

WINTER 2022

POLITICAL
RESEARCH
ASSOCIATES

The Public Eye



A Twisted Love Story: How American Evangelicals Helped Make Putin's Russia and How Russia Became the Darling of the American Right • Power Concedes Nothing: 2020 Was an Extraordinary Year • "We Have to Push the Envelope": A Year After Storming the Capitol, White Nationalist "Groypers" Storm the Right • Can You Ever Trust a Former White Nationalist?

If you are wondering how Russia became the darling of the U.S. Right, historian Katherine Kelaidis, author of the Winter issue commentary “A Twisted Love Story” (page 4) takes us back to how the Cold War thawed the relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and American evangelicals, and how a shared interest in manufacturing so called-traditional values brings them to stoking the culture wars from the same side today. “The creation of an Orthodox Christianity under the influence of American evangelical norms had real consequences,” Kelaidis writes, “the rise of Orthodoxy as the newfound spiritual home of white nationalists being one of the more extreme.”

Antonio Gramsci famously stated, “The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters.” How grassroots organizing could vanquish the monsters of our age is the focus of “Power Concedes Nothing” edited by Linda Burnham, Max Elbaum, and María Poblet. Their introduction (page 5) catalogs the overlapping challenges to public and civic health that we collectively endured. “Whether the rich lessons of 2020 are absorbed and put to use by an expanded and more united progressive current in U.S. politics will, in no small measure, shape the future of democracy,” the editors proclaim. Composed just a step back from the brink of electoral collapse, it’s a poignant opening for the book’s collected stories of struggle and victory.

In our first feature “We Have to Push the Envelope” (page 9), PRA Research Analyst Ben Lorber describes how the White nationalist “Groypers” have pushed further into the mainstream with Nick Fuentes as frontman for the Gen-Z hard right. According to Lorber, “Fervent appeals to populist patriotism, hard-edged Christian nationalism, virulent anti-LGBTQ traditionalism, and conspiratorial anti-elitism all helped the groypers modulate their message in the register of the broader MAGA movement, without diluting their movement’s explicit White nationalist and antisemitic core.”

In our final feature, “Can You Ever Trust a Former White Nationalist?” (page 16), Shane Burley writes about right-wing influencers seeking redemption—or perhaps merely a sincere image refresh—and explores who profits from forgiveness when self-styled “formers” become CVE consultants, best-selling authors, and sought-after spokespeople. “All of this deeply complicates questions about which former White nationalists should be trusted as windows into the movement,” Burley writes, “and what accountability looks like for those who want to leave their harmful pasts behind.”

The cover illustration “Missing Home” was created by Romana Romanyshyn and Andriy Lesiv of Studio Agrafka in Lviv after Russia invaded Ukraine and more than half of children in the country became war refugees. The displaced artists reflect on the burden of transience and the universal pull of home in the Art of Activism (back cover).

In between print issues of *The Public Eye*, PRA is publishing frequently online at politicalresearch.org and religiondispatches.org. We hope you’ll visit us often.

Greeley O’Connor



THE PUBLIC EYE
QUARTERLY

PUBLISHER
Tarso Luís Ramos

EDITOR
Greeley O’Connor

COVER ART
Art Studio Agrafka

PRINTING
Park Press Printers

The Public Eye is published by
Political Research Associates

Tarso Luís Ramos, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Micaela Pacheco Ceballos, RESEARCH PROGRAM MANAGER

Frederick Clarkson, SENIOR RESEARCH ANALYST

Cloe Cooper, SENIOR RESEARCH ANALYST

Ethan Fauré, RESEARCH ANALYST

Steven Gardiner, RESEARCH DIRECTOR

Heron Greenesmith, SENIOR RESEARCH ANALYST

Abigail Hadfield, EDITORIAL COORDINATOR

Amanda Hukanović, HR & OPERATIONS DIRECTOR

Kacy Lane, DEVELOPMENT COORDINATOR

Olivia Lawrence-Weilmann, DATA AND PROGRAM MANAGER

Isabelle H. Leighton, DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR

Ben Lorber, RESEARCH ANALYST

Koki Mendis, COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR

Greeley O’Connor, MANAGING DIRECTOR

Aidan Orly, DONOR PROGRAM MANAGER

Harini Rajagopalan, SENIOR COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR

FELLOWS

Felicia Arriaga • Zoé Samudzi • Tina Vasquez

INTERNS

Gari De Ramos

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Jeyn Levison, Chair

Fatema Ahmad • Cathy Albisa • Saqib Bhatti

Gianna Green • Ellen Gurzinsky

Orson Moon • Mandisa Moore-O’Neal

Charles Orcitti • Mohan Sikka

Carla Wallace • Susan Wefald

FOUNDER

Jean V. Hardisty, Ph.D.

1310 Broadway, Suite 201

Somerville, MA 02144-1837

Tel: 617.666.5300

contact@politicalresearch.org

© Political Research Associates, 2022

All rights reserved. ISSN 0275-9322

ISSUE 107

www.politicalresearch.org

BY KATHERINE KELAIDIS

A Twisted Love Story

How American Evangelicals Helped Make Putin's Russia and How Russia Became the Darling of the American Right



Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow at the patriarchal residence in Peredelkino outside Moscow on September 8, 2010. (Credit: Press Service of the government of Russia/Wikimedia Commons)

Religion Dispatches

If someone from 1965 were to arrive in a time machine, there's likely much about our current state of affairs that would shock them. But I cannot imagine anything that would be more confusing than the love affair between the U.S. Right and Russia—the extent of which has come into stark clarity in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Beyond Donald Trump's slightly unhinged,

but wholly expected, comments praising Putin's "genius" in illegally invading a sovereign nation, there are plenty of current "mainstream" Republican elected officials who seem unclear¹ as to whether Russian aggression on the front porch of NATO is a good idea or not.

How did this ever happen?

The answer, as with most things wrong with the contemporary GOP, lies in the party's almost complete takeover by

evangelicals that began during the Nixon era.

Throughout the Cold War, the official atheism of communist countries and the suppression of religion behind the Iron Curtain became a rallying cry for the American Right in general and American evangelicals in particular, who made it their mission to save "Godless Russia," seemingly unaware that before 1917, it had, in fact, been "Holy Mother Russia."

In a pattern we've seen repeated again and again among American evangelicals before and since, they understood the persecution of the local indigenous Christian population and the suppression of a region's historical Christian institutions to be primarily about themselves. And so, American evangelicals set about converting Russia to Christianity, a task that even a brief look at history would have revealed was already accom-

tural baggage—most importantly the Culture Wars.

The changes were obvious and immediate, both in traditional Orthodox countries and in the diaspora. Of course, Orthodoxy has never been gay-affirming (despite John Boswell's eloquent but unsubstantiated claims) and abortion had been cause for excommunication since the Middle Ages, but the fact is no one really talked about those pet issues of

tional values" that have been abandoned in the face of secular modernity.

Jerry Falwell's words have flown across time and space and landed in the mouth of a Russian president.⁷ Frequently referring to the "so-called West," Putin lists the crimes of the NATO nations as including that "They sought to destroy our traditional values and force on us their false values that would erode us, our people from within, the attitudes they have been

The creation of an Orthodox Christianity under the influence of American evangelical norms had real consequences: the rise of Orthodoxy as the new-found spiritual home of White nationalists being one of the more extreme.

plished by the Byzantine Empire in the Middle Ages.

Almost immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union, American evangelicals began to flood into Russia², with a generation coming of age on mission trips to Moscow and Bible-buying fundraisers for St. Petersburg. Instead of meeting with hostility from the Russian Orthodox Church, these Protestant firebrands were generally welcomed. Which is the part of the story that's perhaps most difficult to explain; Orthodoxy as a faith tradition has spent centuries resolutely opposed to corruption or co-option from outside.

With a fear of foreign contamination that would put the most strident member of the *Academie Française* to shame, Orthodox identity is resolutely grounded in notions of continuity and purity. Money and political influence are certainly part of the equation here, but there is another factor: on the other side of the Atlantic, the converts were flowing the other way.

The influx of Protestant American converts, many from the evangelical tradition, but also conservative mainline Protestants, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, radically changed the face of Orthodox Christianity in America. Once a church almost exclusively made up of immigrants and their descendants, these Americans with no historical ties to Orthodoxy became a majority in a number of Orthodox jurisdictions in the United States and brought with them their cul-

the American Christian Right. Now Putin and Kirill unite around anti-LGBTQ laws³, and Greek bishops make bizarre claims about why people are gay.⁴

The creation of an Orthodox Christianity under the influence of American evangelical norms had real consequences: the rise of Orthodoxy as the new-found spiritual home of White nationalists⁵ being one of the more extreme. Among the less extreme consequences was that the rising number of conservative American Christians who identified as Orthodox started to soften opinions and change American right-wing perceptions of Russia.

Arguably, what this influx of American evangelicals into American Orthodox churches did was create a bridge over which American evangelicals in Russia were able to cross. An alliance began to take root which shaped Russia and the American Right as both headed into the 21st century.

Taking a page right out of the playbook of the Moral Majority, the Russian Orthodox Church has positioned itself as the leader of the conservative/traditionalist position⁶, not only in Russia, but around the world. Putin's speech last Monday night made clear that Russia doesn't see itself as challenging the West and its values; rather, Putin's Russia is positioning itself as the last and rightful guardian of what the West once was and what it ought to be again: a Christian culture centered around family, faith, and "tradi-

aggressively imposing on their countries, attitudes that are directly leading to degradation and degeneration, because they are contrary to human nature. This is not going to happen."

The Russian Orthodox Church and the Russia of today is in no small part what American evangelicals have helped make it, from building literal churches⁸ to sending religious educational material, to guiding political policy.⁹ In return, both have found a powerful ally very close to the beating heart of American power¹⁰. Today, as Ukrainian blood flows, some of that blood is on the hands of those American evangelicals who went off to convert a nation that was Christian before Europeans arrived in the Americas. Every mission trip and box of Bibles that arrived "to Russia with love" helped to create this moment. Make no mistake about it.

Katherine Kelaidis is a writer and historian whose work focuses on early Medieval Christianity and contemporary Orthodox identity in non-traditionally Orthodox countries. She has also written for Salon, Ms. Magazine, and The New Republic.

BY LINDA BURNHAM, MAX ELBAUM, AND MARÍA POBLET

Power Concedes Nothing

2020 Was an Extraordinary Year



Protester at a voting rights rally on August 28, 2021. (Credit: Johnny Silvercloud/Flickr.com)

‘Introduction’ in *Power Concedes Nothing*, edited by Linda Burnham, Max Elbaum, and María Poblet, a project of *Convergence—A Magazine of Radical Insights*, OR Books, 2022.

The nation had endured four years of a presidential administration led by a white supremacist, anti-immigrant, self-dealing demagogue whose disdain for the institutions and procedures of democratic governance became ever more entrenched as his presidency unfolded. Trump deliberately attacked democratic norms and unleashed a suite of far-right actors prepared to use Congress, the federal bureaucracy, the courts, the Republican Party, state legislatures,

right-wing media, and armed militias in their bid for authoritarian rule. Of course Trump’s particular brand of toxicity seeped into well-tilled soil. Forty years of Republican anti-tax, anti-regulatory, anti-government ideology and governance; backlash against the election of the nation’s first Black president; fear of demographic change; the growth of a far-right, all-encompassing media environment; and long-standing, deeply rooted patterns of white and Christian supremacy set the stage for his election. It took most of us far too long to fully comprehend that Trump’s presidency represented a qualitative increase in the determination and capacity of the right to impose minority rule.

And then, in early 2020, the emergent COVID-19 pandemic layered a public health crisis on top of a crisis of democracy. The pandemic exposed, once again, profound inequalities related to class, race, gender, and immigration status. Debates over the public health measures required to halt the pandemic fed on and exacerbated political volatility. The pandemic also underscored Trump’s unique blend of incompetence, disinterest in actually governing, and profound indifference to human suffering—character traits ultimately responsible for hundreds of thousands of unnecessary deaths, and which likely contributed to defeat in his bid for re-election.

