in each of these areas utterly failed to contain white power as a growing and broad-based social movement.

This movement is best understood as the “white power” movement. Although this was certainly a white supremacist movement, this is too broad a category to describe the activists in this groundswell. Similarly, the phrase “white nationalist” carries with it a distortion that threatens to contribute to public misunderstanding, because after 1983, the nation in white nationalism was not the United States, but rather a transnational “Aryan nation” that hoped to unite white people around the world in a violent conquest of people of color. The interests of white nationalism were, and are, fundamentally opposed to those of the United States and other nations.

Reporting white power violence as the work of lone wolves has created and sustained a broad public and journalistic misunderstanding of this activity. Thus we see stories about the Tree of Life synagogue attacks as antisemitic violence, the Christchurch shooting as Islamophobic violence, the attempted assassinations by a Coast Guard officer as political violence, and the El Paso shooting as a work of anti-immigrant violence. They are, of course, acts of antisemitic, Islamophobic, political, and anti-immigrant violence. But they are also actions motivated by a common white power and anti-immigrant ideology. Understood through a focus on perpetrators, they are part of the same story. If we place them in context, we can appropriately designate a rising tide of white power violence, perhaps even one that is accelerating.

Further, we have failed to understand perpetrators on their own terms. A large part of the scholarly work on the white power movement, already divorced from that on other kinds of perpetrators, has attempted to categorize and quantify the various strands of the movement—attempting 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 understood their own participation in the movement. The historical archive reveals that people regularly circulated between groups and belief systems, that they often held concurrent memberships, and that they used a wide variety of flexible and interchangeable symbols and ideologies.

The white power groundswell was certainly a fringe movement, but it was comparable with better-known mobilizations such as the anticommunist John Birch Society. Membership numbers are a poor measure of white power activity, with records often secreted, distorted, or destroyed. Nonetheless, scholars and watchdog groups who seek an aggregate count of the movement's varied branches—one that includes, for instance, both Klansmen and neo-Nazis rather than only one of these often overlapping self-designations—estimate that in the 1980s the movement included around 25,000 “hard-core members;” an additional 150,000-175,000 people who bought white power literature, sent contributions to groups, or attended rallies or other movement events; and another 450,000 who did not themselves purchase materials or participate, but who read the literature.² The John Birch Society, in contrast, had reached 100,000 members at its

² These numbers, drawn from Southern Poverty Law Center and Center for Democratic Renewal estimates, appear in Betty A. Dobratz and Stephanie L. Shanks-Meile, *The White Separatist Movement in the United States: “White Power, White Pride!”* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997); Raphael S. Ezekiel, *The Racist Mind: Portraits of American Neo-Nazis and Klansmen* (New York: Penguin, 1995); Abby L. Ferber and Michael Kimmel, “Reading Right: The Western Tradition in White Supremacist Discourse,” *Sociological Focus* 33, no. 2 (May 2000): 193-213.

1965 peak, and, while much less violent, has garnered much more public awareness and scholarly attention.³

News stories too often portray white power violence as the action of lone-wolf gunmen, a few “bad apples,” or the mentally ill. Instead, many of the purportedly inexplicable acts of mass violence in the present have been motivated by a coherent and deliberate ideology. The materials left behind by the Christchurch attacker—not just the manifesto, but also the social media posts and the white 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 refer 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. The manifesto ends with highly stylized, idyllic images of white mothers and children. This focus on women is also a mainstay of the white power movement and its intense emphasis on white reproduction, worries about the hyperfertility of people of color, and the fear of racial extinction.

³ D. J. Mulloy, *The World of the John Birch Society: Con- spiracy, Conservatism, and the Cold War* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014) 2-3, 15-41.

