

Empathizing with the Enemy

The Threat Within

The sleepy college town of Charlottesville, Virginia became the violent epicenter of racism, religion, and politics in 2017. Now a byword for White nationalist agitation, Charlottesville was the site of what would become the largest gathering of American White nationalist groups thus far this century.¹ One counterprotester, Heather Heyer, was killed after James Alex Fields Jr. purposefully struck her with a car, a murder that then U.S. attorney general Jeff Sessions described as an act of “domestic terrorism.”²

Organized by Jason Kessler, founder of the White nationalist advocacy group Unity and Security for America and a self-styled “white civil rights leader,” the Unite the Right rally was held to protest the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee.³ Lee was a commander of the Confederate forces during the U.S. Civil War—a hero not only to the Confederacy but also to many of the rally’s attendees. Though the monument was a symbol of the nation’s racist history, its proposed removal became symbolic of other issues aggrieving the participants, such as the perceived displacement of White people, evidenced by the demographic rise of people of color in the United States; threats to White cisheteronormative masculinity; as well as cancel culture and political correctness, which serve only to stifle expressions of White identity—all of which heightened their shared sense of victimhood.⁴ These themes, which are omnipresent in White nationalism today, were also present in the cries chanted by the protesters, many of whom marched wearing militia

uniforms and openly carried firearms, already prepared for the race war in which they collectively envisioned themselves taking part: “Blood and soil”; “You will not replace us”; “Jews will not replace us”; “White lives matter.”⁵

A range of White nationalist organizations were present at the rally, from those with a documented history of violence to those engaging mainly in vitriolic rhetoric, including the Patriot movement, paramilitary members, neo-Confederates, neo-Nazis and skinheads, and identitarians, in addition to the National Socialist Movement, the Traditionalist Worker Party, the League of the South, Identity Evropa (the American Identity Movement), Vanguard America, and the Proud Boys, among others. Prominent individuals, such as David Duke and Richard Spencer, were also in attendance, attesting to the rally’s appeal to generations of White nationalists. David Duke once held the highest office within the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan; Richard Spencer is credited with coining the term *alt-right* and is the president of the National Policy Institute, whose goal is the creation of a White ethnostate.⁶

Further reflecting the complexity of White nationalism within the United States and around the world, the attendees also represented a plethora of religious views. They comprised agnostics and atheists, as well as adherents of racist religions such as Christian Identity, which originated in nineteenth-century England; Creativity, founded in 1973, its Golden Rule stating, “What is good for the White race is the highest virtue; what is bad for the White race is the ultimate sin”; and Wotanism, a reinterpretation of the ancient pagan Norse religion Odinism.⁷

Irrespective of their organizational affiliation and religious self-identification, what the Unite the Right demonstrators had in common was adherence to White nationalism, which is the desire for the United States to be exclusively White, or a White ethnostate. This goal may be achieved in various ways, including eliminating everyone deemed to be a person of color by exclusion, deportation, killing, or a combination thereof. Militant White nationalism may seem like a one-dimensional racist phenomenon made up of angry White men anxious about the demographic changes in the United States. However, as subsequent chapters will make evident, White nationalism is a complex assemblage of organizations, personalities, theologies, credos, and motivations. In the aggregate, White nationalists, militant and nonmilitant, seek to protect what they conceive of as the White race from what they perceive as cultural and racial genocide in an imminent race war.⁸ As this book will discuss, from the perspective of many White nationalists, the war has already begun.

