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# Maga, Memes, and Magnificent Hair: How Have Alt-Right, White Supremacy, and White Nationalism Become Rooted in American History?

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POLS 390

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MAGA, Memes and Magnificent Hair: How Have Alt-Right, White Supremacy, and White Nationalism Become Rooted in American History?

**Introduction**

The discourse of American politics is incredibly diverse. Few countries on Earth can allow for such dichotomies of belief to exist and cohabitate with relative ease. It is true that there are tensions between the two major parties, Democrats and Republicans, yet there has always been an underlying semblance of some level of civility and desire to best serve the American people. All of American history has been marked with compromises and progress towards a more perfect union. Yet, among all progress there are forces which desire a return to an earlier time of perceived greatness or better days of living. This too has been a long-held sentiment in the United States dating all the way back to the post-Civil War era and has continued to permeate politics and crop up with increased frequency ever since the Reconstruction. Within the American context this movement has taken on many names but at its heart it can be categorized as white nationalism. The purpose of this inquiry is to ascertain the level of prevalence of white nationalist rhetoric and sociocultural artifacts in contemporary political discourse as well as the level of normalcy it has achieved. Additionally, I will generate a timeline that will chronicle the growth and progression of this movement to our current political era, highlighting major schisms, shifts and events with alterations in fashion and physical presentation. I believe that my research will show not only a long-standing tradition of white nationalism within the United

States but also that such rhetoric has slowly been creeping into mainstream political rhetoric and has become increasingly bolder with the most recent presidential election.

This inquiry will begin with definitions of the various movement specific vocabulary that will be used throughout. There are many factions within the white nationalist movement that go by different names and utilize a wide variety of coded jargon to communicate their message to the public at large. Defining this jargon and differentiating between each group be it alt-right, Neo-Nazi, Neo-Confederate or KKK will allow for a more in-depth analysis of their specific motives and the historical context in which they are set. Following the definition of the terms used, we will begin our historical chronicling the Neo-Confederate initiation of the white nationalist movement shortly after the Civil War and following how it has developed culminating in an analysis of its current role in contemporary politics and the levels of normalcy it may have achieved. Along the way, we will punctuate important events and shifts within the movement by analyzing the fashion choices of adherents. This may seem a strange medium for analysis, however, this is a well thought out movement where every step, word and haircut has a historical reference point and can offer deep insight into the beliefs and affiliations of the individual at hand. Analyzing methods of dress can uncover levels of acceptance of certain factions, target audiences for their message and can align with specific political decisions that either embolden them or discourage them.

### **So, What?**

The white supremacy movement is a complex and, ironically, diverse force. These ideologies and beliefs have found a fresh foothold in the current political climate in the United States. The ferocity and frequency of outbursts and violent clashes with other political groups

have exponentially increased and threaten to destabilize contemporary politics. President Trump's attitude and policies seems to give encouragement to these individuals and their affiliated groups, a troublesome fact for many on both sides of the aisle. Every action within this movement is calculated, rooted in history and designed to subtly maneuver itself into mainstream discourse. White nationalist sentiments are purely regressive and stand as the antithesis of any progressive attempts to bring equality to minorities. Recent politics have granted an unprecedented platform to members of this movement to bring their rhetoric to the forefront and have made grand gains in bringing college educated millennials into its fold. Freedom of Speech is often cited as a protection for the ideologies and symbols used by classic members of the movement. However, core groups have been very successful in normalizing their rhetoric and inserting themselves into previously unattainable spaces as stylish, sexy and masculine individuals that simply care about complex geopolitical issues and desire the best for their homeland. The Southern Poverty Law Center has noted a seventeen percent increase in the number of nationalist and hate groups in the United States a fact that is mirrored, as this research will show, by the uptick in nationalist sentiments over the course of U.S. history (Keneally). If this rhetoric is not what the American public wants to see as standard political practice, awareness must be raised and an understanding of their tactics must be had to counter the growth of their movement.

### **Basic Definitions**

Throughout this inquiry there will be references to white nationalism, the alt-right, neo-confederates and the like. It is important to understand what is actually meant when these terms are utilized to understand the impact of members of these movements and the way they have

inserted themselves in civil society. Despite the names these groups use be it alt-right, KKK or something else, the heart of their beliefs lies in a notion of white nationalism and the formation of a white ethnostate. What is white nationalism? According to Orel Segal, the director of the Anti-Defamation League Center on Extremism, white nationalism is a term that originated as a euphemism for white supremacy in an attempt to rebrand their view of adherents in the public eye (Sanchez). This ideology is founded on the notion that European culture, specifically white Anglo-Saxon culture has a right to exist just like any other culture and social programs like affirmative action measures as well as the removal of Confederate icons represent the slow replacement of white culture (Jacobs). Proponents like Richard Spencer are quick to point out that they do not consider themselves racists nor actual white supremacists, rather, that the formation of a white ethnostate and special protections for white Americans to preserve their European culture is an inherent right (Jacobs). Christian Piccolini, an ex-racist skinhead, in an interview recalled that they were indoctrinated to believe “we aren’t a hate organization, we are pro-white,” a reinforcement that on some level, white pride is being taken away (Jacobs). For the purposes of this inquiry, the terms white nationalist, white supremacist and ‘the movement’ will all refer to the same ideology and identity.

Under the broad umbrella of white nationalism lies, ironically, a very diverse, myriad of sects. As we will discuss later, many white nationalists do not participate in organized groups, however, they still hold the values of these groups to be true and fall under the shadow of specific ideology sets. The alt-right, a term coined by nationalist Richard Spencer, is another coded term used to refer to the movement of white supremacy. When questioned on his political affiliations he was happy to respond, “I don’t use the term white nationalist to describe myself. I like the term alt-right. It has an openness to it. And [is] immediately understandable. We’re

coming from a new perspective” (Sanchez). Use of the terms alt-right, identitarianism and race realists have become commonly used in recent news reports to categorize a far-right wing that has formed within the Republican Party. While this is a more or less accurate use of the term, for our purposes alt-right will be used to not only describe the white nationalist movement, but its recent popularization and politicization in American political discourse.