As if the public health and democracy

challenges were not enough, the millions of acres burned in 2020 wildfires, unprecedented flooding, and other extreme weather events, deepened awareness of the urgency of climate crisis and the scale of interventions needed to mitigate it. The reckless denialism of the Republican Party is evidence of their willingness to put the lives of current and future generations at mortal risk in exchange for the support of the fossil fuel industry. The

campaign had demonstrated that a substantial swath of the electorate is open to a left-of-center political agenda. The campaigns of both Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren in 2020 generated levels of excitement and support that confirmed the existence of a large constituency in favor of governance and policies well to the left of the Democratic Party mainstream. Their platforms, including a Green New Deal, Medicare for All, the

of organizations emerged that combine social justice values with electoral organizing, and that are determined to build political power independent of the Democratic Party. The 2016 election underscored the importance of these initiatives and brought other left forces in from the abstentionist sidelines. The degree of traction achieved by Bernie Sanders' campaign together with Trump's surprise triumph brought home to nearly every-

With any luck, we are in the early stages of an era in which the left strengthens its capacity for effective intervention from one election to the next, shifting the political alignment in a more progressive direction.

election season was haunted by the prospect of environmental collapse.

LEFT AND CENTER AGAINST THE RIGHT

The 2020 elections served as a temperature check on where the country stood after four years of the most intense political polarization since the Civil War. The elections also served as a reading on the relative strength of various political blocs, that is, the capacity of left, right, and center to shape the political terrain. Conservatives, having subordinated themselves to the far right, consolidated the Republican Party around the MAGA agenda of racial and imperial revenge, with Trump as Maximum Leader. White supremacist militias and Q-anon conspiracy theorists were welcomed into the fold. This newly dominant bloc looked eagerly toward another four-year term as an opportunity to double down on white minority, patriarchal rule. Despite a few notable defections from his camp and from the Republican Party, Trump went into the election with the advantages of his incumbency, the dated Electoral College system that confers advantages on white and rural voters, and a roused, highly motivated right-wing base.

Of course, the main question to be settled by the election was whether a broad enough coalition could be forged to rebound from Hillary Clinton's disastrous 2016 loss and toss Trump out of the White House. Mainstream Democrats had to at least nod to the left. Bernie Sanders' 2016

cancellation of student loan and medical debt, a humane immigration policy, and higher taxation rates on corporations and the ultra-wealthy made it clear that neoliberal austerity for the poor and precarious was not the only thing on offer. There is an alternative. Though their primary bids failed, their candidacies opened up new realms of possibility and sparked left imagination.

The US left has been neither united nor strategic in its electoral interventions for many, many decades. Since Jesse Jackson's campaigns for the presidency in 1984 and 1988, and the subsequent collapse of the Rainbow Coalition, some sectors of the left have rejected engagement with the two-party system. Instead, they have adopted an abstentionist stance or launched largely symbolic third-party efforts. More pragmatic sectors of the left tended to vote for Democrats based on a harm reduction framework, while putting little energy into electoral politics. Overextended (and underfunded) on community-based or issue-based organizing projects, and often lacking the skill sets and the organizational vehicles to intervene effectively in the electoral realm, they prioritized other battlefronts.

But beginning about 10 to 15 years ago, these dynamics began to change as local and state-based groups—many of them represented in these pages—started to grapple directly with one of the central ways in which US political power is accumulated and wielded. An important set

of organizations emerged that combine social justice values with electoral organizing, and that are determined to build political power independent of the Democratic Party. The 2016 election underscored the importance of these initiatives and brought other left forces in from the abstentionist sidelines. The degree of traction achieved by Bernie Sanders' campaign together with Trump's surprise triumph brought home to nearly every-

one the unacceptable cost of abstentionism. The 2020 election saw a maturation of the trend toward left electoral engagement in the context of a truly critical contest. The stakes were so self-evidently high that progressive and left organizations of nearly every stripe wrestled with how best to mobilize their constituencies against Trump and in defense of democracy. Though the social justice left has come to the arena relatively late, it is already a key player. With any luck, we are in the early stages of an era in which the left strengthens its capacity for effective intervention from one election to the next, shifting the political alignment in a more progressive direction.

On May 25, 2020, in the midst of presidential primary season, a murderous policeman pressed George Floyd's last breath out of his body. Demonstrations against police violence and the summary execution of Black people spread throughout the country, led and energized by furious young Black protesters. Tens of millions of people took to the streets in the spring and summer of 2020, in demonstrations that were more numerous and located in more cities and towns than at any other point in US history. The protests changed the racial climate. Black Lives Matter signs sprouted in shop windows and on lawns across the country. Corporations and institutions of every kind scrambled to respond to the "racial reckoning." For many, a light bulb had finally been turned on. Others won-

dered why such belated enlightenment always seems to require the sacrifice of Black lives.

In any case, the ruthless suffocation of George Floyd impacted the presidential contest and set off social and political currents that continue to shape today's national dialogue. Debates over racist policing and incarceration and intractable, racialized economic inequities inevitably filtered into the campaigns. And the right-wing distortion industrial complex mangled anti-racist demands in ways that were guaranteed to energize their base. This continues today, with the Republican base mobilized to discredit any attempt to teach the history of US racism, under the banner of opposition to critical race theory.

IN THIS BOOK

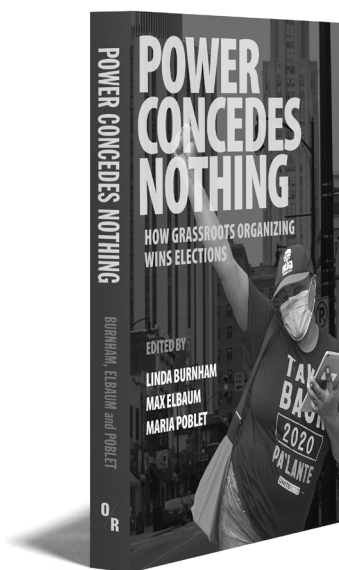
Voters turned out in record numbers in 2020. The 2020 electorate, as compared to 2016, showed the largest increase on record between two presidential elections. Turnout rates increased in every state, in every racial and ethnic group, across gender, and in every age cohort.

The record turnout was driven, at least in part, by the grassroots activists and leaders who tell their stories in this book. This volume of essays provides a close-in vantage point on how many of the organizations that anchor social justice organizing in the US met the challenge of an electoral campaign. The organizations and networks represented here led an array of initiatives across the country. Their work on the ground contributed substantially to the margins needed to defeat Trump.

It is our hope that this volume enables the left to share experiences and insights across organizations, constituencies, issues, and geographies. And that it serves to strengthen the left's orientation to, and practice in, this arena. Each of its chapters sheds light on a distinct set of organizing challenges, protagonists, and approaches to electoral work. Yet a few themes surfaced again and again.

Most of the organizations represented here focused on some combination of registering and motivating new voters and targeting outreach to "low-propensity voters." Communities with high concen-

trations of low-propensity voters—including communities of color—often reflect the results of entrenched patterns of political investment. A party committed to turning out suburban soccer moms is unlikely to prioritize the kind of work it takes to transform a low-propensity voter into a high-potential voter. The strategies implemented by the organizations in this book were based on the conviction that sufficient investment of time and resources—together with culturally savvy messaging—could tap into the potential of low-propensity voters to determine election outcomes.



Cover of *Power Concedes Nothing*. (Credits: OR Press)

While COVID-19 forced organizers to innovate on contacting and mobilizing voters at a distance, there is no substitute for the work on the doors. Engaging prospective voters in conversation, listening hard to their concerns, answering basic questions as to how, where, and when to vote—all this is better served by face-to-face conversations than by phone or text—or, at an even further remove, ads. Every mode of voter communication was needed for the scale of outreach 2020 demanded, and the contributions of the tens of thousands of people who phoned and texted were absolutely indispensable. But high-quality work on the doors, in union halls, places of worship, schools, and community centers—unmediated

human connection—brings out leadership qualities in canvassers and volunteers, identifies potential activists and allies, and produces experiences that can be mined for lessons that shape future work in ways that other forms of outreach cannot.

Investment in high-cost, fly-in/fly-out consultants and pollsters is often misplaced spending. Donors need to think long and hard about investing in the local organizations and leaders that are committed to staying in place for the long haul—well beyond this electoral cycle or the next.

There are challenges related to aligning work on electoral campaigns with the robust, ongoing relationship-building, grassroots campaigning, and organization-building required to win progressive change. Those challenges can be anticipated and worked with in productive ways. And the relationships and skills acquired in these distinct forms of work can be mutually reinforcing.

The contributors to this book are busy with the work of creating a more just society. The pressure of that work, especially in these turbulent times, leaves little room for reflection and summation. The next battle looms. We are grateful that our contributors found the space to bring us stories of what they did, and why and how they did it.

Some chapters in *Power Concedes Nothing* focus on electoral organizing in states that were key to the presidential contest. Others reflect on the efforts of progressive networks and alliances engaged in multi-state organizing. The critical role of organized labor in getting out the vote is the subject of several articles. Organizers in communities of color bring attention to the role of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian American voters in 2020.

No single volume on grassroots electoral organizing could hope to be comprehensive. We have not covered every sector of the social justice movement. Nor have we been able to include the work of many indispensable organizations and networks. We hope that the process of summarizing experiences and sharing lessons will continue in many other forms.

2022 AND 2024

While the country took a small step back from a precipice on November 3, 2020, there was barely a pause before Trump loyalists rallied to a new cause—the alleged “steal” of the election. The violent, failed insurrection on January 6 drove home the level of commitment

worse than his election in 2016. He has shown all of us who he is and what he stands for. And if health or criminal prosecution takes him out of the running, other would-be strongmen are lining up to take his place. A GOP victory, whether by quasi-legitimate means or by what amounts to a coup, would signal a truly profound degeneration of the political

So here we are in 2022 and the right-wing authoritarians who lost in 2020 are still challenging the results of that election. Each day they demonstrate their dedication to white minority, patriarchal rule. Each day they make clear that they are glad to resort to extra-legal—or even violent—measures, if staying within the bounds of the law serves as a check on their power.

of Trump and his party to remaining in power by any and all means.

The lie that Trump won, and that a Democrat is illegitimately sitting in the White House, serves at least two purposes. The base, feeding on a constant stream of new false narratives, has been provided with a cause, which keeps it inflamed and stokes polarization. And Republican political operatives, in state houses and on election boards across the country have an excuse to introduce laws and procedures intended to constrain democracy and suppress the votes of the constituencies Democrats depend upon.

So here we are in 2022 and the right-wing authoritarians who lost in 2020 are still challenging the results of that election. Each day they demonstrate their dedication to white minority, patriarchal rule. Each day they make clear that they are glad to resort to extra-legal—or even violent—measures, if staying within the bounds of the law serves as a check on their power. As one of our contributors succinctly put it, they are playing for keeps.

The midterm elections of 2022 and the presidential election of 2024 are shaping up to be pitched battles. Trump enablers, acolytes, wannabes, and bankrollers are doing everything in their power to gain ground in 2022 and restore Trump in 2024. A Trump restoration would be far

space. As many have noted, right-wing resurgence and the figure of an authoritarian strongman with fascistic leanings are phenomena not limited to the United States. But, given the place and power of the US in global politics, the further shredding of democratic norms and institutions and/or a Trump restoration would likely incur disastrous consequences, both nationally and globally. Said another way, the stakes in 2022 and 2024 remain extraordinarily high.

We may be sure that the social justice organizations that share their experiences in this book are fully alert to what hangs in the balance for the constituencies and issues they represent. Whether the rich lessons of 2020 are absorbed and put to use by an expanded and more united progressive current in US politics will, in no small measure, shape the future of democracy.