White nationalists, such as those who displayed such a strong show of force in Charlottesville, are not the only internal threat to the United States. American militant Islamists, many of them influenced by organizations like al-Qa‘ida and Islamic State (Dā‘ish), as well as by individual figureheads like the late Anwar al-Aulaqi, also pose a powerful menace to the nation. American militant Islamists share a perceived lack of belonging and a fractured sense of identity, yet there is no single determining factor or profile for these individuals; individuals do not become militant simply because they are immigrants, the children of immigrants, or people who identify as practicing Muslims. What is knowable from their own reports, however, is that they frequently identify with the suffering of the Muslim civilians who are the overlooked casualties of the many U.S.-led wars in Muslim-majority nations, including Iraq and Afghanistan, or who are victims of a U.S. foreign policy that turns away from their anguish, as in the case of the Rohingya in Myanmar. Their sense of victimhood, emblemized by their self-described association with Muslim civilian casualties overseas, is similar to that of their White nationalist counterparts in that it is constructed and exploited to justify their violence. The online media of al-Qa‘ida and Islamic State (Dā‘ish) reinforces this narrative by reciting the injustices perpetuated during the Crusades and European colonialism on Muslim-majority countries. The divisive and Orientalist narrative of Islam versus the West that is flagrantly exploited by White nationalists to perpetuate Islamophobia is also used by organizations such as al-Qa‘ida and Islamic State (Dā‘ish) and by ideologues like Anwar al-Aulaqi who advocate militant Islamism even posthumously.⁹ In this framework, militancy becomes the only recourse for such historical and global injustices.

Seeking retribution for members of the *umma*, the global community of Muslims, seemingly out of a desire for connection with believers outside their own nation, militant Islamists ironically reject fellow Muslim Americans. Compelled to act as would-be heroes in the grander narrative of avenging Muslims in Muslim-majority countries targeted by the United States, they hypocritically target Americans, including fellow Muslim Americans, on shared soil. Many American militant Islamists go further than discounting the lives and beliefs of other Muslim American citizens, actively labeling them as apostates for their patriotism and pride in the United States, a nation held in contempt for exacting violence on beleaguered Muslims in Muslim-majority countries.

Perhaps the greatest menace posed by these militant Islamists is, in fact, a mutual war of attrition. Throughout its brief history, the United

States has long been lauded by the international community as the leader of the free world, a bastion of civil rights and liberties, and a righteous bulwark against dictatorship and oppression, though it has undoubtedly struggled to uphold these ideals in practice. The threat of terrorism is leveraged to issue counterterrorism policies that erode freedom, encourage fear, and pit Americans against one another in the name of national security. This takes the shape of not only the surveillance of millions of innocent Muslim Americans by law enforcement agencies but also the monitoring of any who are deemed a political threat. The true danger of American militant Islamists is that they target America's very social fabric.

As the subsequent chapters will detail, there are striking parallels and marked differences between White nationalists and militant Islamists, so it is important to note the contextual divergences and convergences of these groups. Primarily, the historical embeddedness of White nationalism in the United States from the country's founding has resulted in overlapping groups and affiliations demanding a White ethnostate. By contrast, despite the deep roots of Islam in America, American militant Islamism is a diffuse post-9/11 phenomenon.

Another substantial difference is the relationship between state action and political violence carried out in the name of these ideologies. Whereas many White nationalists regard the political landscape as currently in their favor, because they have been both tacitly and explicitly endorsed by President Donald Trump, American militant Islamists view themselves as directly opposed not only to the U.S. government and all of the institutions constituting its bureaucracy but also, by extension, to their fellow Americans. Whereas militant White nationalists seek to restore and purify the United States by reinforcing existing sociopolitical and historical inequities, militant Islamists seek a cessation of the oppressive policies of the United States by overthrowing the country's existing political structures and those of the ruthless international dictatorships it supports hypocritically through the use of violence.

Militant Islamists share with their White nationalist counterparts a strong element of misogyny, or the enforcement of hostility toward women who violate patriarchal norms and expectations.¹⁰ This is not to claim that all misogynists are terrorists or that all terrorists are misogynists. But as traditional gender roles are threatened by shifting norms, research increasingly shows that violence toward women is often linked with other types of violence, including mass shootings and politically motivated violence. Certainly, a number of White nationalists and

Islamists identify as women; nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of the subjects of this study are men. Moreover, just as it is important to acknowledge misogyny as an important predictor of a predisposition to violence for both ideologies, it is just as important to acknowledge the tension between misogyny and the role women themselves play in reinforcing misogyny, or at the very least sexism, within this context. Specifically, women normalize and mobilize the particularly violent strands of these ideologies through social networking and recruitment. While a full discussion is outside of the sphere of this book, there have been many scholarly works dedicated to these topics.¹¹