The Southern Poverty Law Center has identified over nine hundred groups that uphold nationalist ideals with their own political, pseudoscientific or spiritualist beliefs melded in, including neo-Nazis, the KKK, neo-Confederates, racist skinheads and more (Keneally). It is important to denote the use of ‘racist’ when discussing skinheads, we will discuss this later in the section covering cooptation of other mainstream and subcultures, as not all skinheads are necessarily racist or fall under the beliefs of the movement. Because it is nearly impossible in the confines of this inquiry to discuss the minutia of each and every one of these groups, we will quantify them as white-hate groups. This helps to demarcate that while they uphold the beliefs of white nationalism and tend to widely support the politics of the alt-right, they are more focused on cultural dominance and the assertion of white, European culture as the penultimate of human existence in all aspects of life. Because there is some diversity among groups, it may seem illogical to group some together, however this is for simplicity of reference of groups with similar kernel ideologies, motives and tactics. Throughout these various groups and movements, coded language is very prevalent especially as we approach more contemporary political rhetoric. In instances when coded language is being used by an individual or group to secretly or subtly nod at white nationalist or white supremacist ideologies this will be referred to as race signaling.

Later in this inquiry we will also delve into the stark similarities between the alt-right movement and the tactics used by fascism. One such similarity that will be referenced is the idea of the ‘fascist creep.’ This is a term coined by Alexander Ross in his book *Against the Fascist Creep* referring to the slow yet methodical way fascism breeches the porous borders between left and right and inserts itself into mainstream media discourse (Ross 3). For our purposes, I will define fascism as Ross does, “[the] basic emotional attitude of the suppressed man of our authoritarian machine, civilization and its mechanistic, mystical concept of life (Ross 4).” This is to say that fascism draws on old, near ancient myths of racial and cultural origins to develop an ideal plan for the supreme entity or ethnicity to impart its will for future growth on the world at large (Ross 5). Utilizing this frame of analysis, and other research, I will later refer to a concept I have developed called the Turner creep. The Turner creep concept is similar to the fascist creep as it references the way that alt-right and white nationalist forces work to normalize themselves in popular political discourse to appeal to a wider audience and slowly, over broad swaths of time, begin to reveal their true face but not until they have supplanted popular sentiment for their own. My name choice has been inspired by the novel written by William Pierce titled *The Turner Diaries* that has served as a strong inspiration for figures like Timothy McVeigh, David Duke and Richard Spencer. This novel chronicles the struggle of a white freedom fighter, battling a theoretical future American government headed by Jewish elites that use blacks as tools working to suppress white culture (Skutsch). The book culminates with main character’s eventual suicide bombing of the FBI to cripple the system and allow for white militias to rise up and massacre all non-whites and race traitors in creation of the white ethnostate (Skutsch). The definitions for the terms I have chosen are not meant to be the end all be all descriptions of these individuals or

groups, they are meant to serve as a conduit for ease of comprehension for my inquiry and quick reference point for specific ideologies when used.

### **Foundational Ideologies**

Like any political or cultural movement, the alt-right, white hate and white nationalist movements have their own historical context that bore them to the space in which they now reside. Tracing the core ideologies of contemporary white nationalists takes us all the way to the late 1800s and early 1900s beyond the borders of the United States. Whether adherents are aware of it or not, much of their beliefs are rooted in and can be tied to fledgling fascist hopes held by figures like Mussolini and not surprisingly, Hitler. Fascist ideas are incredibly useful for members of the movement because they bridge the gaps between far leftists and the extreme right in a union of social policies and economic nationalism. Fascists call for a rejection of conventional conservatism as defunct and inadequate, simultaneously calling for a return to a golden era of economic prosperity in the loosely defined days of yore (Ross 2). Additionally, there is a basic emotional appeal to the idea that you the individual is being suppressed by the authoritarian machine and must throw off these shackles, the key being held by a hated entity or group (Ross 4). According to Roger Griffin “‘the mythic core’ of fascism is ‘a populist form of palingenetic ultra-nationalism’ (Ross 4-5).” So, to say, fascism and its derivatives rely on an often mythic tie of man and earth, blood and soil. There is an encouragement of producerism, which denotes a strong line between the parasites, historically defined as Jews, race traitors and immigrants, and the productive workers or racial elites (Ross 6). The ideal end of a fascist revolution would be the creation of a classless society that has formed a natural hierarchy between the deserving elites and subdued, disciplined workers (Ross 6).



To achieve these goals of a free yet authoritarian society, Alexander Ross in his book *Against the Fascist Creep*, produces five stages of fascism for us to analyze. These stages are as following: movement building dedicated to creating a new order, the process of rooting in the political system, seizing power, exercising said power, and culminating in either a period of decline and entropy or a refreshed wave of radicalization by hardcore adherents for a new wave of revolution (Ross 15). The first two stages involve popularizing ideologies by attaching them to easily palatable entities such as fashion, leftist programs for social advancement or appealing to economically depressed regions looking for a scape goat and savior. Once popularized, leaders of the fascist movement are able to move into political position and exercise their power to slowly shift legislation in their favor, crafting edicts that will fit their movement. We can see these steps heavily implemented today as the white nationalist movement works to popularize their message with fashion and political sentiments aimed at out of work coal miners and farmers. We can also see where white-hate groups get their penchant for militia forming in the history of the Freikorps. Lead by Prussian army officers, this movement built labor communities and stashed overstuffed military weaponry in an effort to repel Polish migrant laborers (Ross 48). Again, we see a return to the notion of blood and soil as an integral aspect to their beliefs, the bond between the racially pure defending lands that shall only be held by the racially pure (Ross 48).

### **Formation of American Nationalism**

White supremacy is not a new entity in the United States, one could even claim it is foundational to our country as the Constitution. Article I state that black slaves only count as three fifths of a human being and Article IV requires all states to return runaway slaves to their

masters even if they are in a state that does not practice slavery (Skutsch). However, we have made leaps and bounds since that point in our history. The closing of the Civil War also brought the closing of legalized white dominance over blacks, to a degree. In the rubble of the Confederacy rose a group known as the Ku Klux Klan, KKK for short, which saw the freeing of slaves as the first major steps of a country into lawlessness that could only be stymied by white men (“History”). In the first of three iterations, southern ex-confederates and political leaders disguised as white militant groups continued to enforce their version of law and order by carrying out routine lynchings and generally terrorizing newly freed blacks (Skutsch). This behavior was quickly targeted and staunchly opposed by the efforts of the Reconstruction Movement. Continued attempts to scare blacks back into submission worked against them and resulted in galvanizing the movement (“History”).

