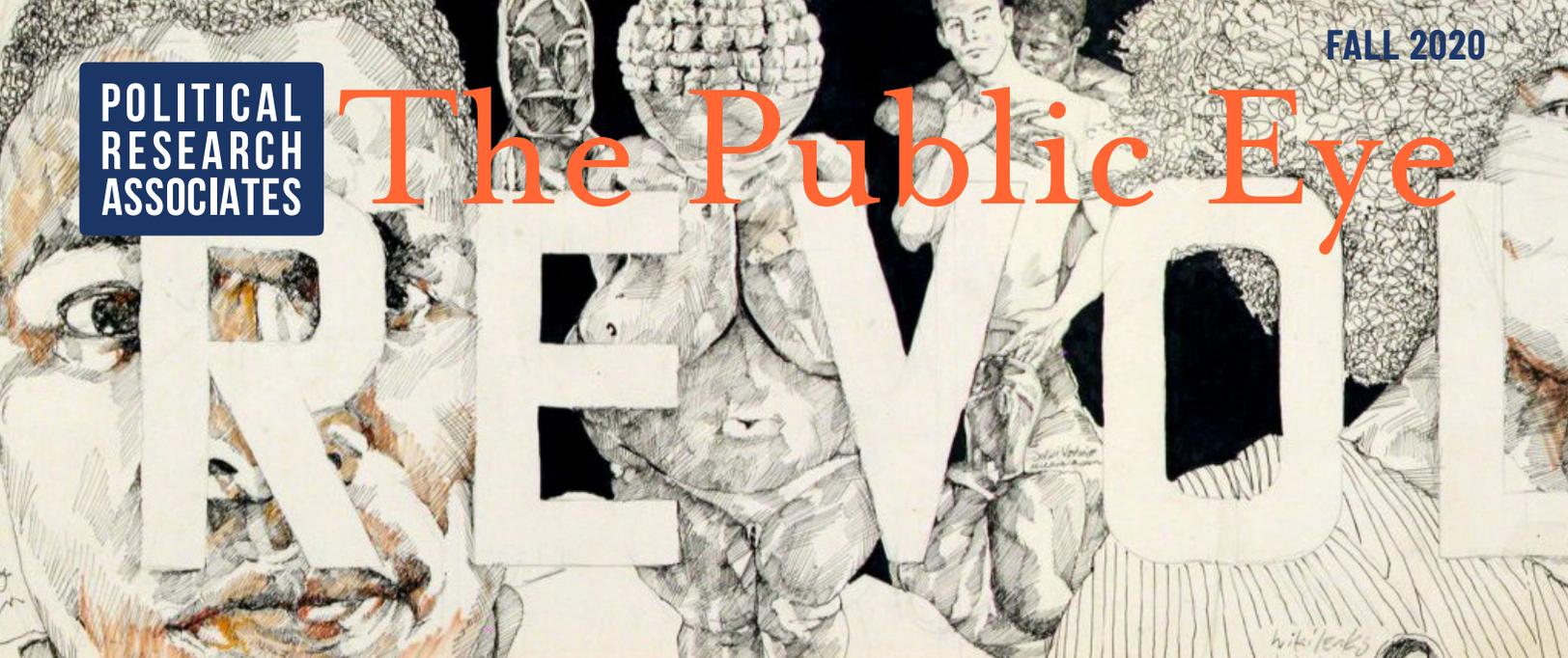


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# The Public Eye



Book Review: *Spectres of Fascism* • Could Anti-Government Militias Become Pro-State Paramilitaries?  
No Sanctuary: Anti-Abortion "Abolitionists" Go to City Hall • Conservative, Christian, Corporate: COVID-19 Opportunism and Betsy DeVos's Education Agenda  
Total Life Reform: The Real Consequences of the Far Right's Self-Help Grift

We're closing this issue of *The Public Eye* on the eve of Election Day. Whatever this week will bring, Political Research Associates will continue to bring sharp, relevant analysis and insight to the trends shaping our country and world.