As the chapters that follow will explore at length, adherents of both groups identify intensely with a sense of their own victimhood, both collective and individual. The mantle of victimhood they don in the pursuit of political aims frequently cloaks isolation, frustration, and a fractured sense of belonging, all of which are ultimately expressed as violence. Whatever their self-identified religiosity, including none, their longing for a White ethnostate or a caliphate is frequently, at least in part, a desire for a sense of purpose and community. They commit their acts of terrorism, while declaring them to be in the name of the Fourteen Words or religious tenets, in an attempt to redress their perceived marginalization by defending themselves or avenging the deaths of those they regard as innocent victims.

Though the specific motivations and aims of militant White nationalists and militant Islamist activists differ, the politically charged religious and sacred rationales they rely on, the grievances they seek to assuage, the goals they wage war to fulfill, and the dangers they pose are strikingly similar. Neither group must be underestimated.

THE ORIGINS OF *HOMEGROWN HATE*

This is the first book to directly compare American militant White nationalists and American militant Islamists, who both mutually—and exclusively—target America for the purposes of claiming the nation as theirs and theirs alone, either as a White ethnostate or as part of a global caliphate.¹² Weaving together the strands of many scholarly disciplines, the book aims to outline the organizations, articulate the worldviews, and examine the motivations of these Americans, whether citizens by birth or by naturalization, who are waging war on the United States by calling for violence or by committing acts of terror. The book's title, *Homegrown Hate*, is a direct reference to how their

resentment and rage manifest into animosity and enmity toward their own country.

The bedlam and output of violence created around the world by militant Islamist groups such as al-Qa‘ida and Islamic State (Da‘ish) have long been a focus of U.S. media attention and popular concern. Even so, for decades, U.S. government agencies and personnel involved in national security, in addition to academic and research institutions, nonprofit agencies, and civil rights organizations, have uniformly recognized militant White nationalism as a more perilous threat to American national security than militant Islamism.¹³ These sources conclude that American militant White nationalists, specifically, and militant groups on the political far right, broadly, are responsible for more attacks and more fatalities than their American militant Islamist counterparts.¹⁴

This has been true for at least the past decade. In 2009, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s Office of Intelligence and Assessment, in coordination with the FBI, concluded that “lone wolves and small terrorist cells embracing violent right wing extremist ideology are the most dangerous domestic threat in the United States.”¹⁵ The report caused a furor due to its use of the label “right wing extremist,” as well as the fact that it examined the recruitment of military veterans by those it labeled extremists.¹⁶ Its author, Daryl Johnson, then a senior analyst with the Extremism and Radicalization Branch of the Homeland Environment Threat Analysis Division, experienced the dismantling of his unit as a result.¹⁷ The secretary of Homeland Security at the time, Janet Napolitano, rescinded the report. Resources formally allocated to keep track of the political far right, which is now concomitant with White nationalism, was scaled back, if not fully stopped. In the interim, militant White nationalism has become so widespread that the FBI has categorized it a “persistent” threat.¹⁸

A database of nine years of domestic terrorism incidents (2008–16) compiled by the Investigative Fund at the Nation Institute and published by the Center for Investigative Reporting likewise concluded that “terror plots and actions by far-right right groups and attacks outnumbered Islamist domestic cases by more than 2 to 1.”¹⁹ Similarly, in a 2017 report, the U.S. Government Accountability Office, a nonpartisan congressional research agency, released statistics on the fatalities caused by “domestic violent extremists” from September 12, 2001, to December 31, 2016. As utilized in the report, “domestic violent extremist” encompasses the categories of “far right wing violent extremist groups” and “radical Islamist violent extremists.” The following statistics are included in the report:

In ten of the fifteen years, fatalities resulting from attacks by far right wing violent extremists exceeded those caused by radical Islamist violent extremists.