A second wave of the KKK was initiated by the release of the first full length moving film in the United States: *Birth of a Nation* in 1915 (“History”). In this film, men clad in traditional KKK robes were seen riding through towns across America saving helpless white women from would be Jewish and black attackers while being lauded as great heroes by the towns they have liberated (“History”). The centering of Jews as a new enemy is indicative of the ideological shift that was adopted now branding their movement as a Protestant nativist movement, demonizing Jews, Catholics and blacks (Skutsch). While the movie itself was mildly successful, it was more so as a feat of technology rather than actual content and this iteration of the KKK was quickly forgotten.

## **White Supremacy and The Civil Rights Movement**

The third wave, the entity which is now commonly envisioned when the KKK is mentioned, was reborn as a response to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The Supreme Court ruling in the 1955 case *Brown v. Board of Education* was one of several large-scale pushes for overt racial desegregation and was subsequently met with strong resistance from white Americans. Out of this resistance movement, two methods of attack were used: the obvious symbols like Confederate flags and swastikas paraded about by working class whites and the subtler, racially neutral rhetoric supported by many local and federal officials for states like Alabama, Mississippi and Georgia (“History”). The first form mentioned often consisted of participants donning Klansman’s robes and engaging in shock and awe spectacles such as waving Confederate flags, Nazi imagery and even violent attacks on perceived enemies of their movement. In the coming years, this branch of the nationalist movement would transform into what are categorized as neo-Nazis who would further branch into the contemporary alt-right. This side of the movement was appealing primarily to working class and blue-collar families who feared they may lose work to the influx of blacks into jobs markets to which they previously did not have access.

The second branch of the white supremacist movement at this time focused on political control and relied heavily on race signaling to further their agendas in a way that was palatable, almost agreeable to the average white American regardless of their political affiliation or views on race. Propagators assumed the guise of the classic southern gentleman, genteel and smooth, concerned with issues of property rights and changing school curriculums (“History”). By washing their integration resistance in a race neutral coded language, supremacists could appeal to educated, upper class whites who could fund their campaigns and spread their message without losing face or appearing confrontational. Many politicians and upper-class whites,

including the mayor of Montgomery, joined the White Citizen's Council which presented both anti-Semitic and white supremacist ideologies in the suit-clad, genteel façade of pseudointellectualism ("White Citizens Council").

The White Citizen's Council was born just after *Brown v. Board of Education*, and for the most part actually distanced itself from the actions of the KKK and other militant groups at this time, however, it was happy to build on their momentum when successful and scapegoat them when necessary ("White Citizens Council"). Although they were found responsible for hanging effigies of African-Americans in Montgomery's bustling downtown, the WCC chose to focus on methods that attacked the economic wellbeing and undermined protesting efforts of both whites and blacks in the Civil Rights Movement. During the bus boycotts led by Martin Luther King Jr. WCC members manipulated their strong social and business ties to pressure local insurance companies in Alabama to cancel or fail to honor policies held by churches for the buses they were using to help protestors ("White Citizens Council"). The White Citizen's Council, with the help of Montgomery Mayor William Gayle Jr., were also able to pressure local prosecutors to charge boycotters and protestors as often as they could in an attempt to break their resolve while simultaneously reinforcing the rampant discrimination and brutality shown by southern police forces ("White Citizens Council"). At this point in American political history, antisemitism was certainly present but was not at the forefront of supremacist concerns whose primary focus was the integration of blacks into what they saw as their social spaces and work places. However, in 1966 anti-black, anti-minority and anti-Semitic rhetoric became part of the same white nationalist cannon when the White Citizen's Council merged with the John Birch Society, a well-known hate society

Changes brought forth by the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Voting Rights Act of 1965 as well as the aforementioned decision in *Brown v Board of Education*, limited the appeal and effect of the renewed interest in the Klan (Skutsch). This morphing landscape, forced the genteel politicians to carefully craft their language to maintain support from average Americans while still appeasing the demands of on-the-ground nationalists. In her book *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander discusses new rhetoric of “law and order” that was adopted. Civil Rights legislation and support for it was equated to support for lawlessness and rewarding criminals (Alexander 40). Utilizing rhetoric that would later help him capture the presidency, then, Vice President Richard Nixon held that increases in crime “can be traced directly to the spread of the corrosive doctrine that every citizen possesses an inherent right to decide for himself which laws to obey and when to disobey them (Alexander 41).”

Representative John Bell Williams echoed Nixon’s sentiment by referencing lower violent crime and property crime rates in southern states as evidence that any change in the status quo would result in massive waves of crime (Alexander 41). Conveniently enough for these politicians, the FBI began reporting sharp spikes in crime rates in major metropolitan areas, a fact that was plastered on every television screen and newspaper, however, the fact that the increase did not equate to the increased black population in these cities was never mentioned (Alexander 41). Simultaneously, as these reports are coming out, riots in Harlem and Rochester in 1964 and later across the country in 1968 following Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s death, broke out (Alexander 41). It did not take long for southern politicians to latch on these events and lay the ground work for the law and order politics and equation of minority rights movements with increases in crime that would become integral to their campaign platforms in the coming decades. Seeing how well this rhetoric played for their nationalist counterparts, conservatives

also began adopting similar language leading to the birth of the ‘victim of generosity’ concept that was applied to Philadelphia and Rochester and is now almost universally applied to areas with high welfare recipient rates as well as high crime rates (Alexander 41). When a city was referred to a victim of its own generosity, it was and still is a critique of the freedom and increasing rights of minorities in those cities. By offering blacks, Latinos and other racial minorities more opportunities, freedoms and abilities to participate in civil discourse these cities were seen as opening themselves up to crime, unrest and violence that, in the opinion of white supremacists, was inherent to minority equality. Southern kindness was “repaid with crime-ridden slums and black discontent (Alexander 41). This supremacist connection of race, drug use and violence will become the foundation for the policies enacted in the next section.