In our book review (pg. 3) this issue, **Matthew N. Lyons reads *Spectres of Fascism***, a collection of essays considering the rise of right-wing authoritarian and populist movements across the world, from the U.S. and Hungary to India and the Philippines. "One of the challenges in trying to understand fascism is that it touches on so many different aspects of human experience," writes Lyons, "from the brutality of mass imprisonment and killing to the pageantry of a political rally; from the calculations of geopolitics to the intimacies of family life."

In a piece encompassing original data research, "**Could Anti-Government Militias Become Pro-State Paramilitaries?**" (pg. 5), Jaclyn Fox and Carolyn Gallaher look at the concerning possibility of overlap and collaboration between various sectors on the far-right and the Trump administration. While militia movements have traditionally defined themselves in opposition to government, this year has shown a worrying trend of these groups' potential alignment with the state—"engaging in extra-judicial violence states desire but can't or won't formally sanction." As Fox and Gallaher write, "By embracing Trump, the new generation of militias has accepted, however tacitly, that the power of the federal government, in the 'right' hands, may deliver bigger rewards."

Cloe Cooper and Tina Vasquez team up for our next feature, "**No Sanctuary: Anti-Abortion 'Abolitionists' Go to City Hall**" (pg. 13), to look at the trend of anti-abortion advocates engaging in hyper-local activism in support of abortion "sanctuary cities." In states across the country, activists co-opting the legacy of both anti-slavery activists and the immigrants' rights movement are lobbying for municipal and county-level ordinances that purport to criminalize abortion locally. While for the most part, these ordinances are still largely symbolic, they nonetheless have significant repercussions both locally and nationally.

In "**Conservative, Christian, Corporate: COVID-19 Opportunism and Betsy DeVos's Education Agenda**" (pg. 18), Alex DiBranco dives deep into the ways that Trump Secretary of Education DeVos has taken advantage of the pandemic to advance her career-long goal of school privatization and taxpayer support for religious education. As DiBranco writes, "Since her deeply contested confirmation hearings, DeVos has been criticized for incompetence and ignorance regarding the public education system. But this lens obscures the extent to which DeVos's decisions as secretary are less inept bungling than intentional right-wing strategy."

Finally, in "**Total Life Reform: The Real Consequences of the Far Right's Self-Help Grift**" (pg. 25), Shane Burley delivers an in-depth report on Operation Werewolf, an entrepreneurial lifestyle brand created by the co-founder of the far-right pagan group Wolves of Vinland, which uses a self-help model to radicalize men into White supremacist politics. This "Amway for ethno-nationalists" has developed a following among various intersecting subcultures, reflecting "an intentional strategy of post-war fascist circles to decontextualize far-right politics as cultural and artistic—a means of influencing culture and identity more than immediate politics, with the hope of changing politics further down the line."

In advance of Election Day, PRA published a memo online, "Paramilitaries at the Polls: What to Expect Around the 2020 Elections," with key takeaways and thoughts on how to prepare for far-right militancy. Our Winter issue, forthcoming in January, will be a special post-election issue, looking forward to the various movements and themes that will be important in the coming months.

In the meantime, as always, we will be publishing fresh research, reports, and analysis online, so be sure to visit us at [politicalresearch.org](http://politicalresearch.org).

Thank you,  
Kathryn Joyce

**POLITICAL  
RESEARCH  
ASSOCIATES**

THE PUBLIC EYE  
QUARTERLY

PUBLISHER  
Tarso Luís Ramos

EDITOR  
Kathryn Joyce

COVER ART  
Shea Justice

PRINTING  
Park Press Printers

The Public Eye is published by  
Political Research Associates

Tarso Luís Ramos, *EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR*

Kevin Chinn, *OPERATIONS COORDINATOR*

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Jan V. Hardisty, Ph.D.