OUR TITLE

We take our title from a speech given in 1857 by the brilliant abolitionist Frederick Douglass. Here is the paragraph in which the phrase appears:

This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any peo-

ple will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress. In the light of these ideas, Negroes will be hunted at the North and held and flogged at the South so long as they submit to those devilish outrages and make no resistance, either moral or physical. Men may not get all they pay for in this world, but they must certainly pay for all they get. If we ever get free from the oppressions and wrongs heaped upon us, we must pay for their removal. We must do this by labor, by suffering, by sacrifice, and if needs be, by our lives and the lives of others.

We encourage you to read the whole speech.

Linda Burnham is an activist, writer and strategist who served as National Research Director and Senior Advisor at the National Domestic Workers Alliance. She was a leader in the Third World Women's Alliance and, for 18 years, executive director of the Women of Color Resource Center.

Max Elbaum is a longstanding activist in the peace, anti-racist and radical movements. He is the author of Revolution in the Air and is currently an editor of Convergence (formerly Organizing Upgrade).

María Poblet is a longtime community organizer with roots in Buenos Aires, Guadalajara, and East Los Angeles. She was instrumental in building Causa Justa :: Just Cause and currently serves as the Executive Director of Grassroots Power Project and as a board member of the Bay Area Rising Action Fund.

“We Have to Push the Envelope”

A Year After Storming the Capitol, White Nationalist “Groyper” Storm the Right



Nick Fuentes speaking to AP about receiving death threats after attending the Unite The Right Rally in 2017. (Credit: Still from “Student Gets Death Threats After Virginia Rally”, Associated Press/Youtube.com)

On January 6, 2021, White nationalist Nick Fuentes stood outside of the U.S. Capitol, addressing a crowd of thousands, as rioters streamed into the building. Hailing the “American people rising up and taking our country back,” Fuentes urged¹ the crowd to “not leave this capitol until Donald Trump is inaugurated President.” They were there, he reminded them, to “put Donald Trump back in office...so that he can take every last illegal alien and throw them back over the border,” and so “we can finally free ourselves from the parasitic global special interests.” While Fuentes agitated outside, his movement’s blue “America First” flag was among² those carried by insurrectionists into the Capitol, and one groyper sat³ in Vice President Mike Pence’s chair in the Senate chamber.

One year later, Fuentes may remain

under federal scrutiny⁴ in ongoing Capitol insurrection investigations. However, while other far-right formations present that day, such as the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers, have seen their national momentum falter⁵, Fuentes’ America First/groyper movement—a largely online and anonymous network of Gen Z White nationalists and hard-right paleoconservatives that inherited⁶ the legacy of the 2016-17 Alt Right—has seen its profile continue to rise.

Fuentes and America First have attracted the support of national and local Republican officials, become a counter-cultural force among Gen Z conservative activists, and cast a long shadow over the MAGA Right, all while fortifying and expanding their organizational infrastructure. As a bevy of nationalist and populist figures jostle to claim the man-

tle of Trumpism, Fuentes seeks to secure a place for White nationalist concerns within the shifting consensus that defines movement conservatism. His momentum both accelerates and reflects the mainstreaming of White nationalism in U.S. politics, and highlights the challenges posed to existing “counter-extremism” strategies in the face of an increasingly normalized Far Right.

GOSAR’S EMBRACE

One month after the Capitol insurrection, U.S. Representative Paul Gosar (R-AZ) made a surprise appearance⁷ as the headline speaker at the groyper’s second annual America First Political Action Conference in Orlando, Florida (AF-PAC II). In a move that would become an opening salvo for the post-Trump era, Gosar addressed the crowd of White nationalists as “American patriots,” and repeat-

ed the groyper mantra, “America First is inevitable,”⁸ to raucous applause. In his own speech that evening, Fuentes laid out the movement’s guiding White nationalist principles around demographics and identity, warning⁹ against America losing its “White demographic core” and insisting that, “White people founded this country, this country wouldn’t exist without White people, and White people are done being bullied.”

Despite attempts to distance himself from the more explicitly racist comments made by Fuentes, Gosar was the only sitting elected official to accept the invitation to speak at AFPAC II. The next day, Gosar’s defense of attending the conference suggested that he considered the groypers a worthwhile constituency within a big-tent conservative coalition. “We thought: There is a group of young

left dictate our strategy, alliances and efforts. Ignore the left.”

As the year progressed, Gosar doubled down. His social media accounts became enmeshed with¹³ the groyper ecosystem, adopting the aesthetics and buzzwords of the movement, and the broader online Far Right, in a steady stream of “edgy” memes and video montages (most notoriously an anime-style video¹⁴ in which an avatar of Gosar appeared to kill his House colleague, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez). He regularly retweeted Fuentes and other groyper leaders such as¹⁵ longtime White nationalist Vincent James Foxx, veteran of the Rise Above Movement, and when scores of groyper accounts were banned from Twitter in December 2021, Gosar took to Gab to personally welcome¹⁶ them to the platform.

But even more significant than Go-

Republicans after asking, “White nationalist, White supremacist, Western civilization—how did that language become offensive?” But such tacit endorsements no longer appear as taboo.

The groyper movement has clear, long-term aspirations to influence, antagonize, and ultimately reshape the rightward flank of U.S. conservatism in its image, as Fuentes explained in a May 28, 2021 episode of his “America First” show:

My job, and the job of the groypers and America First, is to keep pushing further. We—because nobody else will—have to push the envelope. And we’re gonna get called names. We’re gonna get called racist, sexist, antisemitic, bigoted, whatever...and when the party is where we are two years later, we’re not gonna get the credit for the ideas that become popular...but that’s ok. That’s our job. We are the right-wing flank of the Republican Party, and if we didn’t exist, the Republican Party would be falling backwards all the time, constantly falling backwards, receding into the Center and the Left. So we have got to be on the Right, dragging these people kicking and stream—kicking and screaming into the future, into the right wing, into a truly reactionary party. And it’s incremental—we’re not gonna drag them all the way over—but if we can drag over the furthest part of the Right further to the Right, and we can drag the Center further to the Right, and we can drag the Left further to the Right, then we’re winning.

While many¹⁹ other White nationalists, in the final years of the Trump presidency, roundly rejected any strategy to intervene in mainstream politics, the groypers took the opposite tack. They wrapped their fixation on White demographics and identity in the flag and the cross, and pledged to wrest control of the MAGA movement away from establishment conservatives who, in their inflexible devotion to the nominally race-blind neoliberal consensus, had buried White identity politics and betrayed the true promise of Trump’s agenda.

The groypers struck their first blow against the conservative establishment in late 2019, when the movement made headlines with a series of provocative in-

Even more significant than Gosar’s embrace of Fuentes was the consistent lack of meaningful pushback from most other conservative leaders, signaling their tacit acceptance and normalization of White nationalists as an acceptable part of the conservative coalition.

people that are becoming part of the election process, and becoming a bigger force,” Gosar told¹⁰ The Washington Post. “So why not take that energy and listen to what they’ve got to say?”

That summer, the Gosar campaign seemingly planned a campaign fundraiser alongside Fuentes, leading to significant national outcry, including from some conservatives. “America First does not mean Sieg Heil,” tweeted¹¹ one evangelical radio host, “but Gosar is willfully aligning with those who act like they think it does.” Ultimately the event was not held, but Gosar dismissed calls to denounce the groyper leader, making a case for inclusion that would soon be echoed elsewhere on the post-Trump Right. “Not sure why anyone is freaking out,” he tweeted¹² on June 28. “I’ll say this: there are millions of Gen Z, Y and X conservatives. They believe in America First. They will not agree 100% on every issue. No group does. We will not let the

sar’s embrace of Fuentes was the consistent lack of meaningful pushback from most other conservative leaders, signaling their tacit acceptance and normalization of White nationalists as an acceptable part of the conservative coalition. Gosar’s own reputation as a stalwart firebrand on the America First wing of the GOP lends his continued flanking of Fuentes further weight in a moment when his faction is setting the agenda¹⁷ of the post-Trump Right.

“KICKING AND STREAMING”

The GOP’s silence on Gosar’s increasingly public alliance with Fuentes and other members of the Far Right stands in sharp contrast to how the party handled leaders’ flirtation with White nationalism during much of the Trump presidency. In early 2019, for example, former Iowa Congressman Steve King (who also spoke at AFPAC II) was stripped¹⁸ of his committee assignments by fellow House



An America First flag at a “Defeat the Mandates” protest in Allamance County, North Carolina on January 23, 2022. (Credit: Anthony Crider/Flickr.com)

terventions²⁰ at campus events sponsored by Turning Point USA²¹, driving leaders like Charlie Kirk and Ben Shapiro to debate White nationalist views on immigration, demographics, White identity, opposition to U.S. support for Israel, and more. But even as this groypner rebellion made waves—drawing both media attention and condemnation from mainstream conservatives—it underscored a deeper obstacle: that in the lingering shadow of White nationalist violence at events like the 2017 “Unite the Right” rally, anyone associated with the movement remained anathema to the establishment Right, and its ideas were denied a hearing in the conservative conversation.

The groypners found their opportunity to shift this dynamic in the waning days of the Trump presidency, and their actions set the stage for Gosar’s AFPAC II en-

dorsement the following winter. After November 3, 2020, when Trump insisted the election had been stolen, Fuentes and the groypners quickly became front-line players²² in the emerging Stop the Steal coalition, taking to the streets at the Million MAGA March²³ in Washington, D.C., and organizing protests at state capitols²⁴ in Michigan²⁵, Georgia²⁶, and elsewhere alongside other leaders such as Alex Jones and Ali Alexander.

At a moment when some of the conservative establishment lent tepid support to Stop the Steal, Fuentes and the groypners were all in, presenting an energetic and youthful face at the protests, and bolstering their image as Trump’s loyal vanguard along the way. Highly publicized²⁷ groypner chants such as “Destroy the GOP!” designed to inflect Stop the Steal with an insurgent, anti-establishment tone for a

conservative movement at a crossroads, made national headlines.

Their energy caught the attention of Gosar, too. The Congressman had been one of the earliest backers of Stop the Steal—at one rally, organizer Ali Alexander called²⁸ Gosar the “spirit animal of this movement.” On December 9, Gosar tweeted, “Let’s keep our momentum” alongside a meme from a groypner account that photoshopped Fuentes, Gosar, and Trump into seeming battle formation, with a military helicopter overhead and a caption praising Fuentes for “mobiliz[ing] the country in the streets.”

In this December 9, 2020 re-tweet, Gosar helped promote Fuentes as a key leader of the Stop the Steal movement, then underway.

In 2021, following Gosar’s appearance at AFPAC II, Fuentes continued to exploit

opportunities to edge the groypers brand further into the conservative big tent. He rallied the America First banner under popular causes such as “Big Tech censorship²⁹” and opposition³⁰ to COVID-19 public safety measures, and deepened relationships with prominent right-wing personalities like Alex Jones, gaining access to new audiences and influential networks across the far-right ecosystem. Fervent appeals to populist patriotism, hard-edged Christian nationalism, virulent anti-LGBTQ traditionalism, and conspiratorial anti-elitism all helped the groypers modulate their message in the register of the broader MAGA movement, without diluting their movement’s explicit White nationalist and antisemitic core.

The groypers have become a countercultural presence, especially on the nationalist flank of the broader Gen Z Right, leaving their imprint on the culture—and with it, the politics—of a rising generation of conservative leaders.