### **The Race Neutral Drug War**

When citing crime statistics, the way President Nixon and Representative Williams were at this time, they pointed to increasing arrests for drug use, violent crimes and increased incarceration rates as proof that Americans should feel unsafe. However, many of these statistics were inflated by the fact that, in 1971, President Nixon officially declared a “war on drugs,” an act that exponentially increased the number of police on the street, the number of individuals arrested for previously ignored offenses and began filling U.S. prisons (“Brief”). Crime rates showed a sky rocket at this time not because there were more crimes being committed, they increased because more activities were being illegalized and punishments were increasing in severity. This fact did not stop President Nixon from equating protestors and civil rights activists to violent drug users, one top aid, John Ehrlichman confirmed this fact:

You want to know what this was really all about? The...Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people...We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and the blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt both communities. ("Brief")

Building this image through drug war politics was an incredible boon to the white nationalist movement and is heavily indicative of the presence of genteel style, race washed rhetoric. Not only did these policies disproportionately affect working-class and poorer Americans, they acted as a wedge to divide working class whites from their black and Latino coworkers.

The goal was to perpetuate the trope of non-European minorities as violent, drug addicted welfare recipients that leech off hard working white Americans. Subtly, welfare was framed as a contest between races and that white tax dollars were going to support lazy black. The movement's rhetoric created what Eva Bertram calls "The casual link between decaying conditions in the inner cities and increased drug abuse..." (Bertram). Just as the delineation of a group as parasitic is a fundamental part of winning members to the nationalist ideology of supremacy, we too can see this ideology manifested in these attempts to intensify, among whites, that the disadvantaged are responsible for their own state of being (Ross 6) (Alexander 45).

In the 1980s, newly elected President Ronald Reagan perfected his race neutral rhetoric, netting him huge gains in opinion polls and the election. President Reagan played off white frustration and disenfranchisement by condemning "welfare queens" and "criminal predators" (Alexander 47). His popularity sprouted from a combination of the disillusioning of southern Democrats, enraged at their party's stance on civil rights and the Republican excitement at a leadership figure that would curtail the expansion of black rights (Alexander 47). President

Reagan's administration's major legislative undertaking was the massive expansion of the War on Drugs and subsequent increase of incarcerations of primarily African-American decent ("Brief"). Just as his predecessors before him, President Reagan's rhetoric was heavily influenced by coded language pioneered by the white supremacist movement. Michelle Alexander writes, "His 'color-blind' rhetoric...was clearly understood by white (and black) voters as having a racial dimension, though claims to that effect were impossible to prove" (Alexander 48). As with Nixon and the genteel politicians before him, President Reagan's race washed language allowed him to convey a very direct racial message with the defense of plausible deniability if pressed by critics. As a foreshadow of situations to come decades later, liberals found themselves arguing against the use of race signaling rhetoric but unable to prove said rhetoric was overtly racist (Alexander 48).

Just as the genteel, race neutral attacks of groups like the White Citizens Council on blacks and other minorities lived on through Presidents Nixon and Reagan, so too did the more violent, overt attacks of the KKK live on with groups like Posse Comitatus. Posse Comitatus formed in the mid 1970s by William Potter Gale, a man heavily inspired by the white pride, anti-Semitic message of preacher Wesley Swift (Skutsch). Gale and his Posse believed the government had no right to aid black Americans nor did it have the authority to utilize the military to force the Civil Rights Act (Skutsch). He also was an avid proponent for people to form private militias to oppose the federal government, a thin guise to his real meaning: white America should arm itself against minorities (Skutsch).

Out of Potter's growing Posse movement, grew Richard Butler and the Aryan Nations. Butler preached that the United States was controlled by Jews and only white Christians could fight their power (Skutsch). Simultaneously, William Pierce was founding a similar group,



National Alliance, with his close associate George Rockwell, the leader of the American Nazi Party (Skutsch). William Pierce also authored the widely popular novel *The Turner Diaries*, which is referenced to this day by open nationalists as the Bible of their movement and has sold over 500,000 copies since it was authored (Sutherland). This book was another key facet that aided the spread of anti-Semitic ideals throughout the white nationalist movement. One of the core plot points of *The Turner Diaries* is that America is controlled by Jews and they use blacks as their tools to impose their globalist ideologies (Skutsch). Pierce also popularized the idea that the liberal government would take guns from law abiding Americans to achieve total control. In 1977, the National Rifle Association was radicalized after the election of several officials that had close ties to the KKK and white nationalist movement and picked up Pierce's sentiment of fear of the loss of gun rights (Skutsch). This rhetoric, like its predecessors, was most popular in areas that were primarily white and had seen recent economic downturn that affected the work of blue collar Americans and workers without college level degrees (Skutsch).

### **Contemporary White Nationalism**

With the proliferation of the internet and dozens of platforms like social media, chatrooms, data sharing and instant messaging it has become much easier for white supremacist and white nationalist groups to connect and spread under the radar. The first websites of this kind to crop up were the Stormfront and the Daily Stormer, names chosen because of their reference to the Storm Troopers used by Hitler during his ethnic cleanse (Skutsch). The Stormfront claims that "we are the voice of the new embattled white minority" and portray themselves as warriors against white genocide while the Daily Stormer is a forum akin to Reddit and 4chan.org where nationalist moderators post news updates, discuss ideologies and advocate for education of the

masses as a means to achieve political change (Skutsch). Both sites have experienced extreme censorship in the past, even being put out of commission for extended periods of time as many hosting companies do not want to be associated with their ideologies but this has not stopped them from recreating their web presence time and time again. Lists of other sites that have appeared in the last few decades with a more mainstream appeal almost always include Breitbart News. Breitbart has become the self-proclaimed “voice of the alt-right” and regularly posts conspiracy theories, deliberately misleading content and vaguely researched articles that support their ideological foundation in European ethno-nationalism, although their editor-in-chief Steve Bannon regularly denies this tie (Skutsch). When publications like this are attacked or shut down, followers are quick, not to deny the nature of their content, but to argue that their rights to free speech are being attacked. This is but a part of the new coded language and genteelism that has become a hallmark of the movement for white dominance: they are concerned for the degradation of free speech and their right to demonstrate without backlash.