1310 Broadway, Suite 201  
Somerville, MA 02144-1837  
Tel: 617.666.5300

[contact@politicalresearch.org](mailto:contact@politicalresearch.org)  
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All rights reserved. ISSN 0275-9322  
ISSUE 103

[www.politicalresearch.org](http://www.politicalresearch.org)

Book Review  
***Spectres of Fascism***

One of the challenges in trying to understand fascism is that it touches on so many different aspects of human experience, from the brutality of mass imprisonment and killing to the pageantry of a political rally; from the calculations of geopolitics to the intimacies of family life. *Spectres of Fascism: Historical, Theoretical and International Perspectives* (London: Pluto Press, 2020) approaches this challenge by taking an interdisciplinary approach. Edited by Samir Gandesha, a scholar of Frankfurt School critical theory—a dynamic school of radical thought that coalesced in the 1930s—the collection takes inspiration from that tradition in two respects. First, the book follows the Frankfurt School’s recognition that analysis of class struggle and crisis in capitalism is only part of understanding fascism’s rise, and that an analysis of subjective factors, such as culture and psychology, is also needed. Second, like the school’s organizational home, the Institute for Social Research, the book assembles scholarship from many different fields, with contributors representing political science, philosophy, economics, sociology, anthropology, law, history, psychoanalysis, and aesthetics.

*Spectres of Fascism* grows out of the lectures and discussions in a year-long “free school” of the same title that Gandesha organized in 2017 as director of Simon Fraser University’s Institute for the Humanities. The collection seeks to make sense of the recent upsurge of right-wing authoritarian populist movements, parties, and governments in countries as varied as the United States, Italy, Hungary, India, Brazil, Turkey, and the Phil-



ippines. (See the Winter/Spring 2020 “international” issue of *The Public Eye* to read more about some of these countries.) In the introduction, Gandesha argues that today’s authoritarian populist Right represents not a simple return to fascism as it emerged in Europe in the 1920s and ’30s, but a reworking of fascist elements in new forms and under new conditions. For example, while classical fascism attacked liberal democracy head on, contemporary fascism erodes or suffocates it gradually from within. And while 1930s fascism emerged as a counter-revolutionary response to mass working-class radicalism in an era of rival colonial empires, Gandesha argues

that today’s fascism is shaped by other factors, such as the dominance of finance capital, automation, climate change, and international mass migration.

Some of the book’s range of disciplinary approaches can be seen in the three essays that I consider to be its strongest, at least from the standpoint of helping us understand today’s authoritarian Right. In “The Outsider as Insider: Steve Bannon, Fourth Turnings, and the Neofascist Threat,” philosopher Joan Braune details the far-right ideological influences that have helped shape former Trump administration strategist Steve Bannon. Notable among them are the apocalyptic mysticism of the Traditionalist School (whose ranks included neofascist philosopher Julius Evola) and Jean Raspail’s racist novel *The Camp of the Saints*. The title of Braune’s essay highlights her argument that Bannon’s populism is rhetorical cover for an elitist, anti-egalitarian worldview.

In contrast to Braune’s ideological focus, Gandesha’s own essay, “A Composite of King Kong and a Suburban Barber’: Adorno’s ‘Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,’” explores the social psychology of fascism. As Gandesha relates, Adorno argued that adulation of and identification with the leader caused people to give up their individuality and even their interest in self-preservation. (Think mask-less Trump rallies in the age of COVID-19.) Adorno emphasized the role of mass-produced culture (at the time, radio and film) in promoting “the authoritarian personality” by teaching people to be passive—a dynamic Gandesha sees extended in an era of social media algorithms and fake news.

Going beyond Adorno, Gandesha also argues that neoliberalism has sharpened the contradictions that make fascism appealing, by increasing people's sense of individual responsibility for their own success, while depressing wages and slashing social services so that the vast majority of people have fewer resources with which to realize their individual goals. The resulting guilt, frustration, and anger can be readily exploited by populist agitators and channeled into

benefit big business. While many studies of right-wing populism focus on its exclusionary dimension (*us versus them*), the Gudavarthys focus here on its efforts to forge political unity among disparate groups with conflicting interests—in this case, Indians divided by caste and class.