In late April, Fuentes tweeted that he had been barred from boarding an aircraft on the way to headlining a Florida rally against “Big Tech Censorship,” and that he had been placed on a federal no-fly list in retaliation for his participation in the January 6 Capitol insurrection—an assertion that remains unconfirmed. Over the next week, a bevy of MAGA media figures, including Mike Cernovich³¹, Dinesh D’Souza³², Daily Wire hosts Matt Walsh³³ and Andrew Klavan³⁴, Lauren Chen³⁵, Michael Knowles³⁶, and others, along with contrarian journalist Glenn Greenwald³⁷, boosted the narrative on their shows and social media accounts, framing Fuentes as a victim of political persecution. “Maybe there is more common ground than previously thought possible,” Fuentes offered in a May 3 tweet thanking several figures for what would have once seemed their unlikely support. “We have to be imaginative in order to defeat powerful forces.”

Even while many of these figures stressed various disclaimers about how they disagreed with a number of Fuen-

tes’ views, their sympathetic coverage was nonetheless a coup of its own. In a conservative discourse saturated with competing postures of martyrdom at the hands of Big Tech, the Biden administration, and other “regime” overlords, Fuentes eagerly branded himself as “the most censored man in the world” and the premier “civil rights icon” of the victimized Right. In the months that followed, leaders such as U.S. Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-FL) continued to circulate³⁸ calls to take Fuentes off the no-fly list. Fuentes’ Twitter ban in July elicited another chorus³⁹ of conservative condemnation, with Dinesh D’Souza bemoaning that Fuentes “is now the Rosa Parks of the civil liberties struggle in America.”

This image continues to score Fuen-

tes more political capital and publicity as the face of White nationalism in the post-Trump area. His first major interview on the MAGA punditry circuit in years, conducted by popular BlazeTV host Elijah Schaffer in early December 2021, hyped⁴⁰ Fuentes as “the most banned person on the Internet...targeted not only by the tech companies but also by the federal justice system for no other reason than thought crimes.” The interview, in turn, was lauded by the groypers as a new milestone in their long march towards overtaking the mainstream. While notoriety eventually caught up with Richard Spencer, today this infamy may be Fuentes’ smoothest path in.

In December 2021, hard-right Arizona state senator Wendy Rogers walked through the door Gosar had opened. “Thank you, Nick Fuentes. We love you,” Rogers tweeted⁴¹ after Fuentes called her “based.” She continued, “Because Nick Fuentes said I am BASED, I am now truly BASED. It is official.” Rogers had previously called⁴² for Fuentes’ removal from the no-fly list, given interviews⁴³ to

close Fuentes ally Lauren Witzke on the antisemitic outlet TruNews, and, one week before praising Fuentes online, sat down for an in-person interview with local groypers activists.

Celebrating the endorsement, Gosar remarked⁴⁴ on Gab that Rogers is “certainly very based—some might say she’s even catching up to me! Keep up the great work, Wendy!” This call-and-response between Fuentes and the GOP’s hard-right flank, like so many others, shows his incrementalist strategy paying off in real time.

CHANGING THE CULTURE

Meanwhile, Fuentes and the groypers continue to hold significant sway among Gen Z conservative leaders. On college campuses, multiple groups⁴⁵ within state and national organizations like California College Republicans and Republicans United⁴⁶ have close ties to the groypers movement (even self-identifying⁴⁷ as groypers) and have hosted events⁴⁸ featuring movement leaders⁴⁹. Other new far-right Gen-Z groups angling for conservative influence, like the American Populist Union⁵⁰, have consciously adopted Fuentes’ talking points and style, while shying away from hardline White nationalism and antisemitism, in a bid to ride the movement’s wave.

Departing from other White nationalist formations, the groypers eagerly highlight support from conservative leaders of color, such as⁵¹ former host of BlazeTV’s “The White House Brief” Jon Miller and MAGA rapper Bryson Gray (whose anti-Biden “Let’s Go Brandon” song went viral in late October 2021), and welcome activists of color into the movement base, hoping to blunt charges of White nationalism. While much of the movement base remains anonymous, 2021 saw many groypers network publicly at conservative conferences, work within youth institutions like the Leadership Institute, organize America First camping retreats⁵² and “White Boy Summer” meetups⁵³, and circulate elsewhere as Fuentes’ ambassadors across Gen-Z conservative institutional and cultural life, lending the blue America First hat brand recognizability among many activists on the young Right.

In one notable example, at least two major influencers featured on Republican Hype House—a large political account on TikTok that commanded over 1.2 million followers and 51 million likes before it was banned in October 2021—were enthusiastic groypers⁵⁴ who incorporated White nationalist themes into their vid-

chat room. “You agree with me on certain things,” he told the group, “but you can’t say it.”

Among the group of leaders in the Twitter Space that night were National Review fellow Nate Hochman and American Moment President Saurabh Sharma, who were recently profiled⁵⁹ in The

of base-building among conservative minority groups. “You’ve gotten a lot of kids based and we respect that for sure,” admitted one among the assembled group, speculating that Fuentes is “probably a better influence than Ben Shapiro on young men who might otherwise be [mainstream] conservatives.” Speakers

Consequently, Fuentes continued, the Right must recognize the ongoing race war on traditional White America, and help Whites band together to advocate for their interests.

eo content, and promoted Fuentes and the movement regularly on their own accounts. In these ways and others, the groypers have become a countercultural presence, especially on the nationalist flank of the broader Gen Z Right, leaving their imprint on the culture—and with it, the politics—of a rising generation of conservative leaders.

While its internal growth and digital reach has been hobbled by steady deplatforming⁵⁵ from most social media sites, payment processors, and streaming services, America First has built a team of staff and interns, professionalized its design and video production capacity, and acquired⁵⁶ its own streaming platform, which now hosts almost two dozen other far-right streamers in addition to Fuentes. At a time when the rest of the White nationalist movement has mostly avoided large offline mobilizations (aside from tightly-scripted flash demonstrations and the occasional closed-door conference), Fuentes has repeatedly taken the groypers movement to the streets⁵⁷ throughout 2021, holding public meetups and sometimes confrontational⁵⁸ rallies across the country.

GROYPERS VS. POPULISM, INC.

As conservatives deliberate their future in the post-Trump era, Fuentes aims to bring White nationalist ideas on immigration, demographics, and White identity further into the conversation. Circumventing his Twitter ban, Fuentes engaged in a rare public debate on December 5, 2021 with several young conservative leaders in a Twitter Spaces voice

New Republic as part of a wave of radical young intellectuals who want to take over the American Right; “populist culture warriors” who want “to see Republicans abandon their fealty to free-market dogmas, embrace traditional Christianity, and use the levers of state power to wage the culture war for keeps.” The chat room featured young people with connections to the Trump White House, the Claremont Institute, National Review magazine, the America First Policy Institute, American Moment, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, and other outfits, who cast themselves as the true inheritors of the spirit of Trump’s “America First” revolution. Self-styled radical dissidents and hard-edged traditionalists, they also, like the groypers, admire paleoconservative forerunners like Pat Buchanan, and see themselves fighting a two-front war against a society ruled by degenerate elite liberal institutions on the one hand, and an out-of-touch, Reaganite conservative establishment on the other. But unlike Fuentes, they eschew explicit racial nationalism in favor of a broader nationalist and populist agenda. The coalition they represent—which groypers derisively call “Populism, Inc.”—seeks to orient the post-Trump Right around some variant of economic and cultural nationalism. Admirers of firebrands like Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and Missouri Senator Josh Hawley, they often champion defense of “Western civilization” as an ostensibly non-racial set of transmissible cultural values and political traditions, and emphasize multiracial populism and the importance

of base-building among conservative minority groups. “You’ve gotten a lot of kids based and we respect that for sure,” admitted one among the assembled group, speculating that Fuentes is “probably a better influence than Ben Shapiro on young men who might otherwise be [mainstream] conservatives.” Speakers

criticized attempts to expel Fuentes from the bounds of conservative acceptability and concurred with his assessment that “there’s gonna be a decisive shift in right-wing politics, [and] the old guard is gonna have less and less power.” Yet Fuentes insisted that his national-populist interlocutors suffered, much like the establishment, from “a limited... imagination of what’s gonna become possible in the next couple decades.” Prophesying “the ascendancy of real American reaction,” he insisted that, as Whites become a demographic minority in the U.S., “politics is becoming more racialized... not less,” and explicit White identitarianism will become more salient to conservative Whites, who form the bulk and natural base of the conservative movement. “Implicitly, MAGA was an expression of White identity,” Fuentes acknowledged. “Liberals got that right... it’s gradually becoming more and more explicit that conservatism is [about] conserving the texture and the character of White American society. That’s where the opposition to [critical race theory] comes from”—although CRT, Fuentes continued, was a deceptive acronym, “one of these weasel words to obfuscate” the root phenomenon of anti-White animus. (Another such acronym, he told the group in one of several antisemitic asides, was “‘Cultural Marxism’—try ‘Jewish intellectuals!’”)

Fuentes insisted that, in the ideological ferment of the post-Trump Right, conservatives seeking to ground their vision in a restorative ideal of tradition and heritage cannot afford to bury their heads in the



Still from the video "Asking Arizona GOP lawmakers about Rep. Paul Gosar," uploaded on March 12, 2021. (Credit: Arizona's Family 3TV and CBS 5 News Phoenix, YouTube.com)

sand with fantasies of what one interlocutor called "an encompassing American identity," "transmissible Anglo-American culture," or some other ostensibly race-neutral category, but must ultimately acknowledge the real elephant in the room: White identity politics. Attempting to redpill his interlocutors on the central tenets of White nationalism, Fuentes argued that "the White race is real," and that race more broadly is an "essential part of a person", a "biological fact...like a taxonomy." Consequently, he continued, the Right must recognize the ongoing race war on traditional White America, and help Whites band together to advocate for their interests. Only by orienting itself explicitly (though not exclusively) as the party of disaffected White Americans, Fuentes insisted, could the GOP fortify its power base against the Left for decades to come.

Some responded by allowing that "maybe it would be ideal" if White identity politics was a viable central organizing principle on the Right, but that "even if we wanted to reverse the last 100 years of immigration...it's just not plausible." By the end of the call, however, others had conceded that Fuentes was "influential and...a lot of what he says is good," dial-

ing back their disagreement to one largely of style, not substance.

"IT'S TIME TO SHIFT THE CENTER AGAIN"

The debate illustrated just how radically the playing field has shifted for the movement in the last two years. During the latter half of the Trump presidency, the task at hand for the groypers, as Fuentes explained to⁶⁰ followers on an April 2019 members-only broadcast, had been to "break away" from the toxic Alt Right and "form a new periphery...get in there, introduce the talking points, infiltrate, start converting people, and build bridges... Bit by bit we start to break down these walls and we start to get back in... and then one day, we become the mainstream."

Nearly three years later, White nationalism continues to move mainstream. On September 22, 2021, as the Biden administration began to forcibly deport thousands of Haitian immigrants at the Texas border—a choice widely condemned⁶¹ by progressives as a continuation of Trump-era immigration restrictions—Tucker Carlson introduced his audience of millions to the core terminology and principles of White nationalism, claiming⁶² that Biden was promoting "an un-

relenting stream of immigration" to "change the racial mix of the country... in political terms, this policy is called the 'Great Replacement': the replacement of legacy Americans...to reduce the political power of people whose ancestors lived here, and dramatically increase the proportion of Americans newly-arrived from the Third World." It was far from⁶³ the first time Carlson had used replacement rhetoric, but his deployment of the terms "Great Replacement" and "legacy Americans"—language lifted directly from the White nationalist canon—marked a new milestone.

The next day, groypers had even more reason to celebrate when Charlie Kirk, leader of the campus-based organization Turning Point USA and longtime groypers foe, said the quiet part even louder, calling⁶⁴ on Texas to "deputize a citizen force [and] put them on the border," and arguing that the arrival of Haitian immigrants was "about diminishing and decreasing White demographics in America." This was a radical departure from the days of the late 2019 Groypers Wars, when Kirk responded to a groypers's question about non-White immigration, changing demographics, and maintaining "our White European ideals" by calling⁶⁵ "arguments

like ‘how are we going to maintain our White status’” a “racist idea.”