Richard Spencer, father of the alt-right movement and president of the white supremacist National Policy Institute, reiterates this fact in several of his interviews. In wake of the announcement that he was going to speak at Texas A & M, there were several large student-led protests to bar him and his rhetoric from campus. When asked about this and similar reactions that are almost routine with his visits, Spencer says he does these visits because he wants to create realistic conversations about race and protect the free speech of whites who have been silenced (Spencer). Like many within the alt-right movement, Spencer feels the “academic left” has over used “postmodern totalitarianism where everyone wants a trigger warning” forcing conservative viewpoints to be suppressed (Spencer). As ironic as it may seem, contemporary white nationalists frame their ideology, which is largely unchanged from its fascist foundation,

as a matter of equality. They fear the death of the white race to globalization, political correctness and large immigrant populations (Jacobs). Spencer and those like him, often advocate for white or Euro-American student unions on college campuses for similar reasons. To them, it is not a matter of hate for others, it is a matter of respect for white students who deserve the same opportunities to express their racial heritage (Spencer). Movement leaders often lead with the message that white European culture has just as much right to exist and be celebrated as any other culture, tearing down Confederate statues, censoring nationalist websites and shaming racist language is their proof that the replacement of white culture is alive and well (Jacobs).

Along with this seemingly matter-of-fact presentation to resistance, there is also an increasingly complex coded vocabulary among contemporary white supremacists. Most members of the movement will agree, by and large, the days of people like David Duke going on national television and fighting with newscasters over the existence of a Zionist conspiracy have mostly come to a close. Christian Picciolini, who was fourteen when he was recruited to the Chicago Area Skinheads, recounts that leaders in his organization and many like them were realizing that they were turning away to average white American and simply preaching to already galvanized adherents, they were not growing (Jacobs). Creating palatable, normalized language that would still carry their core message became a vital task, they needed to look and sound like their neighbors not white hooded monsters (Jacobs). Phrases like “Jewish media” and “Jewish global conspiracy” were dropped and replaced with “liberal media” and “failed globalism” while simultaneously, rather than call out media moguls and reports for being Jewish, members demonize specific figures like George Soros as representations of what is wrong with American media (Jacobs). What this is intended to do is create a subconscious connection between powerful media icons that are Jewish and negative global events, for white nationalists,

people like George Soros act as a stand in for all Jewish people in the world and are criticized relentlessly. The average American white nationalist will not tell you that they are racist or that they are anti-Semitic, or anti-black; rather they see themselves as pro-white (Jacobs). In their eyes, they are not fighting against minorities they are fighting for white pride and attempting to overcome notions of white shame.

### **Weapons of White Nationalism and the Alt-Right**

Normalcy is the new weapon of the white nationalist movement, with it they can navigate social situations almost with total invisibility and garner support through talking points that seem to touch just the right nerves and have just the right combination of twisted facts or pseudo-science. Unlike previous iterations of the white nationalist movement, members of the alt-right blend in. Traditional robes worn by the KKK and the bomber jackets with red shoelaces worn by racist skinheads draw attention. They shock, scare and intimidate their audience into anger or submission. In fact, Richard Spencer and those like him, actively distance themselves from the KKK and old establishment hate groups for their crude tactics. The uniform of the nationalist of today does not inspire a double take, it does not elicit a strong emotional reaction, it is remarkably unremarkable. When a group of white polo and khaki short wearing young men walk into a public space, they seem acceptable, normal, invisible. This is what Jaime Feldman in her research on contemporary white nationalists' clothing calls their 'fashion camouflage' (Feldman). Both Christian Picciolini and Jamie Feldman point to one fact that drives all of the new white nationalists' fashion decisions: to distract, embolden, and reassure potential members while disguising their true message which is revealed slowly over time (Feldman) (Jacobs). Richard Spencer as well as other supremacist leaders continually remind their followers to be

well dressed and look good, as Spencer puts it, “we have to be hip and we have to be sexy” to attract youth who like the style but are unaware of the underlying ideas (Feldman).

Over time, white preferred brands have been selected, seemingly at random. Brands like Fred Perry, Doc Martin and New Balance have all become household brands for nationalist consumers who proudly display these company’s brands (Feldman). There could be a variety of explanations for these choices, such as their prevalence among white middle to upper class consumers. This theory reinforces the already displayed phenomena of targeting white people over their preferences, except now the focus has shifted to material goods. Capturing the white middle class has consistently been a strong tactic to gather supporters, starting with race neutral rhetoric on property rights, then freedom and school quality, followed by the War on Drugs and now here, with the cooptation of the blue collar and dapper gentleman’s façade.

Another, much more recent tool the nationalist movement has readily clung to is the power of internet anonymity and satirical internet images known as memes. Online forums and message boards like Reddit, 4chan and 8chan offer users high security with their anonymous ability to post topic from mundane questions about the best soap to use for dry skin to near pornographic content. Granted the bulk majority of these forums are basic question-answer sites centered around discussions of technology, personal advice and even self-help. However, the rising popularity of the ‘r/trump’ thread that great around the presidential run and win by populist Donald Trump, soon spawned threads like ‘/r/politicallyincorrect’ and ‘/r/debatealtright’ which have gained national recognition for the supremacist ideologies discussed (Neiwert). Right in line with the findings of the Southern Poverty Law Center, these online communities have blossomed from a few provocative individuals behind keyboards to a complete counterculture. As mentioned earlier, because of the high degree of anonymity offered by these internet outlets,

it can be difficult to track users' movements, however, they leave a breadcrumb trail of memes rich in symbolism behind them everywhere they go.

One of the most well-known memes used by white nationalists is the image of Pepe the Frog. A visual representation of Pepe can be found in the appendix, labeled image nine. As with most articles of appropriation, Pepe did not start out as the racist symbol he has become. He was invented by Matt Furie for a comic series known as *Boy's Club* ("Pepe"). In a comic in early 2008, Pepe can be seen lowering his trousers to urinate with the caption "feels good man," shortly after, images of Pepe with this caption began cropping up on 4chan along with variations on his facial expressions that have been common referred to as either "Feels Good Man, Sad Frog, Angry Pepe, Smug Frog, Well Meme'd" as well as "Rare Pepe" ("Pepe"). This group of images grew in popularity with the inception of the Pepe the Frog Instagram account, PepeTheFrogBlog on Tumblr as well as the '/r/pepethefrog' Reddit thread ("Pepe"). Even celebrities began using this internet culture icon including Katy Perry and Nicki Minaj; the fast-food chain Wendy's even Tweeted out a Pepe variation that looked like their popular mascot ("Pepe"). Members of the Kekistan variation of the white nationalist movement, whom we will discuss in the next section, began launching a concerted effort to reclaim Pepe from popular culture "normies" and return him as an internet icon, except now he would act as a signal to other far-right advocates (Neiwert). Images of the frog dressed as Hitler, with swastikas and other conventional nationalist symbols began to crop up and turned Pepe from a joke of satyr to a symbol of racial unrest and hatred. In 2016, Pepe was embraced by then, presidential candidate Donald Trump who has published several examples of Pepe memes in what many analysts and nationalists alike believe to be winks of support to Pepe's new racial meaning ("Pepe")

(Sanchez) (Neiwert). Southern Poverty Law Center's Heidi Beirich has also labeled Pepe the Frog as a "white supremacist meme" in an interview on NBC News ("Pepe").

