

# Introduction

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This *Field Guide to White Supremacy* illuminates the long and complex career of white supremacist and patriarchal violence in the United States, ranging across time and across impacted groups, in order to provide a working volume for those who wish to recognize, understand, name, and oppose it. We focus here not only on the most catastrophic incidents of white supremacist domestic terrorism—like the 1995 bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building and more recent mass shootings at stores and places of worship, and the January 6, 2021, storming of the U.S. Capitol—but also on the manifold ways that overt and covert white supremacy, supported by often-violent patriarchy and gender norms, have shaped American law, life, and policy.

A field guide is meant to train observers to notice a particular phenomenon—here, white supremacy—and its distinctions. This manual will help observers to notice and name variant forms of white supremacy, ranging from systems to laws, from hate crimes to quiet indifference, from the everyday interactions that comprise white supremacist society to the movements that demand something else.

*A Field Guide to White Supremacy*, in other words, is meant as a resource for journalists, activists, policymakers, and citizens who wish to



In this April 6, 1942, photo, a boy sits on a pile of baggage as he waits for his parents, as a military policeman watches in San Francisco. More than 650 citizens of Japanese ancestry were evacuated from their homes and sent to Santa Anita racetrack, an assembly center for the forced internment of alien and American-born Japanese civilians. (AP Photo)

understand the history, sociology, and rhetoric of this phenomenon. It also offers a sampling of some of the best writing and most recent scholarship on these subfields, to spark broader conversations between journalists and their readers, teachers and their students, activists and their communities.

As this volume took final form, between the summer of 2020 and the first weeks of January 2021, our planet and nation faced multiple crises. A

devastating COVID-19 pandemic had left more than two million dead, with numbers mounting. The United States witnessed massive protests against systemic racism, a hard-fought presidential election, the U.S. House of Representatives voting articles of impeachment against President Donald J. Trump for the “Incitement of Insurrection,” and the inauguration of President Joseph Biden. A new chapter of the racial justice movement began on May 25, 2020, when George Floyd, a forty-six-year old Black Minneapolis resident, was arrested for purchasing cigarettes with a counterfeit \$20 bill. His arrest turned lethal when Officer Derek Chauvin pinned Floyd to the ground, placing his knee on Floyd’s neck for more than eight minutes, long enough to kill him. A long summer of peaceful mass protests against racist policing and systemic racism followed, escalating into rioting and looting in some cities. At many of these riots, militant-right activists ranging from antigovernment to white power militants delivered bombs, incendiary devices, and weapons to escalate peaceful demonstrations into confrontation with the militarized police forces. They assassinated law enforcement officers, plotted attacks on civil protests, and launched a major and coordinated attack on American communities. President Trump responded with a “law and order” campaign slogan and deployed federal forces from the Department of Homeland Security, the Bureau of Prisons, and elsewhere—sometimes without name badges or identifying insignia—to subdue the streets, to “dominate” protesters, and to energize the white supremacist segment of his supporters.

Beginning several years before the 2020 presidential election, President Trump had constantly warned his loyalists that Democrats were determined to steal the election from him. Without corruption, he claimed, he, Trump, would easily win. When Joseph Biden beat Donald Trump by more than seven million votes, winning the electoral college by 306 to 232, Trump refused to acknowledge the results and instead contested his defeat with lawsuits alleging widespread voter fraud. Neither the suits nor the intimidation of state election officials changed the tally, and court after court rejected his claim. Trump’s final salvo over the “stolen election” was to call his supporters to a “Save America March”—part of “Stop the Steal” campaign—in Washington, DC, on January 6, 2021, the day Congress would certify Joseph Biden’s election as president. The motley assemblage, which included white power armed militants, disgruntled

military veterans, QAnon conspiracy proponents, radical evangelicals, and fervent members of the Trump base, arrived by the thousands. At the Ellipse, a park just south of the White House, President Trump roiled those gathered: “We will stop the steal . . . we can’t let this happen . . . We fight like hell, and if you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore . . . We’re going to walk down, and I’ll be there with you . . . to take back our country.” They marched to the Capitol but without Trump. He retired to a White House television set to watch the mob violently attack the building and its occupants for several hours, vandalizing and desecrating the building, injuring numerous Capitol guards, leaving five dead behind in the mayhem. The Federal Bureau of Investigation soon discovered that among the heavily armed insurrectionists were members of white power neo-fascist militias. They had conspired to plan the attack, intending to take prisoners, among them then Vice President Mike Pence and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, to “stop the steal.” Two pipe bombs at the Democratic National Committee and Republican National Committee headquarters did not detonate, and the activists used neither their Molotov cocktails nor their military-grade weapons, but the body count was stunningly low, considering their preparation. Once the Capitol building was again under federal control that night, Congress certified the election of Joseph Biden as the forty-sixth president of the United States.

This was, make no mistake, a domestic terror attack on U.S. democracy, aimed at derailing free elections through the use of violent force. It was a show of force that used old texts like the white power novel *The Turner Diaries* to script its action and paved the way for recruitment and radical violence to come.

The House of Representatives voted to impeach President Donald Trump on January 13 for “high crimes and misdemeanors” for inciting an insurrection against the federal government at the U.S. Capitol. On the eve of Biden’s inauguration, Senator Mitch McConnell, the Senate’s leader, concluded: “The mob was fed lies . . . They were provoked by the president and other powerful people. And they tried to use fear and violence to stop a specific proceeding of the first branch of the federal government which they did not like.”<sup>1</sup> Though threats had been made by Trump’s loyalists that they would disrupt the inauguration of the forty-sixth president of the

United States on January 20, it occurred relatively peacefully, guaranteed only by the massive presence of National Guard troops and police and an increasing recognition of clandestine, extensive networks of organized, armed, antigovernment domestic terrorists espousing insurrectionist variants of white power.