Unfortunately, the remaining essays in the collection are less useful for illuminating the threat of fascism or right-wing authoritarianism today. Some are strong essays that nonetheless tell us

## **While classical fascism attacked liberal democracy head on, contemporary fascism erodes or suffocates it gradually from within.**

racist scapegoating and exclusionism. There's a lot in Gandesha's essay that speaks to our current situation, but the essay also points to questions that Gandesha does not address. For example, how do we parse the social psychology of neoliberalism to understand its effects not just on "the vast majority" of people, but on specific groups within society? And how do we square the charismatic role of the traditional populist agitator with the fundamentally decentralized (and often anonymous) nature of internet meme activism?

Authoritarian populism's roots in the contradictions of neoliberalism also figure centrally in the third essay I want to highlight, "Populism, Fascism, Neoliberalism: Theorizing Contemporary India," by political scientist Ajay Gudavarthy and economist Vijay Gudavarthy. While Braune's focus is ideological and Gandesha's psychological, the Gudavarthys foreground class dynamics and economic policy in addressing the question: How does Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist government manufacture consent? They trace how neoliberal policies of deregulation and privatization have intensified rural inequality and displaced millions of tenant farmers into migrant labor, disenfranchising them and disrupting their social ties. Hindu nationalism, with its fascistic vision of a unified and reempowered Hindu community, speaks to these grievances, while bolstering policies that feed inequality and disproportionately

more about the preconditions for studying fascism than about fascism itself. For example, in "Which Came First, Fascism or Misogyny? Reading Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*," media theorist Laura U. Marks rightly urges us to examine fascism's relationship with misogyny in historical rather than essentialist terms, but she doesn't offer any guidance on what such an approach would tell us. In "Decolonizing the 'Contemporary Left': An Indigenous Reflection on Justice in the New World Order," legal scholar Patricia M. Barkaskas argues that the Canadian state and legal system are built on and deeply connected with the dispossession and violence of settler colonialism. Her essay is a powerful indictment of liberal democracy and describes a key part of the context in which North American fascist politics develop. But while Barkaskas notes in passing that settler colonial violence is related to fascism, she offers no specifics about how a right-wing authoritarian version of settler colonialism might differ from a liberal democratic one.

The collection would also be stronger if it included greater attention to right-wing voices. Only a third of the essays cite any works by current-day Rightists. That may be fine if you're writing about the socioeconomic impact of neoliberalism, but not if you're trying to understand far-right ideas. In "The Future of Futurism: From the Avant-Garde to the Neo-Avant-Garde, or, How to Imagine Communism by Other Means," art historian Jaleh

Mansoor draws directly on the words of F.T. Marinetti and other Futurist artists to thoughtfully explore the complexities of Futurism's relationship with fascism in the interwar period. Unfortunately, in the last part of the essay, Mansoor argues that Futurism can help us understand the current-day Alt Right but does consider what Alt Rightists themselves have to say on the subject—despite the fact that one Alt Right website, *Counter-Currents*, alone has published scores of articles on Futurism.

Right-wing voices, of course, need to be placed in context. In "Are the Alt-Right and French New Right Kindred Movements?," political scientist Tamir Bar-On generalizes about the Alt Right almost entirely from a close reading of one document, Richard Spencer's 2017 manifesto, "What It Means To Be Alt-Right." The result captures some key points, such as the Alt Right's antisemitism, desire for ethno-states, and use of metapolitical strategy. Yet Bar-On's approach exaggerates Spencer's role within the movement and presents a misleading portrait of its political activity, by focusing on conventional propaganda while saying nothing about the Alt Right's pioneering use of internet memes and online harassment campaigns. These shortcomings are to some extent mitigated by the fact that other essays in the collection highlight the movement's reliance on social media and memes such as Pepe the Frog.

*Spectres of Fascism* starts from a valuable basic concept: to illuminate Rightist authoritarianism by approaching it from multiple angles, perspectives, and disciplines. It's a success for this vision that the book's best contributions explore dramatically different dimensions of fascistic politics (ideological, psychological, and socioeconomic). Yet the concept could have been realized more fully if more of the book's essays focused on its central topic squarely and in depth.