### **Uniforms and Coded Meanings**

Due to the seemingly innocuous nature of their clothing, it can be difficult to discern meaning from the variety of uniforms used by white nationalists and supremacists. The outside might only see a well-dressed young man, stylish haircut, well-tailored clothes while an insider will immediately be able to identify your subgroup affiliation or leanings. But what do these uniforms actually look like? For visual representations of the following referenced images, please see the appendix at the end of the paper. In image number one we see what Tasneem Raja has identified as "Identity Evropa" (Raja). The best example of this are the Charlottesville protestors in their white polo shirt with the Evropa triangle stitched on and khaki shorts (Raja). These individuals are very well versed in European history and culture, excluding Jewish society, and frequently discuss how one can protect their heritage (Raja). At rallies and protests they are often heard shouting chants of "blood and soil" or "you will not replace us," clear references to their movement's origins in Nazi Germany and early fascism as mentioned earlier. Common consensus among members of this group holds that their goals are a completely white ethnostate, devoid of racial difference and, according to their logic, devoid of racism as there is only one race (Raja). Members are also easily identifiable through their appropriation of the high-and-tight or undercut hair style.

In image two, we can see the standard attire of those that call themselves the Proud Boys. These individuals have embraced hipster and fraternity culture to an almost cult degree. Many proudly display 'Make America Great Again' trucker hats, have a long, well-groomed beard or

fancy mustaches (Raja). Fred Perry twin-tipped tee shirts have become a mainstay among members as well as Fred Perry polos that are primarily black with yellow stripes, a call back to early appropriations of British punk skinhead culture (Raja). Public provocateur, Gavin McInnes is widely referred to as the father of this sect with his stylish suits, haircut and veneration of the housewife (Raja). Like many white nationalists, this group focuses on promoting hypermasculinity as a means of superiority over those they consider lesser. One such example of this is the common initiation ritual used to induct new members. The would be initiate stands in the center of a group of current Proud Boys and proceeds to shout the names of popular breakfast cereals while being beaten until a satisfactory number of cereals has been named (Raja). In a video published by Rebel Media, an alt-right media outlet similar to Breitbart, Gavin McInnes himself vehemently denies being racist or holding any contempt for other races. However, simultaneously he proudly embraces the fact that their mantra is “west is best” (“Gavin”). During his video commentary he is even wearing a tee shirt with Proud Boys as they want to be defined: “we are Western chauvinists who refuse to apologise for creating the modern world” (“Gavin”). Additionally, within this monologue, he attempts to display his lack of racism by saying “I just want to get a black person just to sit next to me so I can go not racist! Not racist! Not racist!” (“Gavin”). At their core, they view themselves like any other fraternal organization in the air of the Elks, Free Masons or Lions (Raja).

In image three we can see a more contemporary manifestation of the classic neo-Nazi of the National Socialist Movement. In contrast to their Identity Evropa counterparts who believe nations should be structured based on race, neo-Nazis prefer a more genocidal approach like those described in *The Turner Diaries* (Raja) (Skutsch). On his shield is a symbol called the othala rune which is widely considered a modern-day swastika. Perhaps the most strongly



derived from racist-skinheads from the 1980s, adherents commonly don black combat boots, shave their heads and have tattoos that are a mix of old and new Nazi symbols (Raja). As has become a common theme among the movement, the NSM movement has abandoned the Hitler's Army style brown and olive shirts for a uniform of all black called their "battle dress uniform" (Raja). During the Charlottesville protests, a NSM speaker sported a swastika armband beneath his anarchist-socialist flag patch (Raja).

Vanguard America is represented by image four in the appendix. Tasneem Raja calls them the "IT guy who's not-so-secretly into white nationalism on the weekend" (Raja). This group carries a similar look to the Identity Evropa with their white polos and khakis, however, their symbolism is slightly different. On his shield is an eagle carrying a bundle of sticks around an axe handle which is a lightly modified Italian fascist crest (Raja). The "blood and soil" chant commonly heard at nationalist protest and gatherings is often being shouted by a member of this sect that was founded by a retired U.S. Marine who served in Iraq and Afghanistan (Raja). This foundation and affinity for military rigidity both of the Italian fascists and American Marines is the reason for their paramilitary activities and rankings. James Fields, killer of Heather Heyer who was counter-protesting the Charlottesville nationalists, has been photographed holding Vanguard America gear and wearing their symbolism (Raja).

Perhaps the most easily recognizable group that will be mentioned in this section are the Southern Nationalists depicted in image five. This entity is made up of a conglomeration of other groups like the KKK, Identity Dixie and others which explains the Klan robes and blood drop crosses that are prominently displayed on their person (Raja). When a Confederate flag is flown as well as other southern pride symbols, it is often a Southern Nationalist. Other groups like the Proud Boys, Richard Spencer's followers and college educated nationalists actively distance

themselves from this group because of the image they have carried since the first iteration of the KKK after the Civil War. Unlike other groups, their dress is not invisible and immediately sparks strong feelings, whereas Identify Evropa members are much more able to disappear into a crowd. Some members even carry shields bearing as symbol called the Black Saltire which consists of a long white cross over a black background to represent the almost spiritual feeling of loss of nationality by white southerners (Raja).