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

The white power movement was profoundly transnational, motivated by ideas that have long roots in the United States and elsewhere but not bounded by nation. As with many transnational movements, white power both responded to inflows from other places—like skinhead culture from Great Britain—and exported a specific white power ideology, shaped by U.S. paramilitarism, abroad. Groups like Aryan Nations 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 groups 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 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 books like *The Turner Diaries*, a novel-turned-manual-turned-lodestar that appeared in places like Apartheid South

Africa and sold more than 50,000 copies in the few decades after it was released. The places white power activists chose map onto their idea of an Aryan nation that would transcend national boundaries.⁴

The Turner Diaries was and remains the crucial text in understanding the way that white power activists imagine the future, and in understanding what mass violence means to people who adopt this ideology. The book is so important because it sets out to answer the question that undergirds the entire project: how could a tiny fringe movement hope to overthrow the United States, the most powerful superstate in the history of the world?

In *The Turner Diaries*, 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 and nuclear weapons, and then provoke a nuclear exchange between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. In the aftermath, the novel’s white guerrilla soldiers take over first the nation and then the world, carrying out a brutal genocide of all populations of color.

Indeed, as *The Turner Diaries* reveals, the mass casualties wrought by this movement are not, in themselves, the movement’s goal. They are a means to an end, a way to awaken a broader white public to what white power activists see as obvious: the threats posed to the white race by immigration and racial others. The violence is meant to mobilize white people, at home and around the world, to wage race war. This is not a hate

⁴ 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); 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): 82.

crime, which our society has most often understood as related to individual prejudice. This is domestic terror: political violence meant to destabilize and overthrow the nation.

The internet has accelerated the transnational turn already underway in the late twentieth century. The Christchurch attack, although carried out by an Australian gunman against people in New Zealand, attempted to galvanize white power activists in the United States. Indeed, in a section of the manifesto about the use of guns, the attacker writes about how he hopes to spur a seizure of guns that would then enrage the right in the United States and provoke further conflict. The Charleston manifesto talks about that shooting in the same way. So do several other pieces of writing. Significantly, it is the seizure of guns that awakens Earl Turner, the protagonist of *The Turner Diaries*, and brings him into the race war.

For this reason, a seizure of weapons or surveillance crackdown directed too broadly could have an unintended effect in spurring more people to adopt white power ideologies, which center on government betrayal. Simply extending the suspension of civil liberties and civil rights used for the prosecution of Islamic terror creates other ethical issues. Similarly, not every act of mass violence should be classified as part of the white power movement. The historical archive offers clarity, context, and information about several attempts that have not successfully curbed white power violence. It also offers another possible response.

Recommendations

- 1) Truth and Reconciliation Process: Congress should appropriate funds to a relevant agency to administer a grants program open to nonprofits and local

community agencies, focused on truth and reconciliation commissions at the local level.

- 2) Congress should broaden the interagency conversation around white power violence and government response to include the Department of Justice, Homeland Security, Federal Trade Commission, the Department of Veteran Affairs, the Department of Health and Human Services, and Department of Defense.

We have an existing example of a truth and reconciliation process related to white power violence. In 2005, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) convened in Greensboro, North Carolina, to explore the long impact of the 1979 shooting of leftist demonstrators by Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi gunmen. That commission was organized by an NGO and had no subpoena power, but people on every side testified. Community members were able to explore the event, its history, and the culpability of various parties. They issued a long report, and eventually succeeded in concrete action. Truth and reconciliation processes allow communities to discuss local racial tensions, to identify areas of discord, and to propose alternative interpretations of history, social inequality, and more. Truly grappling with white power violence would require a long look at the racial inequality foundational to many American communities.

However, such a process could not hope to succeed in the absence of real changes to our surveillance of white power activity and prosecution of domestic terrorism. Because white power activity relies on fundamental misunderstandings at every level,

ranging from the individual to the media to the courts to the government, the response must be broad and multifaceted. A cross-government conversation could address the many scales at which white power violence currently operates. For instance:

- Monitoring social network activism (Federal Trade Commission)
- Monitoring mobilization of active-duty troops and disaffected veterans (DoD and VA)
- Resources and counseling for people who wish to leave the movement and outreach efforts to high risk potential activists (Health and Human Services, grants to nonprofits)

Thank you for your time. I am available to answer further questions by Committee members and staff at the hearing and in the future.