*Matthew N. Lyons has been writing about right-wing politics for over 25 years. His work focuses on the interplay between right-wing movements and systems of oppression, and responses to these movements by leftists, liberals, and the state.*

# Could Anti-Government Militias Become Pro-State Paramilitaries?



Armed militia members march next to a WWG1WGA flag, a common identifier of QAnon believers, at the United We Stand & Patriots March for America, St. Paul, Minnesota, September 12, 2020. Credit: Fibonacci Blue/Flickr.

In 2020 millions of Americans peacefully stood up against racism and police violence in protests across the country. These protests are remarkable not only for their size and duration, but their geographic scope, ranging from big cities to small hamlets.<sup>1</sup>

However, a corresponding burst of mobilization has also occurred on the Far Right, especially among groups with virulently anti-government views. This energy has manifested in Second Amendment rallies (some at state capitols, where protesters have intimidated lawmakers with military-grade weapons), demonstrations against government imposed COVID-19 lockdowns, and efforts to dis-

rupt and sow chaos at Black Lives Matter (BLM) rallies.<sup>2</sup> Many of these groups are new and ready for violence. The Boogaloo Bois, a loose network that first appeared in 2018, aims to incite (or at least welcomes) a civil war<sup>3</sup> that will bring down the government.<sup>4</sup> In neonazi and White nationalist circles, newly empowered accelerationists are trying to start a race war. QAnon, a movement that began on 4chan in 2017, believes “deep state” enemies in the federal bureaucracy are trying to overthrow President Trump. But, like QAnon, many of these movements waffle between denouncing the government (or “deep state”) and cheering on President Trump’s shows of federal force

at the border and in the streets.

This tension between hostility and support for the federal government is also showing up in the more established wing of the anti-government movement—the traditional militia or Patriot movement<sup>5</sup>—as two recent events make clear. In August 2017, several militias attended the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. Their attendance was remarkable not only because militias have historically eschewed overt racism,<sup>6</sup> but also because they’ve traditionally opposed the kind of strong central government White nationalists believe is necessary to build a White ethno-state. A year later, Ammon Bundy, who led the 2016

militia takeover of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon, criticized President Trump's depiction of Central American asylum seekers as criminals.<sup>7</sup> Bundy argued that migrants were protecting their families from violence and criticized the federal government's aggressive policing against them. While Bundy's critique was consistent with the Patriot movement's suspicion of federal police, he was widely condemned by other militias on social media. After receiving death threats, Bundy announced he was quitting the movement and said of his critics: "The vast majority seemed to hang on to what seemed like hate, and fear, and almost warmongering."<sup>8</sup>

These developments raise the possibility that some anti-government factions could morph into pro-Trump paramili-

White ethnostate; and two, by acting as enforcers for Donald Trump and allied Republican politicians. These pathways aren't mutually exclusive, but they are distinct, with different tradeoffs for militias and their members.

After the Unite the Right rally, many commentators speculated that the first pathway was already occurring,<sup>12</sup> but our analysis suggests that's unlikely. White nationalist groups reject militias' anti-government views and openly mock their military skills and masculinity; in turn, militias reject White nationalists' racist ideology. Our analysis indicates that the second path—militias becoming enmeshed with the government—is much more probable. Militia members appear primed to support President Trump with violence, though we have no evidence

## **Militia violence is nothing to scoff at, but the violence of groups working on behalf of the state under Trump would likely increase in scope.**

taries. The U.S. has little recent<sup>9</sup> history with paramilitaries—a term we use in its narrowest sense, as non-state armed groups using violence to support the state (or a particular regime that holds state power)—but they are a scourge across the world. Unlike guerillas and insurgents, who fight the state, paramilitaries share weapons, intelligence, and resources with the government and engage in extra-judicial violence states desire but can't or won't formally sanction. In return, paramilitaries are allowed to prey on civilians and co-opt local political structures—extorting businesses, bribing mayors, and threatening bureaucrats, among other behaviors.<sup>10</sup>

To explore whether and how anti-government groups could transition into pro-Trump paramilitaries, we looked at recently leaked online chats related to traditional<sup>11</sup> militia groups. (We didn't look at newer groups because they were either too recently formed to track or still consolidating at the time of our analysis.) What we found indicates that militias could become paramilitaries in two ways: one, by making common cause with White nationalists who want to use violence to create an authoritarian,

yet they are involved in coordinated planning with the Trump administration, or each other.<sup>13</sup>