The much reported on Traditionalist Worker Party member is displayed in image six. These are white, working-class individuals that are widely Trump supporters with a Midwestern biker dad look (Raja). Religion and labor are central to their ethos as Christian jewelry like crucifix necklaces are commonly displayed with as much pageantry as their cog-and-pitchfork emblem (Raja). This unique emblem was formed to represent the plight of blue-collar American workers and their support for industrial and rural laborers that are of European descent (Raja). Traditionalist Worker Party ideologies mix socialist ideas of free healthcare, subsidized housing and worker's unions with a hatred of blacks, Jewish people and homosexuals in their vision of a white ethnostate (Raja). All of their society is based on the high levels of trust that can be found only in white society. Tasneem Raja writes that it is likely that this group is one of the most well organized within the movement (Raja).

Our final group, Kekistan is represented in the appendix as image seven. This group was mentioned earlier in our discussion of meme usage. They are the keyboard warrior personified. Kekistan itself is a made-up country born of white nationalist lore on the anonymous forum 4chan (Neiwert). The work 'kek' formed in online gaming lobbies primarily for games like World of Warcraft as a part of a coded language used to prevent opposing players from intercepting friendly messages (Neiwert). Korean based encryptions would render 'lol' or laugh

out loud as 'kek' to opposing players (Neiwert). The phrase caught on in 4chan as their audiences heavily overlap and it grew with the proliferation of the Pepe the Frog meme and the coincidence that an Egyptian god with frog head was also called Kek (Neiwert). As the cult following and provocateur-ing around Pepe grew and his place as a nationalist mascot was solidified, adherents to Kekistan developed a cultural mythology centered around 'anti-normies,' coded language for Jewish people, blacks and liberals (Neiwert). Their most prominent feature is the Flag of Kek. The flag is a modified Nazi flag as the red has been replaced with green for the frog's skin and the swastika is replaced with the word 'kek' written in four directions (Raja). Political correctness is the greatest enemy of this group which demands to be taken seriously yet maintain the ability to claim they are kidding at any point in time (Raja). They have repeatedly reiterated the great encouragement they get from their "greatest friend" Donald Trump (Raja).

### **Survival through Cooptation**

As this inquiry has developed a common theme began to take form surrounding the main mode of survival for the white nationalist movement. Cooptation is the key to the survival of their ideology, without the ability to dynamically adapt they would never be more than a blip on histories radar. Skinheads are a perfect example of this. Prior to their racism, skinheads were punk music fans that dressed in the way of blue-collar factory workers and the proletariat in opposition bourgeoisie (Jacobs). Racist skin heads arrive on the scene looking for an outlet for their aggression found the mosh pits of the punk scene to be a perfect fit. As they dominated the culture they wrote their own music and started a subgenre of punk which popularized the image of skinheads with red laces as neo-Nazis (Jacobs). Even Hitler himself coopted symbols from other cultures, such as the swastika which was taken from Indian culture.

Similarly, as we just discussed, they coopt internet culture to further enable their ability to send normalized coded messages into popular discourse. But perhaps one of their most noticeable appropriations is the popular hipster hairstyle called the undercut. Members of the movement often call it a ‘fashy’ which is short for fascist, a call back to Hitler and his Hitler youth who had a similar style (Scott). In the 30s and 40s such a style was popular with young working-class boys as well as soldiers because of its utility for making helmets more comfortable to wear (Scott). Anti-fascist Brooklyn hipsters picked up this style as a way of relating to the proletariat workers who previously held this haircut and it has slowly grown in popularity since 2010 (Scott). Celebrities like David Beckham and Macklemore aided in the spread of this hairstyle into mainstream culture and soon it was prevalent across many social, racial and cultural groups (Scott). Neo-Nazis saw a great deal of appeal in this haircut for several reasons. In accordance with their strong history of genteelism, nationalists liked having the chance to look chic and trendy (Scott). Richard Spencer has openly admitted in interviews “we want to be hip and we have to be sexy” (Feldman). By adopting this haircut in combination with adopting brands popular with working- and middle-class white Americans, they can break down the barriers of intimidation and seem amicable to potential members. All across the movement this pattern can be seen as well. White nationalists aligned themselves with conservatives that were concerned with property rights and school quality on the surface but used these as surrogates for their real concerns of racial desegregation and equality. As they continue to coopt popular cultural artifacts, they can continually interweave their ideologies into political discourse to such a degree no one knows what they are secretly referencing. This is precisely the basis for the Turner Creep phenomena that was briefly mentioned earlier in this inquiry. Within *The Turner Diaries*, the main protagonist works to subtly sneak coded messages to like-minded individuals

to build up a resistance to the liberals, blacks and Jewish people that run the country (Sanchez). This is the same kind of start to fascism that Alexander Ross discusses in his book *Against the Fascist Creep*. The alt-right's main reason for existing almost completely matches Ross' foundational definition of the fascist creep as "a rejection of conventional conservatism and a call for the return of a golden era" (Ross 2).

All of these groups have survived and continued their messages through coopting which is why the definition Ross gives for how fascism enters popular discourse is the platform for which several presidents have been elected within the United States. Nixon, Reagan and Trump were all elected through the use of race washed or race neutral rhetoric that left subtle nods to these groups. This is not to say that any of these men are themselves nationalists, moreover, it demonstrates how non-nationalists can quickly adopt such rhetoric when it serves them and without realizing the ramifications of their actions. Nationalists have found an incredible amount of momentum from this phenomenon. In prior iterations of the nationalist movement the demographic focus for recruitment was blue-collar and working-class white males with little education beyond a high school degree. However, now, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center the bulk of alt-right members are college educated males often in white collar jobs (Keneally). Once they have attracted would be initiates with their benign style, their message is reinforced by political and cultural leaders who borrow their coded language.

## **Conclusion**

The history of the United States is a complex maze of interrelated events that, as my research has shown, has been underscored by a growing movement of white nationalism. Through the cooptation of popular culture and the normalization of coded rhetoric, this

movement has been able to slowly and subtly work its way into contemporary political rhetoric. While not necessarily nationalists themselves, several presidents including Nixon, Reagan and Trump as well as several mayors and governors have adopted the loaded terms used by this movement, inadvertently spreading a message of which they may not even be aware.