Meanwhile, a broader politics of White reaction and rage continues to take root across conservatism. This takes form in deepening policies of minority voter suppression, pervasive moral panic over “critical race theory”—which commentators like Carlson⁶⁶ and The Daily Wire’s Matt Walsh increasingly⁶⁷ call “anti-White” (to the delight of White nationalists)—revisionist histories⁶⁸ of the Capitol insurrection (as well as the insurrection⁶⁹ itself), the glorification of Kyle Rittenhouse, and more.

In this climate, Fuentes is strategically positioned on the cutting edge of the growing illiberal, ultranationalist currents that continue to shape the U.S. Right. His position as a confirmed

limiting the reach of radical Right movements) face fresh challenges. Similarly, the strategy of “naming and shaming” White nationalists within conservative institutions may offer diminishing returns, as the once-pervasive pressure to expel and quarantine White nationalist ideology gradually softens within a conservative movement that’s increasingly adding that ideology to its toolkit and opting not to purge, but to protect and expand, its ranks.

With the 2022 midterms on the horizon, the America First movement has launched⁷¹ a 501c4 political action nonprofit, and has pledged to endorse and run its own candidates for office. At least three groypers candidates—Maryland House of Delegates candidate Shekinah Hollingsworth⁷², West Virginia Con-

the next step....For a long time, people were afraid of going further to the Right, they didn’t wanna be thought of as the furthest to the Right. I wanna be the furthest to the Right! I wanna be the furthest Right reactionary and drag everybody over.

Donald Trump had shifted the Center before, Fuentes continued, but this was a new era. “So it’s time to shift the Center again.”

Ben Lorber works as a Research Analyst at PRA, focusing on white nationalism and antisemitism. Lorber has worked as a journalist, organizer and movement-builder for over a decade. Lorber has published on right-wing social movements, Israel/Palestine, Jewish culture and other topics at The Nation, Salon, The Jewish Daily Forward and more. He tweets at @BenLorber8.

A broader politics of White reaction and rage continues to take root across conservatism. This takes form in deepening policies of minority voter suppression, pervasive moral panic over “critical race theory,” revisionist histories of the Capitol insurrection and more.

outsider is more than ever a strategic asset in a broader conservative movement awash with self-styled outsiders, affording the groypers an unprecedented degree of call-and-response interaction with the MAGA Right.

As the conservative movement lurches further⁷⁰ right, the ideas he represents dwell in proximate and dynamic tension with other, less explicitly racialist strands of populist nationalism also in ascendance. If the America First wing of the GOP continues to gain influence through the 2022 midterms, Fuentes’ early maneuvering could edge the groypers brand even further into the conservative big tent.

In an age where losing one’s Twitter account is seen on the Right as a badge of honor, and leaders like Fuentes are embracing ideologically-aligned alternative sites like Gab—where Fuentes has amassed nearly as many followers as he once had on Twitter—standard interventions like deplatforming (long effective at

gressional candidate Michael Sisco⁷³, and California Congressional candidate Nick Taurus⁷⁴—have already launched electoral campaigns. Whether or not Fuentes and his followers are able to deepen their inroads into the big-tent GOP coalition, the ideas they carry with them have already arrived.

Conservatives “need to take the Trump legacy and build on top of it,” Fuentes told followers on a May 2021 episode of America First, adding that “2020 showed us that 2016 was not nearly enough.” The conservative attitude going forward, he continued, should be that:

We have to go further, we have to go harder, we have to be more radical, more revolutionary...at an accelerating pace, never stopping, never relenting, never moderating...Donald Trump was the beginning, was a starting point, and the real way to carry on his legacy....[is] to take the baton and carry it through to its logical conclusions...We love Trump, but he was a first step. We’re

BY SHANE BURLEY

Can You Ever Trust a Former White Nationalist?



Christian Picciolini, Matthew Heimbach, and Jesse Morton. (Credit: Collage created by PRA)

After leaving behind her career on the Far Right, it only made sense for Katie McHugh to turn over emails from her former bosses, colleagues, and boyfriend. McHugh had been an Alt Right favorite, an editor at Breitbart News who helped funnel far-right ideas into mainstream conservatism. She emailed and spoke regularly with Trump's senior White House aide Stephen Miller, who advised her to repurpose content from White nationalist sources like VDare for her posts at Breitbart.¹ She was dating White nationalist writer Kevin DeAnna,² a member of the “folkish” heathen cult the Wolves of Vinland³ and a contributor for Alt Right leader Richard Spencer's Radix Journal, and attended parties with people from groups like American Renaissance. When she was fired in 2017 for social media posts that proved too racist and Islamophobic

even for Breitbart, her life appeared to go into a tailspin.

In 2018, she had started saying she wanted out.⁴ Her relationship with movement leaders and DeAnna had broken down, and she says she was rethinking the ideas she'd once claimed as her own. Several months later, McHugh was connected with anti-radicalization groups and journalists, saying she wanted to undo some of the harm she'd caused. She started considering what she knew about the movement, and what documentation she had. One of the most obvious smoking guns was a cache of emails she'd received from Stephen Miller, where he helped set the anti-immigrant agenda at Breitbart, and spoke relatively openly about his intentions.

To McHugh, their significance was obvious. “Perhaps the most influential advisor to the president is thinking he has to

build concentration camps and he is separating children from their mothers and fathers,” she told me in 2020.⁵

She sent the emails to the Southern Poverty Law Center, in what would become the first of multiple information dumps to SPLC. She earlier had given leaked emails to the Atlantic, part of a flurry of releases of once private correspondence.⁶ Names, records, insider information, pseudonyms—it was all available. The news that Miller—and by extension, the Trump White House—had substantial ties to leading White nationalist organizations like VDare and American Renaissance made a splash. It was one of the most significant leaks in the Trump years, showing exactly how organized White supremacy was pushing on the U.S. immigration system.

For McHugh, it was, at least in part, a bid for redemption. “Certainly you be-

come scared, but you know in your soul that it is the right thing to do," she said. "These are extremely bad people; they are going to hurt more people. I have to do something."⁷

But some antiracist activists and observers expressed skepticism among themselves, given the role McHugh had played in mainstreaming White nationalism. Today, McHugh's story isn't unique. While White supremacists have always lingered on the edges of the political Right, the Alt Right's rebranding efforts grew their numbers. It stands to reason that the ranks of those now trying to

ple who have done and said awful things to suddenly change, and I think we need to hold them to account," he said. "I also think we can't have the blanket statement of 'nobody can change.'"⁹

Picciolini's conviction comes from his own story as a former neonazi in the Hammerskins skinhead group in the late 1980s and early '90s. Traveling with his band White American Youth, he became a violent street brawler before leaving the movement in the 1990s and beginning the long process of reconciling with what he had done. Eventually he founded Life After Hate,¹⁰ a group that is in-

brought them into the movement in the first place.

One of Picciolini's colleagues, Shannon Martinez, a former neonazi drawn into the movement after a sexual assault, says most work with "people who are still in" isn't ideological, but personal. "You have to address the underlying things that create the reason you found resonance with this stuff in the first place," she said. "That takes time and a lot of really hard-core, ongoing support."¹²

And it's not a process that happens quickly, she said, noting the many current "former" White nationalists who rapidly became public figures within months of leaving. At that point, Martinez said, "You don't even know the sickness you have yet."¹³

THE COMMANDER

Before PRA reached out to Jeff Schoep, the former "Commander" of the neonazi National Socialist Movement (NSM), Picciolini warned me to be careful. Schoep, he said, was "a grifter and not being fully genuine."¹⁴

As one of the highest-profile neonazis in U.S. history, in the 1990s, Schoep transformed his skinhead crew into a nationwide political organization, which he then led for 25 years. The NSM were often referred to as "Hollywood Nazis" for their brazen racism, including dressing in a "blackshirt" uniform with swastikas, using racial slurs, and preaching race war. Schoep sought out recruits with military training—he claimed 50 percent of their members were veterans—and NSM members have one of the longest rap sheets of racist violence in the movement.¹⁵ Schoep helped lead the deadly 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, and became one of U.S. White nationalism's loudest voices. But in 2019, he began presenting himself as a "former White nationalist," first appearing on Picciolini's MSNBC show and then working with the Washington, D.C.-based Light Upon Light. Within months, he was speaking at conferences as an expert on White nationalism, and offering "deradicalization" counseling. To Picciolini, it seemed disingenuous.

"Immediately after [he was on my show] ... I was pressuring him to do the

All of this deeply complicates questions about which former White nationalists should be trusted as windows into the movement, and what accountability looks like for those who want to leave their harmful pasts behind.

leave the movement could grow as well. And so, over the last few years, the idea of the remorseful "former White nationalist" has come into vogue, featured in popular books, a catalogue of TED Talks, and a growing industry of media figures who've built personal brands out of being a "former."

Some of them have landed positions as consulting experts with "Countering Violent Extremism" organizations that present themselves as non-partisan opponents of "extremism"—defined so vaguely that they often make no distinctions between groups advocating far-right violence and those fighting against them.⁸

All of this deeply complicates questions about which former White nationalists should be trusted as windows into the movement, and what accountability looks like for those who want to leave their harmful pasts behind.

SEEKING REDEMPTION

For Christian Picciolini, a former White nationalist who's made it his life's work to help others leave the movement, a guiding principle is understanding that "not everybody is going to be convinced that people have changed."

"It's healthy to be skeptical about peo-

ple who have done and said awful things to suddenly change, and I think we need to hold them to account," he said. "I also think we can't have the blanket statement of 'nobody can change.'"⁹

Picciolini is one of many figures and organizations in a growing field focused on "de-radicalization": an approach to far-right militancy that works with people who want to get out to confront their past, with varying results. Some have measurable success, while critics allege that others simply legitimize White nationalists without holding them accountable or even fully reforming their views.

During the 2000s, Picciolini primarily worked with kids leaving skinhead crews and the Ku Klux Klan, but now he deals mostly with the more fragmented world of online radicalization. He also hosts a show on MSNBC, featuring White nationalists who say they want to leave the movement. Although he sometimes works with more than 300 people at a time, Picciolini says his program is not a rubber stamp exit plan, but comes with a stack of stipulations and requirements, including setting personal goals and making amends. There's no shortcut to the redemption many "formers" seek, he said—just a deliberate process to take responsibility and understand what



Jeff Schoep at a Ctrl+Alt+Delete+Hate event in 2019. (Credit: New America/Flickr.com)

work, to see a therapist. I had job interviews lined up,” said Picciolini. “He kind of refused to do it. He just decided he wanted to be a spokesperson for himself again. And I decided to cut it off because it didn’t feel like he was being genuine.”¹⁶

The issue may not be whether someone like Schoep sincerely wants out—there are plenty of practical, non-ideological reasons to not want to be publicly affiliated with White nationalism anymore—but whether he was willing to work to make amends, or even cared to.

When we first spoke on the phone, Schoep said, “The longer some of us have been in, the more harm we have done. I think it’s really important that we ...do what we can to repair that damage. Anybody can talk about it but you need to walk the walk.”¹⁷

But it’s unclear what Schoep means by “walking the walk.” He left the organization in 2019, amid a lawsuit¹⁸ stemming from his role in the 2017 Unite the Right rally, where Schoep and associates were alleged to have attacked counter-protesters.¹⁹ After his departure, though, Schoep

refused to provide anti-racist organizations with NSM’s membership lists or other information that could help authorities target the group.