It became clear to many Americans on January 6 that white power and white supremacy are yet live wires in our politics, in our relationships, and in our conversations with one another. As social media companies deplatformed Trump and various groups involved in the insurrection, then pulled hosting from alternative sites like Parler, people grasped for context to understand what they had just seen. But to scholars who have trained their eyes on the study of race and racism, these events did not represent a surprise or a moment of disconnect from “who we are.” Instead, they flow clearly from a long and fraught history, one now urgent to understand.

What is white supremacy? White supremacy is a complex web of ideology, systems, privileges, and personal beliefs that create unequal outcomes along racial lines across multiple categories of life including wealth, freedom, health, and happiness. It is not a matter of argument among the vast majority of scholars, but of demonstrable fact. White supremacy includes both individual prejudice *and*, for instance, the long history of the disproportionate incarceration of people of color. It describes a legal system still predisposed towards racial inequality *even when* judge, counsel, and jurors abjure racism at the individual level. It is collective and individual. It is old and immediate. Some white supremacists turn to violence, but there are also a lot of people who are individually white supremacist—some openly so—and reject violence. Others have seen the ugliness of their personal racism and renounced its manifestations large and small.

But white supremacy operates through a collection of misunderstandings. It requires public officials like George Wallace, Patrick Buchanan, and Donald Trump who engage and encourage it in volumes ranging from dog-whistles to overt shouts. It requires a body politic that is not curious about its own history, doesn't understand the long and deep roots of its inequalities, and doesn't recognize its own culpability in the failure to confront its massive injustices.

This story goes back to the founding of the nation. Historians sometimes argue over precise dates and the relative importance of key events,

but the overwhelming majority agree that the colonies that eventually formed America were defined through violent articulation of the political identity that would become “whiteness.” From Christopher Columbus’s 1492 ill-fated settlement on Hispaniola, to the North American outposts the French and Dutch established before the foundation of Jamestown, the goal of these settler colonialists was the denigration of Indigenous peoples and the violent appropriation of their labor, natural resources, and even their lives. The loss of Indian labor quickly gave rise to the African slave trade. The founding documents of the United States promised life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness not for all, but for white, property-owning men. A long series of contestations has gradually opened citizenship to those previously excluded: non-property owners, women, people of color, “Indians not taxed,” and more—but this project has been incomplete, characterized by steps forward and back and by massive resistance to the extension of voting and civil rights to subordinated groups.

The historical moments when America saw more people incorporated as democratic subjects came not from goodwill or perfection of the American experiment, but through the actions and organizing of those people themselves. Women worked tirelessly for their own suffrage, for instance. And recent scholarship has highlighted the role of enslaved persons in fighting for their own freedom.

Whiteness itself is a socially constructed category that has changed dramatically over the course of United States history. In early America, whiteness worked as a political affinity among different ethnic groups. Not until the nineteenth century did racial pseudoscience introduce the idea of “white” as a biological marker. Even this whiteness changed over time, expanding to include previously excluded groups like Irish, Jewish, Italian, and Polish immigrants in the early twentieth century. And all along the way, whiteness was determined at the local level largely by individual bureaucrats, who variously held the line on strict standards or allowed passing and mutable boundaries as the local context required.<sup>2</sup>

As the bright line around whiteness changed and intensified, immigration restriction and anti-immigrant animus came to delineate large numbers of persons from Latin America and the Caribbean as nonwhite. Anti-Indian violence defined whiteness in early America. Slavery and Asian exclusion defined it in the nineteenth century. The twentieth century brought the mass

forced deportations of Mexican Americans, the internment of Japanese Americans, the durability of Jim Crow segregation in the South and de facto segregation nationwide, and heightening immigration restriction at the U.S.-Mexico border. After intensifying measures born of terrorist threats at the end of the twentieth century, cross-border migrations had become more difficult and much more deadly, with vigilante enforcement of immigration restriction quite regular and, at the time of writing, even condoned by the state.

One need look no farther than basic disparities across medical care, incarceration, life expectancy, maternal mortality, and even incidence of coronavirus infection—which at the time of writing had a death toll twice as high among people of color as among white people—to see that America hasn't fulfilled the promise of equality for women, people of color, LGBT and gender-nonconforming persons, and others. Nor has it reckoned with the legacy of settler colonialism—the process of taking and populating the nation through violence against, forced assimilation of, and legal exploitation of first peoples.

As with many social ills, at least part of this continued injustice has to do with failure to understand these problems as part of an overlapping system of race and gender disparity. Even in the scholarship, specialists often delve deep into one area of the problem—hate crimes against a particular group, for instance, or state violence to the exclusion of individual prejudice or vice versa. This *Field Guide* proposes that a better understanding of hate groups, white supremacy, and the ways that racism and patriarchy have become braided into our laws and systems can help people to tell, and understand, better stories.

To read the intertwined histories of hate crimes against Black Americans, women, Muslim Americans, Latina/o immigrants, Jews, and Asian migrants is to see the large patterns of exclusion and policing that have made possible the continued rule of white supremacy in the twenty-first century. It is to begin to inventory the injustices, past and present, with which the nation would have to reconcile to truly fulfill its democratic promise.

The *Field Guide* opens with a set of recommended changes to the *Associated Press Stylebook*. These are meant to directly engage journalists