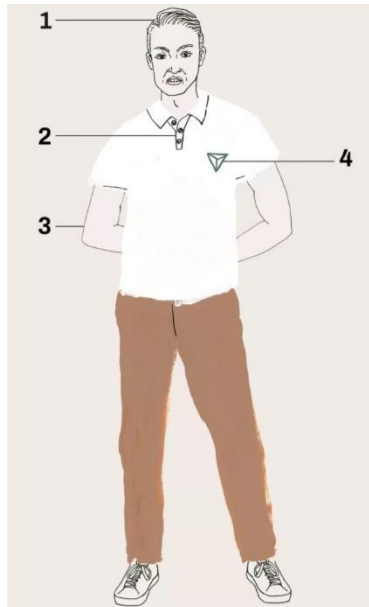
What we are seeing is the fruition of one of their core goals: capturing the public mind through normalcy. When politicians sound like and celebrities look like members of their movement, the public begins to accept what they are seeing and hearing as a social norm, indistinguishable from other aspects of their lives. When the nationalists look like one's neighbor, coworker or friend, they do not inspire fear or spark intimidation, they seem amicable and approachable. Gone are the days of cross burning and white robed Klansmen. Today is the era of the camouflaged message and magnificent hair. This fact demands vigilance from the American public if this is not the ideology they want to see flourish. Challenging political rhetoric on both sides by contextualizing the history behind the message is the only way to expose potentially nationalist sentiments. Politics does not happen in a vacuum, nor does it happen without influence from groups external to political institutions. In the words of Albert Einstein, "Nationalism is an infantile thing. It is the measles of mankind" and the only vaccination is awareness and outspokenness (Smythe).

### **Limitations of Research**

Researching this project presented itself with several difficulties. While there is a plethora of research and information available about the Klan and similar groups during the Civil Rights era and a moderate amount about the alt-right, there is little information connecting the two. As time has progressed their movement has doubled down on a push for normalcy, hiding

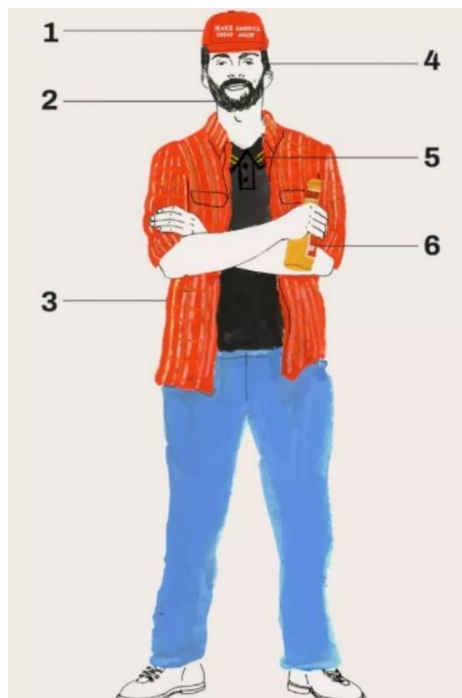
them deeper and deeper in social discourse. They have cultivated an anonymity that it incredibly difficult to ascertain growth and membership beyond the numbers provided by the Southern Poverty Law Center. With the rise of the internet, they can do rhetorically what their clothing allows them to do in public spaces, move with complete anonymity. Internet forums do not require real names or physical locations; thus, nationalists are able to step into discussions, leave their coded language and images and disappear without any trace. So too are they able to physically step into public spaces to protest the destruction of Confederate monuments like in Charlottesville and then disappear into the crowd. Such mobility makes tracking the movement beyond broad stroke trends, especially with the absence of data on nationalism in the World Values Surveys and Pew Research studies. Additionally, writing on a topic such as nationalism is incredibly difficult without making value statements or letting personal bias effect my research. In writing this paper, I have attempted to be as neutral as possible when referring to the ideologies and tactics of the white nationalist movement. In laying out my research I have attempted to demonstrate the strong history of nationalism in the United States with a factual chronicling that does not place judgement or value on the ideas within.

Appendix



<https://www.topic.com/decoding-the-language-of-extremist-clothing>

Image #1



<https://www.topic.com/decoding-the-language-of-extremist-clothing>

Image #2





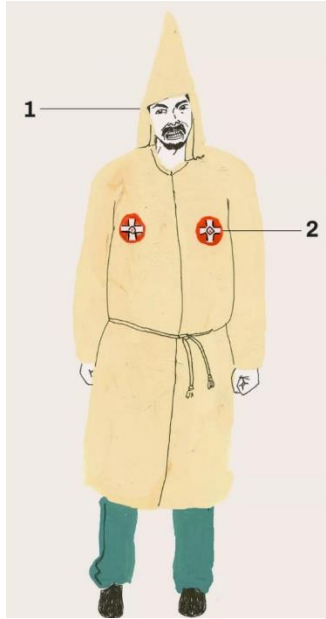
<https://www.topic.com/decoding-the-language-of-extremist-clothing>

Image #3

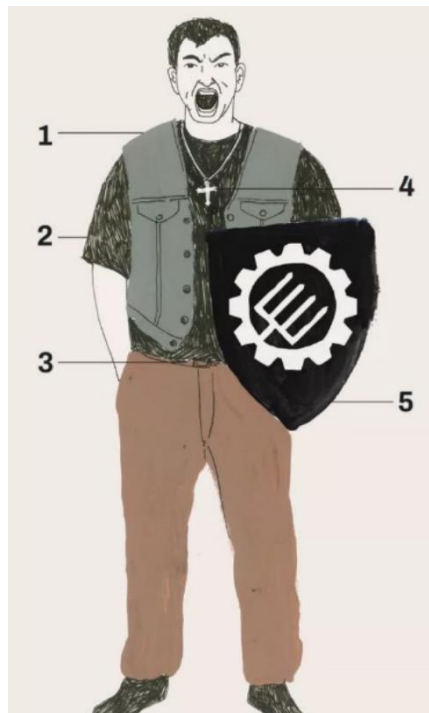


<https://www.topic.com/decoding-the-language-of-extremist-clothing>

Image #4



<https://www.topic.com/decoding-the-language-of-extremist-clothing>  
Image #5



<https://www.topic.com/decoding-the-language-of-extremist-clothing>  
Image #6



<https://www.topic.com/decoding-the-language-of-extremist-clothing>

Image #7



<https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/05/08/what-kek-explaining-alt-right-deity-behind-their-meme-magic>

Image #8



<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/pepe-the-frog>

Image #9

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[wcc/](http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_white_citizens_councils_wcc/).