“It wasn’t mine to just give away,” Schoep said, citing alleged non-disclosure agreements that NSM members sign and comparing such disclosures to corporate espionage. “It’s like saying, ‘Well, if you worked for Apple and now you are working with IBM, how come you didn’t take all the schematics and things Apple was working on and hand them over to their competitor?’ You just don’t do that. It’s not ethically sound.”²⁰

Schoep also hasn’t worked with any victims of NSM violence, and minimizes the long history of violence associated with the group, including a recent case where an NSM member from Missouri was arrested en route to bomb a hospital during the COVID-19 pandemic.²¹ Instead, when asked, Schoep seems to wax nostalgic about the impressive things he did in his time with the NSM.²²

“He likes very much to remind everyone that he was the leader of the NSM for

25 years. There is no way that you undo 25 years in a matter of months,” said Martinez.²³

FORMERS, INC.

But Schoep’s high-profile redemption story has been helped along by Light Upon Light (LUL), which has recently come under fire for what many in the deradicalization community consider to be playing fast and loose with the process. By appealing to a supposed political center with so-called countering violent extremism (CVE) programming, LUL has denounced antifascist activists and even collaborated with right-wing writer and livestreamer Andy Ngo, whose misleading reporting has created dangerous hyperbole around antifascist activism—including by alleging “Antifa violence” where there is none—and whose use of racial, transphobic, and bigoted characterizations of left-wing activists, and singling out of reporters and community organizers, has left them vulnerable to far-right political violence.²⁴ Ngo’s inclusion as a legitimate voice helps to laun-

der far-right ideas and bigotries under a “both sides” narrative of manufactured centrism, and also shows LUL’s disconnect from how the Far Right actually functions.

Starting in 2019, shortly after his conversion, Schoep became a public speaker for LUL, speaking about his experiences in the White nationalist movement, and appearing as an expert on the Far Right at conferences and universities.²⁵ LUL was also criticized by antifascist activists for working with the Clarion Project, an anti-Muslim organization²⁶ that has used Islamophobic films such as *Obsession: Radical Islam’s War Against the West* and *The*

ing the movement over concerns about members’ violence, yet neglected to actually denounce any of its politics. Just a matter of months prior to the video’s release, Heimbach had helped launch the National Socialist Charitable Coalition to help raise money for James Alex Fields, the Alt Right activist who killed antifascist counter-protester Heather Heyer in Charlottesville in 2017.³¹ Just a few months before that, Heimbach had also appeared on an accelerationist neonazi podcast and proclaimed “God bless Dylann Roof,” the White supremacist who murdered nine parishioners at Charleston, South Carolina’s Mother

and he saw nothing to be contrite about. His main transformation, he suggested, was becoming a nationalist socialist rather than a national socialist. In a subsequent interview, Heimbach added that he now believes what can best solve the world’s problems is some form of authoritarian Marxism or a type of National Bolshevism—an ideological current that tries to mix ethnic nationalism with a distorted form of Marxism. Now, instead of citing neonazi leaders, he pulls from obscure Soviet or Chinese Communist Party policies to justify his far-right ideas, as well as the nationalism of some Marxist leaders such as Ho Chi Minh, while also arguing that he affirms “proletarian internationalism” and cross-racial solidarity against capitalism and its elites. Much of his apparent ideology still centers on antisemitism—calling Jews “hyper capitalists” and “rootless cosmopolitans” in our interview³⁶—even as he attempted to qualify this by suggesting he was only condemning various elites of Jewish descent (a qualification that’s been the hallmark of open antisemites for decades). He also still believes in racial IQ differences, in the unique threat that Jews and Judaism pose to the world (though he phrases it as “Zionists”), that transgender people are “mentally ill,” and that some form of nationalism is acceptable.

Despite Heimbach openly proclaiming that his beliefs haven’t changed, and maintaining friendly relationships with other White nationalists, including his former Traditionalist Worker Party co-leader Matthew Parrott, LUL not only allowed him to become an organizational ambassador, but to host a six-episode podcast with Morton. In the show, Heimbach reverently uses honorifics for White nationalist leaders (such as “Dr. Pierce” for National Alliance founder William Pierce); defended “national socialism” as an ideology; propped up the myth that there is a genocide against Boer farmers in South Africa;³⁷ blamed antifascists for not allowing the Far Right an acceptable outlet for their racist rage;³⁸ and hyped moral panics over claims about “transsexual drag shows for children.”³⁹

Far from LUL being misled about Heimbach’s views, they seem to have been his ticket into the group.⁴⁰ His connection

By appealing to a supposed political center with so-called countering violent extremism (CVE) programming, LUL has denounced antifascist activists and even collaborated with right-wing writer and livestreamer Andy Ngo, whose misleading reporting has created dangerous hyperbole around antifascist activism.

Third Jihad: Radical Islam’s Vision for America in trainings for law enforcement and with voters in battleground states.²⁷ Both LUL founder Jesse Morton²⁸ and Schoep appeared in a Clarion video alongside the group’s Intelligence Network Director Ryan Mauro, who has been featured on Fox News’ Lou Dobbs Tonight repeatedly alleging that there are domestic terrorist “training camps” in the U.S.²⁹ Schoep and LUL also participated in an event from the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism. During this, Morton participated in a controversial forum on the “involuntary celibate” or incel movement, suggesting that the movement, which has inspired numerous misogynistic murders and mass killings in recent years, was instead simply misunderstood.³⁰

LUL turned even more heads in 2020 when it announced they were working with Matthew Heimbach, another longtime White nationalist celebrity and the former head of the Traditionalist Worker Party who, like Schoep, was still facing a lawsuit over his role in the violence in Charlottesville. In a video LUL released in April 2020, Heimbach discussed leav-

Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, one of the oldest Black churches in the nation. There, and in other podcasts, Heimbach talked about supporting imprisoned White nationalists, which had been his official role as an officer in the NSM.³² Not to mention that before he left the movement, leaked messages he’d written on a White nationalist forum showed him praising an accelerationist neonazi manual and terror groups like Atomwaffen Division as “good friends of ours.”³³

Heimbach’s subsequent connection with LUL seemed to confirm critics’ suspicions that the organization was achieving little beyond helping White nationalists rebrand themselves and their politics. In a YouTube comment in April 2020, Heimbach posted a letter clarifying his views, expressing continued support for nationalist causes, using coded language like “anti-Zionist” to express otherwise antisemitic tropes,³⁴ and saying he opposed the “PC” culture found among other former White nationalists.³⁵

In an email to PRA, Heimbach confirmed that while he had left White nationalism, his beliefs hadn’t moderated

with LUL began in early 2020, after Heimbach wrote Morton a letter, outlining his political trajectory and explaining why he left White nationalism. The letter was never released publicly, but in a copy acquired by PRA, Heimbach writes, “Traditionally in the United States, when someone leaves White Nationalism they go on a long apology tour, about how sorry they are about being a hateful bigot and hurting innocent people, and while your average neoliberal might nod approvingly and clap their hands at this wonderful ‘transformation’, the average person in and out of the White Nationalist movement just rolls their eyes. I am not apologizing and have nothing to apologize for. End of story.” Rather than challenging Heimbach, Morton responded immediately with an offer to connect him with The New York Times for an interview about being a former White nationalist.⁴¹

That sort of pattern has led many researchers and activists to criticize “CVE”

Right.⁴² “And most of the high-profile examples they produce are clearly fictional.”

Even a former LUL consultant on far-right radicalization, Samantha Kutner, echoed the critique. In the six months she was there, she saw what she described as multiple “red flags” that eventually convinced her to quit, including LUL’s relationship with the Clarion Project; watching the “ways that ‘formers’ were being used with no accountability measures in place”; and being placed in the middle of a “turf war” between competing CVE organizations. Kutner was also particularly concerned by Morton’s collaboration with Andy Ngo,⁴³ since she’d been one of 13 journalists and activists targeted by an Atomwaffen-style “kill list” video, entitled “Sunset the Media,” after Ngo publicized a list made by Eoin Lenihan accusing the journalists of having connections to “Antifa.”⁴⁴ “When I realized the org that I was recruited into had really no in-

tion, particularly information that can be used to confront and dismantle White nationalist organizations, is often considered the baseline of amends-making by antifascist activists, who both play an extensive role in confronting White nationalist movements and are frequent targets of threats or violence for their defensive work. There has to be an attempt to use what information and skills the person has to undo some of the base-building work they did for the White nationalist movement. If they act in defense of their old comrades and organizations, how can the rest of the community actually trust them as anything other than a dangerous unknown?

“People who leave these movements do have an obligation...to commit to using their knowledge to better inform the interventions that could prevent other people from going down that path. And not just in a way that platforms their own personality and their own experiences,” says Miller-Idriss.

When Schoep talks about his White nationalist past, he tends to brag about the skills he learned leading the NSM, such as his infiltration of law enforcement and antifascist groups. But that sort of boasting makes it particularly hard for his former targets to believe his claims of redemption.

In 2018, for example, Schoep worked with a Black NSM supporter to infiltrate the antifascist group One People’s Project, with the intention of doxing antifascist organizers.⁴⁷ That’s not the kind of harm that is easy to undo, yet in our interview, Schoep seemed more proud than remorseful.

“[Former White nationalists] have to be upfront about what they and [their] hopefully former colleagues did, especially those of the caliber of Schoep. While I appreciate the need to move on, even those I have helped to get out that just [want] to live their lives have provided info that was helpful,” said One People’s Project Daryle Lamont Jenkins. “They know that there was some pain they have caused that they will need to atone for if they want to be accepted. And the more pain they caused the more they have to deal with.”⁴⁸

Heimbach and Schoep are two of the over 20 defendants who were suc-

There has to be an attempt to use what information and skills the person has to undo some of the base-building work they did for the White nationalist movement. If they act in defense of their old comrades and organizations, how can the rest of the community actually trust them as anything other than a dangerous unknown?

groups. “[Many groups] that have focused on trying to counter violent extremism or prevent extremist radicalization have been very vague about their criteria for success,” says Cynthia Miller-Idriss, a researcher who studies far-right radicalization. “You have to find some way of... assessing the genuine commitment to disengagement from the beliefs... It’s really important that there are metrics for success, and that you assess what you’re doing before you scale up.”

“So much of the crossover of the CVE framework and bringing it to American Nazism is just about image laundering and producing these narratives of rehabilitation,” said Molly Conger, a Charlottesville native who became an antifascist organizer in the aftermath of Unite the

groups. “[Many groups] that have focused on trying to counter violent extremism or prevent extremist radicalization have been very vague about their criteria for success,” says Cynthia Miller-Idriss, a researcher who studies far-right radicalization. “You have to find some way of... assessing the genuine commitment to disengagement from the beliefs... It’s really important that there are metrics for success, and that you assess what you’re doing before you scale up.”

terest in doing the work they claimed to do or the work that I wanted to be there for,” said Kutner, “I made the choice to leave.”⁴⁵

LUL declined repeated interview requests for this article and did not respond to a detailed list of questions. Ultimately LUL and Heimbach parted ways—prompted, Heimbach claims, by Morton saying that Heimbach was going to “ruin everything” with LUL’s donors after Heimbach wrote in a livestream comment thread that “fascism has a lot of good points.” But as of this writing, Heimbach’s content is still online at LUL’s website.⁴⁶

RESPONSIBILITIES FOR A PATHWAY BACK

Giving over organizational informa-

Many antifascist activists argue that, while much of the de-radicalization model focuses on trying to dismantle White nationalism one soul at a time, this goal shouldn't come at the cost of community safety and is ultimately no substitute for a structural transformation of society that eradicates White supremacy and White nationalism at its root.

cessfully sued for their roles at Unite the Right. The lawsuit accused Schoep of not truly separating from the NSM and of refusing to turn over equipment, such as his cell phone, requested by the plaintiffs during the lawsuit.⁴⁹ According to the lawsuit, Burt Colucci, Schoep's replacement as NSM's "Commander," who was arrested in April 2021 for allegedly threatening to kill a Black man,⁵⁰ testified during a deposition that Schoep was still involved with NSM in late 2019, well after his LUL biography claims he left the movement.⁵¹ Evidence of these continuing ties included a 2019 text message from Schoep warning Colucci about a federal informant, and the fact that Schoep's girlfriend, Acacia Dietz, still is an "informal" NSM member who maintains the group's website.⁵² Schoep's warning text was sent just two weeks before LUL released a video of Schoep expressing his remorse for his role in the movement and claiming he'd left it behind.⁵³ The court documents also reveal Schoep's profound unwillingness to release NSM member data, with Schoep's attorney "obstinately refus[ing] to even inquire who else within the organization, beyond the former leader, possess responsive documents."⁵⁴ Taken together, these facts convinced many activists that Schoep's supposed conversion was just a ploy to aid in his defense against the lawsuit.⁵⁵

Another sticking point with activists is the tendency of "formers," and the groups that have sprung up to promote them, to draw false equivalencies between White supremacist movements and those who resist them—using a "both sides" approach to assign equal blame for political violence between the Far Right and antifascists.