In three of the fifteen years, fatalities resulting from attacks by far right wing violent extremists were the same as those caused by violent radical Islamist extremists.

Of the eighty-five violent extremist incidents that resulted in death, far right wing violent extremist groups were responsible for sixty-two (73 percent).

Of the eighty-five violent extremist incidents that resulted in death, violent radical Islamist extremists were responsible for twenty-three (27 percent).²⁰

In 2020, the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security issued its annual report on Muslim American involvement in terrorism. In 2019, twenty-four Muslim Americans were arrested for alleged terrorism involvement. By the center's count, the number of fatalities attributed to American militant Islamists in the United States from September 11, 2001, to December 31, 2019, was 141. Over this same period, it cited approximately 290,000 murders in the United States. The report also cited that in 2019 alone, 254 Americans were killed in mass shootings, including 22 people killed by White nationalist Patrick Crusius at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas.²¹ Crusius's twenty-third victim died of his injuries in 2020.

Despite the alarming statistics, violent expressions of White nationalism are often ignored by federal counterterrorism agencies, which have remained slow to robustly fund and organize units examining the phenomenon; jettisoned by the criminal justice system, which does not have a federal criminal statute for domestic terrorism (if enacted, such a statute could itself be problematic for the civil liberties and civil rights of minoritized groups); and neglected by the media, which often personalizes the stories of the perpetrators when they are White.

Militant White nationalists, by virtue of White privilege, are portrayed and perceived as individuals, so they are not collectively criminalized.²² White privilege is defined as the inherent and unearned advantages, opportunities, and benefits White people are afforded simply because of their skin color. It also insulates White people while simultaneously disadvantaging people of color. By contrast, instances of militant Islamism are prosecuted as terrorism, criminalized in the court of public opinion, and covered by the media in a way that reifies

Islamophobia.²³ Furthermore, innocent Muslims in the United States and around the world are similarly prosecuted by guilt through association.

White privilege is also made evident in successful attempts to suppress legislation that would address the increasing numbers of White nationalists, most vividly shown in the myopic focus of funding and legislating for counterterrorism programs addressing militant Islamism.²⁴ During Donald Trump's presidency, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Office of Community Partnerships, which oversaw White nationalist terrorism and had a budget of \$21 million under President Obama, was relabeled the Office of Terrorism Prevention Partnerships and had its budget cut to less than \$3 million.²⁵

Signaling a potential shift to the minimizing of White nationalist violence at the federal level, FBI director Christopher Wray acknowledged to the House Judiciary Committee in 2020 that militant White nationalists "collectively pose a steady threat of violence and economic harm to the United States."²⁶ Recognizing that militant White nationalists, which he defined as "racially/ethnically motivated violent extremists," are "the primary source of ideologically-motivated lethal incidents and violence in 2018 and 2019 [in the United States], and have been considered the most lethal of all domestic extremism movements since 2001," Wray further stated that violence in the name of this ideology would be "on the same footing in terms of our national threat banding as ISIS and [American militant Islamism]."²⁷

Though Wray's language indicates a new tone, as does the U.S. State Department's designation of the White nationalist group the Russian Imperial Movement as a global terrorist organization, whether or not terrorism perpetrated by American militant White nationalists and American militant Islamists will ever truly be regarded on the same plane from a national security perspective will be made evident by funding priorities and the language framing the urgency of the threat.²⁸ Despite the recognition within the Trump White House that "racially motivated extremism" concomitant with militant White nationalism exists as a terrorist threat, former FBI supervisor Dave Gomez, who oversaw terrorism cases, stated, "There's some reluctance among agents to bring forth an investigation that targets what the president perceives as his base."²⁹ Moreover, the affinity President Trump has for many of the racist and exclusionary worldviews of the militant and nonmilitant White nationalist groups within the broader political far right also fac-

tors into why scant federal resources have been allocated to keeping track of and dealing with this ideology during his administration.