In addition to a baseline expectation that "formers" make amends and share information, said antifascist writer Spencer Sunshine, they must also understand that some issues, such as antifascism or Jewish cultural issues, should be off lim-

its.⁵⁶ Instead, Schoep has started to weigh in on what kinds of antifascist tactics he thinks should be practiced, and castigating the Left for engaging in what he calls their own form of "extremism." On Twitter, he's evoked far-right conspiracy theories in decrying "Marxist" antiracist activists, and said that leftist politics are a turnoff to those he is trying to urge to leave White nationalism.⁵⁷

"Even if I thought Schoep was being real, how he is approaching things is downright insulting," said Jenkins. "He doesn't get to lecture anyone about anything, period."⁵⁸

Now Schoep is trying to counsel other people out of the movement, presumably using the same soft-hand approach that he took to leaving, without requiring tough ideological work, serious conversations, or real accountability.

"Somebody like Jeff Schoep, he spent 30 years in it...he doesn't really know anything else. He's continuing that grift he had there, and just kind of monetized it now," said Picciolini. "I think he really does not want to be a Nazi anymore, but I think he's trying to figure out how to make it being a former Nazi to celebrity."

Lastly, many antifascist activists argue that, while much of the de-radicalization model focuses on trying to dismantle White nationalism one soul at a time, this goal shouldn't come at the cost of community safety and is ultimately no substitute for a structural transformation of society that eradicates White supremacy and White nationalism at its root.

"If you're willing to engage in a year-long emotional connection of extraordinary strength [that it takes to deradicalize White nationalists] ...fine," said Talia Lavin, an author and organizer who tracks the Far Right. But "that's not scalable. What is scalable is saying these sentiments are unacceptable. You cannot show up in my town. You cannot show up in my university."⁵⁹

MOVING ON

"Going into and going out of it was slow and gradual...I can't tell you at what point I started believing this stuff," said Mak Kapetanovic, who picked up White nationalist beliefs as a teenager while browsing message boards like 4Chan.⁶⁰ Today, Picciolini says that he has to deal with a huge number of young people like Kapetanovic who were radicalized in online spaces frequented by the Alt Right.⁶¹ Kapetanovic had come across this milieu when looking to debate people on the Internet and instead stumbled on racist pseudoscientific talking points—about racial intelligence difference or Holocaust denialism—that he didn't understand enough to refute. Gradually, he came to see that these racist allegations are a house of cards: put under even a little scrutiny, the White nationalist manipulation of data and lies crumble. He could no longer stand by the ideas he had adopted, and who he had become.

"When I saw the same rhetoric that I had said or believed... used to justify killing 50 people, I fucking cried," said Kapetanovic, who watched with horror as the "White genocide" conspiracy theories he had bought into were cited as justification for mass shootings at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, that killed 51 people and injured another 40.⁶² Kapetanovic is from a family of Muslim refugees himself, who escaped from the Bosnian genocide in the 1990s. He thought he needed to speak up about what he had experienced joining and leaving the White nationalist movement, so he sent Picciolini an email to offering to volunteer in an effort to help people understand what White nationalists were thinking so that they could be countered more effectively.

"I felt like I had a responsibility to do something about it. And I thought that my story specifically could help people

understand how this happens and hopefully either deter or help people be more informed," said Kapetanovic.⁶³

What many people leaving White nationalism must confront is that many people will never accept them back. The responsibility is on them to try and address the damage they have done, not on those who bore the brunt of that harm. And while it's important for people like Kapetanovic to have access to a pathway out, and people like Picciolini have shown what compassion and redemption can accomplish, it's more important to keep people safe and do what is possible to decimate fascist movements.

"It's hard to explain, because it is kind

believe, particularly when organizations like LUL provide them the prefix of "former" without sufficient rigor or expectations of internal and external work. "Formers are experts in their own biography. That's it...They're not experts about the far-right extremist environment. They're not experts about radicalization," says Daniel Koehler, the founding director of the German Institute on Radicalization and De-Radicalization Studies. Koehler, whose work with German neo-nazis is considered foundational to evidence-based deradicalization programs, says that formers have to make serious attempts at restitution and should not be money-making celebrities, and pro-

There is a challenge here that goes beyond simply asking for denunciation and ideological conversion: the White nationalist movement has committed crimes against the community, and they're not guaranteed forgiveness.

of uncharted territory. What does somebody do to win redemption?" asks Picciolini. "Right now, people want to forgive people who are interested in leaving those movements. But we have to be careful because we have to hold those people to account, and there are different levels of what they have done."

Racists accumulate a debt, not just to the people they harmed directly, but also to the wider world they have made more cruel and dangerous. Paying down that debt isn't—and shouldn't be—easy. And none of this can begin to happen without an act of penance that brings real-world consequences: They have to bring down their former comrades.

"Whatever information that you have, give it," said Katie McHugh, who has continued to share information with reporters and nonprofits to help expose White nationalists. The sincerity of her actions is up for debate, just like it is for every White nationalist who claims to be "out of the movement." As McHugh said, "You don't have to believe my words, just believe my actions."⁶⁴

But many of the actions of allegedly former White nationalists are hard to

grams that center formers who have not even had professional training raise "red flags."⁶⁵

Allowing figures like Heimbach and Schoep—who don't even pretend at a substantial ideological transformation—to re-enter mainstream society without criticism both leaves the community at risk and advertises to potential White nationalist recruits that a clean slate and second chance will always await them no matter what they do.

In November 2021, at least one form of accountability arrived, as both Heimbach and Schoep were found liable in a well-publicized civil lawsuit against them and nearly two-dozen other White nationalists and organizations involved in the violence in Charlottesville in 2017. The \$25 million judgement is enough to potentially bankrupt not only the defendants, but the entire movement, similar to how lawsuits against White Aryan Resistance, the United Klans of America, and Aryan Nations did in the 1980 and '90s.⁶⁶ During the trial it was revealed that Heimbach had sent convicted murderer James Alex Fields a letter calling them "comrades" and praising Fields as a

"martyr for our folk."⁶⁷ While Heimbach argued that he does not really work with fellow defendant Richard Spencer, other testimony showed that Heimbach's Traditionalist Worker Party had clearly acted as a security force and army for the Alt Right leader.

But it shouldn't take a major lawsuit to prevent actors like this from getting a free pass from organizations claiming to "deradicalize" violent bigots. There is a challenge here that goes beyond simply asking for denunciation and ideological conversion: the White nationalist movement has committed crimes against the community, and they're not guaranteed forgiveness. Groups like Light Upon Light offering such a guarantee, and a fast-track to redemption, are instead creating a world where it could be nearly impossible to believe that anyone in that movement is truly reformed.

"Trying to get White supremacists to not be White supremacists, that's a struggle, to be sure," said Heimbach.⁶⁸ That may have been the most honest part of his interview.

A big thank you to Daniel Harper for providing a difficult piece of research support.

Shane Burley is a writer and filmmaker based in Portland, Oregon. He is the author of Why We Fight: Essays on Fascism, Resistance, and Surviving the Apocalypse (AK Press, 2021) and Fascism Today: What It Is and How to End It (AK Press, 2017), and the editor of the forthcoming anthology ¡No pasarán!: Antifascist Dispatches from a World in Crisis. His work is featured at places such as NBC News, The Daily Beast, The Independent, Jacobin, Al Jazeera, Haaretz, Tikkun, The Baffler, Bandcamp Daily, Truthout, and the Oregon Historical Quarterly. He is also the editor of a special issue of the Journal of Social Justice on "Antisemitism in the 21st Century." He is currently working on two books, one on radical approaches to antisemitism and another on the history of antifascism and popular struggle.

ism-revealed-leaked-emails.

2 Hannah Gais, "Emails Reveal Identity of Longtime White Nationalist Propagandist as Onetime Conservative Insider," *The Southern Poverty Law Center*, March 4, 2020, [splcenter.org/hatewatch/2020/03/04/emails-reveal-identity-longtime-white-nationalist-propagandist-onetime-conservative-insider](https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2020/03/04/emails-reveal-identity-longtime-white-nationalist-propagandist-onetime-conservative-insider).

3 Shane Burley, "Total Life Reform," *Political Research Associates*, November 9, 2020, politicalresearch.org/2020/11/09/total-life-reform.

4 Rosie Gray, "A Former Alt-Right Member's Message: Get Out While You Still Can," *Buzzfeed*, May 1st, 2019, buzzfeednews.com/article/rosiegray/katie-mchugh.

5 Author interview with Katie McHugh, February 21, 2020.

6 Rosie Gray, "Emails Link Former Homeland Security Official to White Nationalists," *The Atlantic*, August 28th, 2018, theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/08/emails-link-former-dhs-policy-analyst-to-white-nationalists/568843/.

7 Gray, "Emails link."

8 Shane Burley, "Trump's antifa tweet is right-wing catnip — with potentially troubling consequences," *NBC News*, June 3, 2020, [nbcnews.com/think/opinion/trump-s-antifa-tweet-right-wing-catnip-potentially-troubling-consequences-ncna122686](https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/trump-s-antifa-tweet-right-wing-catnip-potentially-troubling-consequences-ncna122686).

9 Author interview with Christian Picciolini, April 19, 2020.

10 Picciolini no longer has any affiliation with Life After Hate.

11 He outlines this history in his memoir. Christian Picciolini, *White American Youth: My Descent into America's Most Violent Hate Movement—and How I Got Out* (New York City: Hachette Books, 2017).

12 Picciolini, *White American Youth*.

13 Picciolini, *White American Youth*.

14 Email from Christian Picciolini to Shane Burley, February 17, 2020.

15 "National Socialist Movement," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/national-socialist-movement>.

16 Author interview with Christian Picciolini, April 19, 2020.

17 Author interview with Jeff Schoep, February 20, 2020.

18 Tyler Hammel, "Lawsuit plaintiffs say neo-Nazi group continues to withhold evidence," *The Daily Progress*, November 15, 2020, dailyprogress.com/news/state-and-regional/crime-and-courts/lawsuit-plaintiffs-say-neo-nazi-group-continues-to-withhold-evidence-article_82d60d5c-26b1-11eb-8871-9f5f5972c2dc.html.

19 "National Socialist Movement," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/national-socialist-movement>.

20 Author interview with Jeff Schoep, February 20, 2020.

21 Adam Goldman, "Man Suspected of Planning Attack on Missouri Hospital Is Killed, Officials Say," *The New*

York Times, March 25, 2020, [nytimes.com/2020/03/25/us/politics/coronavirus-fbi-shooting.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/25/us/politics/coronavirus-fbi-shooting.html).

22 Author Interview with Jeff Schoep, February 20, 2020.

23 Author Interview with Shannon Martinez, March 14th, 2020.

24 "Jesse Morton Comes Out in Support of Andy Ngo's Kill Lists," *Light Upon Light Upon Light*, January 12, 2020, lightuponlightuponlight.home.blog/2020/01/12/jesse-morton-comes-out-in-support-of-andy-ngo-kill-lists/;

Shane Burley, "March 3, 2021 Reviews Andy Ngo's Unmasked: The Next Phase of the Grift," *Protean Magazine*, March 2, 2021, proteanmag.com/2021/03/03/andy-ngos-antifa-unmasked-the-next-phase-of-the-grift/;

Shane Burley, "We're Being Played," *Commune*, August 1, 2019, communemag.com/were-being-played/;

Shane Burley and Alexander Reid Ross, "I was the target of alt-right death threats across the internet—here's what happened next," *The Independent*, August 15, 2019, [independent.co.uk/voices/alt-right-antifa-death-threats-doxing-quillette-a8966176.html](https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/alt-right-antifa-death-threats-doxing-quillette-a8966176.html);

Shane Burley, "Right-wing media is creating the 'antifa shooter' narrative out of thin air," *Waging Nonviolence*, August 24, 2019, wagingnonviolence.org/2019/08/right-wing-media-creating-antifa-shooter-narrative-out-of-thin-air/;

Arun Gupta, "Portland's Andy Ngo Is the Most Dangerous Grifter in America," *Jacobin*, August 16, 2019, [jacobinmag.com/2019/08/andy-ngo-right-wing-antifa-protest-portland-bigotry](https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/08/andy-ngo-right-wing-antifa-protest-portland-bigotry).

25 "Jeff Schoep speaking at Veritas University," *Facebook*, July 4, 2020, [facebook.com/watch/?v=255222875564359](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=255222875564359).

26 "Supporter of anti-Muslim policies Raheel Raza speaks at Minnesota State Capitol," *The Southern Poverty Law Center*, January 29, 2018, [splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/01/29/supporter-anti-muslim-policies-raheel-raza-speaks-minnesota-state-capitol](https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/01/29/supporter-anti-muslim-policies-raheel-raza-speaks-minnesota-state-capitol).

27 Katherine Burgess, "Muslims name 37 Groups That Fuel Islamophobia," *Washington Post*, September 19, 2013, [washingtonpost.com/national/on-faith/muslims-name-37-groups-that-fuel-islamophobia/2013/09/19/5d529c24-2166-11e3-ad1a-1a919f2ed890_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-faith/muslims-name-37-groups-that-fuel-islamophobia/2013/09/19/5d529c24-2166-11e3-ad1a-1a919f2ed890_story.html);

"Clarion Project," *Center for American-Islamic Relations*, October 10, 2017, <http://www.islamophobia.org/islamophobic-organizations/55-clarion-project.html>.

28 Morton passed away in December 2021 at the age of 43.

29 Lou Dobbs Tonight, "Ryan Mauro on 'Lou Dobbs Tonight' about Islamist Groups in America," *YouTube*, January 28, 2015, [youtube.com/watch?v=84p9hk-gDko](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=84p9hk-gDko).

30 M. Kelly, "The Mainstream Pill: How Media and Academia Help Incels Rebrand," *The Public Eye*, Spring/Summer 2021, 8; "Asking Incels: An Insiders Account of the Involuntary Celibate Community," *International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism*, January 27th, 2021, <https://www.icsvs.org/asking-incels-an-insiders-account-of-the-involuntary-celibate-community/>.

31 Brett Barrouquere, "Two Prominent Neo-Nazis Recant, but Their Actions Sow Doubts," May 14, 2020, *The Southern Poverty Law Center*, [splcenter.org/hatewatch/2020/05/14/two-prominent-neo-nazis-recant-their-actions-sow-doubts](https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2020/05/14/two-prominent-neo-nazis-recant-their-actions-sow-doubts).

32 Waffien Haus, "We Eat Beefsteak Again with Matt Hamback," October 2019.

33 Quoted by Luke Barnes, "Leaked chatroom transcripts reveal far-right group's violent ideology," *ThinkProgress*, April 6, 2018, archive.thinkprogress.org/chatroom-transcripts-reveal-far-right-violent-ideology-91836c8990cf/.

34 While anti-Zionism is in no way synonymous with antisemitism, it is often used as a code for antisemitic ideas on the Far Right whereby Zionism is portrayed as an international Jewish conspiracy with tentacles reaching far beyond the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

35 @AntiFashGordon, "'Yeah, fascism is bad, but only because it involved collaboration with the capitalists, also, I'm still a raging antisemite who uses the same coded language I always did to express that.'" --Matthew Heimbach, who *Light Upon Light* is calling "reformed," *Twitter*, April 2, 2020, <https://twitter.com/AntiFashGordon/status/1245725146708619264>.

36 Author interview with Matthew Heimbach, June 1, 2021.

37 Take a Walk on the Right Side, "Episode 1 – Making the future face of organized hate in the United States," *Spotify*, April 2020, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/31rGcRUUqedPQqVF-Ph724?si=3e638b49ca5a441e&nd=1>.

38 Take a Walk on the Right Side, "Episode 2 – Charlottesville: Unite the Right?" *Spotify*, April 2020, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/oS1hAxvW3qgEVYVF-nDE2Da?si=770f1e163ad64eaa&nd=1>.

39 Take a Walk on the Right Side, "Episode 2."

40 Matthew Heimbach, "Where I'm Going," unpublished letter from Matthew Heimbach to *Light Upon Light*.

41 Email from Jesse Morton to Matthew Heimbach, February 17, 2020.

42 Author interview with Molly Conger, March 5, 2021.

43 Author interview with Samantha Kutner, October 29, 2021; Burley, "We're Being Played."

44 Shane Burley and Alexander Reid Ross, "I was the target of alt-right death threats across the internet—here's what happened next," *The Independent*, August 15, 2019, [independent.co.uk/voices/alt-right-antifa-death-threats-doxing-quillette-a8966176.html](https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/alt-right-antifa-death-threats-doxing-quillette-a8966176.html).

45 Author interview with Samantha Kutner, October 29, 2021.

46 Author interview with Matthew Heimbach, June 30, 2021.

47 One People's Project/Idavox, "Meet Gabriel Diaz!" *YouTube*, May 2, 2016, [youtube.com/watch?v=4BuqwE_Glww](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BuqwE_Glww).

48 Author interview with Daryle Lamont Jenkins, April 4, 2020.

49 Brett Barrouquere, "Jeff Schoep Sheds Neo-Nazi Past but Stays Loyal with Lawyer's Maneuvers," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, September 11, 2019, [splcenter.org/hatewatch/2019/09/11/jeff-schoep-sheds-neo-nazi-past-stays-loyal-lawyers-maneuvers](https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2019/09/11/jeff-schoep-sheds-neo-nazi-past-stays-loyal-lawyers-maneuvers).

loyal-lawyers-maneuvers.

50 Miguel Torres, "Neo-Nazi leader arrested in Chandler on suspicion of threatening to kill Black man," *AZ Central*, April 20, 2021, [azcentral.com/story/news/local/chandler/2021/04/20/burt-colucci-neo-nazi-leader-arrested-threatened-kill-chandler-man/7307594002/](https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/chandler/2021/04/20/burt-colucci-neo-nazi-leader-arrested-threatened-kill-chandler-man/7307594002/).

51 His biography says that he left the movement in "early 2019," yet that is obviously before the October date where he was warning Colucci.

52 Elizabeth Sines, et al. vs. Jason Kessler, et al, Civil Action No. 3:17-cv-00072-NKM, 9. Complete document at: <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/virginia/vawd-ce/3:2017cv00072/109120/1106/>.

53 Parallel Networks, "Light Upon Light Shape Shifters—Jeff Schoep," *YouTube*, November 3, 2019, [youtube.com/watch?v=vV7_SoLLYIU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vV7_SoLLYIU).

54 Quoted in Barrouquere, "Jeff Schoep Sheds Neo-Nazi Past."

55 Sines v. Kessler

56 Author interview with Spencer Sunshine, April 4, 2020.

57 @IGD_News, "Former neo-Nazi leader + current 'Light Upon Light' motivational grifter Jeff Schoep, who refuses to turn in Unite the Right evidence because he 'dropped his phone in the toilet,' currently on a roll promoting far-Right click-bait and 'ANTIFA' conspiracy theories," *Twitter*, June 30, 2020, https://twitter.com/IGD_News/status/1277888523673182208?s=20..

58 Author interview with Daryle Lamont Jenkins, April 4, 2020.

59 Bad Faith, "Punching Nazis vs. Deradicalization w/ Talia Lavin," *YouTube*, September 6, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=raHlk4J6VO-U&t=434s>.

60 Author interview with Mak Kapetanovic, March 3, 2020.

61 Author interview with Christian Picciolini, April 19, 2020.

62 Author interview with Mak Kapetanovic, March 3, 2020.

63 Author interview with Mak Kapetanovic, March 3, 2020.

64 Author interview with Katie McHugh, February 21, 2020.

65 Author interview with Daniel Koehler, December 9, 2021.

66 Neil MacFarquhar, "Jury Finds Rally Organizers Responsible for Charlottesville Violence," *The New York Times*, November 23, 2021, [nytimes.com/2021/11/23/us/charlottesville-rally-verdict.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/23/us/charlottesville-rally-verdict.html);

"Why Lawsuits Are Not Enough to Stop the Far Right," *Truthout*, December 7, 2017, [truthout.org/articles/why-lawsuits-are-not-enough-to-stop-the-far-right/](https://www.truthout.org/articles/why-lawsuits-are-not-enough-to-stop-the-far-right/);

Ellie Silverman, "Neo-Nazi told leader of group at deadly 2017 Charlottesville rally: 'We're all doing it together,'" *Washington Post*, November 4, 2021, [washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/11/04/charlottesville-law-suit-nazis-heimbach-trial/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/11/04/charlottesville-law-suit-nazis-heimbach-trial/);

68 Author interview with Matthew Heimbach, June 1, 2021.

The Art of Activism: An Interview with Cover Artist Art Studio Agrafka



Copyright: Art Studio Agrafka

About the art:

The Illustration “Missing Home” was created after the war started in Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022. More than 50% of Ukrainian children according to UNICEF have become refugees since that day. Millions moved from their houses abroad or to other regions of Ukraine seeking shelter from Russia committing genocide of Ukrainian people. So we all, children and adults, must remember how strongly we love our home, our family, how strongly connected we are with each other, how we suffered, how we cried, how we fought and how we won, how we were hurt and how we healed. We have to work with our memory, to remember who we are.

About the artists:

Romana Romanyshyn and Andriy Lesiv are book authors, designers and illustrators, members of PEN Ukraine. Both were born in Ukraine in 1984, and now live and work in Lviv. After graduating from the Lviv National Academy of Arts both co-founded Studio Agrafka, where they collaborate and create illustrated books for children and adults. Agrafka duo received a number of accolades for their work, among them are Bologna Ragazzi Award (2014, 2015 - mentions, 2018 - winner), Premio Andersen (2019), Plaque and Honorary Mention of the Biennial of Illustration in Bratislava (2017, 2012), NAMI Concours Award (Green Island and Purple Island Awards - 2019, Green Island Award - 2021), Gold (2020) and Silver (2021) of the European Design Awards, Bronze medal and Honorary Appreciation of the Stiftung Buchkunst concours “The best book design from all over the world” (2019 and 2022), Appreciations and Third Winner of Sharjah Children’s Reading Festival (2015, 2016, 2022), Global illustration Award (2016, 2017), White Ravens list (2013, 2014, 2016, 2021) and others.

**POLITICAL
RESEARCH
ASSOCIATES**

Political Research Associates (PRA) is a think tank devoted to challenging the Right and advancing social justice. Visit our website, www.politicalresearch.org, to access past issues of *The Public Eye*, connect with us through social media, and donate. You’ll also find in-depth reports, web-only features, and our archive. Need to renew or purchase a subscription? Go to politicalresearch.org/subscribe. Call 617.666.5300 or email us at contact@politicalresearch.org for more information.

Your support makes *The Public Eye* possible. Subscribe and donate today!