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP AND HOMEGROWN HATRED

It is impossible to talk about the need for this book without reference to the presidency of Donald Trump. White supremacy and White nationalism have long had outsized influence on American politics—including economic, criminal justice, immigration, military, and foreign policies—resulting in systemic inequities that are rooted in racism and manifested according to class, gender identity, sexual orientation, and ability, for example. But the election of President Donald Trump has normalized White nationalist rhetoric and policies, including conspiracy theories, all of which are now explicitly part of the American political establishment.³⁰ Many Americans who support him self-identify in seemingly innocuous terms, including *race realist*, *White identitarian*, or *White racialist*, that are in fact derived from White nationalist discourse.³¹ Within these circles of the political far right, Christianity is often upheld as a cultural entity that encompasses Whiteness, and racialized Christendom reifies the Orientalist notion of Western civilization as demarcating Whiteness from the Other. The White nationalist belief that the United States is a land solely for White people gives cause for violence, rhetorical and physical, in the pursuit of establishing America as a White ethnostate.

Indeed, Trump's 2016 election was met with fanfare by an array of White nationalists, militant and nonmilitant, who are united in viewing themselves as victims of a world that is on the brink of collapse on several levels: they feel that their economic livelihoods are threatened by immigrants of color, their cultural identity is being displaced by people of color, and their social values are being upended by women and nonbinary gender identities. White nationalist Richard Spencer, an ardent supporter of President Trump, gave a speech celebrating Trump's election at the National Policy Institute's 2016 annual conference: "America was, until this past generation, a white country designed for ourselves and our posterity. It is our creation, it is our inheritance, and it belongs to us. . . . Hail Trump! Hail our people! Hail victory!"³² Spencer was met with a standing ovation, the crowd raising their arms in Nazi salutes.

Trump's election was also greeted as a triumph by the very popular White nationalist websites the *Daily Stormer* and *Counter-Currents*,

and in a front-page article in *The Crusader*, the KKK's official newspaper, which calls itself "the political voice of White Christian America."³³ The openness of these demonstrations of support, harking back to a dark time in global history, indicates how standardized White nationalism and its platform of racism, nativism, and misogyny have become since President Trump's election.

Even while refraining from explicitly utilizing words like *White* or *Black*, and, in fact, denying that he is a racist, Trump employs dog whistles—highly inflammatory but coded language—in addition to covert displays of racism and other forms of discrimination to incite his base of supporters.³⁴ Oscillating between displays of covert and overt racism, President Trump labeled himself a nationalist in 2018, though not explicitly deeming himself a White nationalist, at a political rally in Houston, Texas: "You know what I am? I'm a nationalist, okay? I'm a nationalist. Nationalist. Nothing wrong. Use that word. Use that word."³⁵ In 2019, he hosted the Presidential Social Media Summit and invited politicians and online provocateurs within the political far right.³⁶ That same year, he also tweeted that four Democratic congresswomen of color—Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, Ayanna Pressley, and Ilhan Omar—should "go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came," implicitly equating American citizenship with White identity.³⁷ (Three of the four of them were born in the United States, and all are American citizens.)

The inference is that the United States is a nation not for people of color but for White people only. Coating his racist remarks with conspiracies, Donald Trump engaged in falsehoods before his presidency as well. In an interview with Fox News talk show host Bill O'Reilly in 2011, Trump, at the time a reality TV host, declared that the then presidential candidate Barack Hussein Obama, who would go on to become the nation's forty-fourth president, had not been born in the United States, claiming, "He doesn't have a birth certificate. He may have one, but there is something on that birth certificate—maybe religion, maybe it says he's a Muslim; I don't know"—as if being Muslim and American are juxtaposed and contradictory identities.³⁸ As president of the United States, Trump has levied similar birther attacks on his political rival Senator Kamala Harris, claiming her status as a natural-born citizen of the United States is questionable due to her parents' citizenship status at the time of her birth.³⁹ These conspiratorial attacks signal the conspicuous Islamophobia that has become the hallmark of White nationalism, along with antisemitism and the demarcation of who qualifies as an