A shift toward paramilitarism could pose significant danger. Militia violence is nothing to scoff at, but the violence of groups working on behalf of the state under Trump would likely increase in scope. In his seminal book, *Fascists*,<sup>14</sup> Michael Mann argues that fascism contains three elements: organic nationalism, radical statism, and paramilitarism. He asserts that paramilitarism is what enabled European fascism in the 1930s and '40s to move from the realm of ideology to violence, from antisemitism to the final solution. If today's militias begin to work with the U.S. state, they could be used as agents of repression. And their de facto independence means they could use tactics that are, as yet, off-limits to the state.

### **DIVIDES IN THE NEW RIGHT COALITION AND AN OPENING FOR THE FAR RIGHT**

The New Right coalition of White evangelicals, pro-business elites, and neo-conservatives<sup>15</sup> solidified in the run-up to the 1980 presidential election and has underpinned Republican electoral successes for nearly 40 years since.

Part of the New Right's success lay in its ability to exclude conspiracy-minded elements of the so-called Old Right, notably paleoconservative groups like the John Birch Society.<sup>16</sup> New Right leaders embraced free-trade and foreign intervention and refused to publicly traffic in antisemitism, as some paleoconservatives had. Those paleoconservatives who remained in the party did so largely because of their shared opposition to Communism.

But unity among conservatives began to fray in the early 2000s. The Iraq War deepened antagonisms between the party's neoconservatives, who saw the war as a moral imperative; realists, who believed it threatened U.S. interests; and reemergent paleoconservatives, who opposed it on isolationist grounds.<sup>17</sup> The GOP establishment's support of bailouts for big banks after the 2008 housing crisis exacerbated divides between business elites and grassroots conservatives in the GOP who saw them as Wall Street handouts.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, evangelicals grew weary of President George W. Bush's style of compassionate conservatism,<sup>19</sup> and their growing antipathy toward Islam put them at odds with neoconservatives, who believed the U.S. should try to work with "moderate Muslims," who support Western values, to defeat "radical Muslims."<sup>20</sup>

Cracks in the New Right coalition<sup>21</sup> allowed the Far Right to make plays to control the center and its key institutions. They primaried establishment conservatives, commandeered right-wing think tanks like the Heritage Foundation,<sup>22</sup> hijacked Tea Party affiliates, and shifted their focus to immigration<sup>23</sup>—all helping cement the power of once marginal views within the GOP establishment.

### **SHIFTS WITHIN THE MILITIA MOVEMENT**

In many respects, militias are the least likely part of the far-right ecosystem to morph into paramilitaries, given that most see the federal government as illegitimate and some have even tried to destroy it, as Timothy McVeigh did when he detonated a truck filled with explosives in front of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995, killing 168 people. And militias have threat-

ened government employees; during the 2016 Malheur standoff, the Bundy militia's supporters were accused of intimidating Forest Service workers.

Militias have also tried to thwart federal institutions in non-violent ways. During the 1980s farm crisis, Sovereign citizens<sup>24</sup> and nascent militias filed thousands of illegal liens in an effort to flood the court system with bogus paperwork that would impede farm foreclosures.<sup>25</sup> After the 2008 financial crisis, Sovereign citizens used similar tactics to stop foreclosures on homes.<sup>26</sup>

However, since the '90s, militias have been forced to reckon with two internal dynamics that complicate their attachment to anti-government ideology: latent antisemitism and racism and growing partisanship within militia ranks.

## RACISM AND ANTISEMITISM

While most anti-government militias publicly reject overt White supremacy—in the movement's rhetoric *all* citizens are sovereign—its views on the evils of government are based on antisemitic and White nationalist conspiracism. The movement's identified enemy, the New World Order (NWO), is an updated, coded version of an older conspiracist theory

have largely remained silent when Black people are arrested or fatally shot, as Philando Castile was, while carrying permitted concealed weapons.<sup>30</sup> And in the wake of George Floyd's murder this May, several militias attended BLM protests in support of police, and some engaged in online and in-person intimidation of marchers.<sup>31</sup>

The resulting impression is that militias' concern about government overreach extends only to the country's White, Christian citizens.

## POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND PARTISANSHIP

During the 1980s farm crisis, Sovereign citizens and militia groups took figurative and literal aim at politicians across the political spectrum. They were angry at Ronald Reagan, a Republican, but also local sheriffs of all parties.<sup>32</sup> By the '90s, however, militia groups began focusing on Democrats. The sieges at Ruby Ridge and Waco, which occurred or were adjudicated during Bill Clinton's presidency, created the initial impetus. In the aftermath, militia leaders began tentatively working with Republicans and Blue Dog Democrats.<sup>33</sup> In 1994 Idaho militias threw their support behind Republican Helen Chenoweth's congress-

Act. Although some militias organized against the Patriot Act,<sup>37</sup> it never became a rallying cry that significantly boosted movement numbers. Moreover, militia members who were Vietnam veterans often supported the War on Terror, or at least those who fought in it, in recognition of their own experiences. They saw the commanders who'd sent them to Vietnam as feckless, and the civilians who'd scorned them on their return as unpatriotic.<sup>38</sup> For them, supporting soldiers was a way to right a historical wrong.

During the Obama presidency, militias began to ramp up active support for Republicans, especially the populist wing of the party. Many adherents joined Tea Party affiliates<sup>39</sup> and used them to amplify<sup>40</sup> conspiracist claims such as birtherism and the Aztlan/"reconquista" plan—a supposed plot to reconquer U.S. states that once were part of Mexico.<sup>41</sup> They also joined efforts to encourage primary challenges to moderate Republicans in the 2010 elections.<sup>42</sup> And returning veterans, who claimed they worried about the government invoking martial law, started new militias or took the helm of existing ones.<sup>43</sup>

More recently, some militias have offered to provide security to Republican officials. In 2019 the Democratic-controlled Oregon Senate considered a cap-and-trade bill designed to limit greenhouse emissions. To prevent the quorum necessary to vote, 11 members of the Republican Senate delegation fled to Idaho.<sup>44</sup> When Oregon's Democratic governor sent state troopers across the border to bring them back, Oregon militias promised to head to Idaho to protect the senators.<sup>45</sup> (The senators ultimately returned when it became clear Democrats couldn't pass the bill.)

Militias' growing partisanship is reflected in the ebb and flow of active groups across four presidencies. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) estimates, for example, that there were 858 and 1,360 active Patriot groups at the midpoint of the Clinton and Obama presidencies, respectively. During the Bush and Trump presidencies, the numbers were 156 and 576.<sup>46</sup>

## **For a movement that cut its teeth on hating the federal government and suspicion of executive power, the uniformity of support for Trump in our data represents a major aberration for the movement.**

about Jewish domination, the so-called Zionist Occupied Government (ZOG). Instead of accusing Jews of attempting to create a one-world government, militias use terms like international elite<sup>27</sup> or globalists<sup>28</sup> to identify so-called NWO architects.

Similarly, militias have rarely defended Latinx and Black victims of government aggression. Few militias condemned New York City's stop-and-frisk policy, which targeted young men of color, or police violence in Ferguson, Missouri. During the 2015 Ferguson protests, the local Oath Keepers chapter came to nightly protests to "protect journalists," not Black protesters.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, militias

sional campaign. Once elected, Chenoweth returned the favor by investigating conspiracist militia theories about UN black helicopters at Ruby Ridge.<sup>34</sup> In Kentucky, militia members worked with Republicans and Blue Dog Democrats in the General Assembly to write and pass militia-friendly legislation, including the state's concealed carry law and a resolution prohibiting UN troop maneuvers in the state.<sup>35</sup>

During George W. Bush's presidency, militias were fairly muted, despite two wars and the intensification of federal policing,<sup>36</sup> most notably the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the passage of the Patriot

## MEASURING PATHWAYS TO PARAMILITARISM

To assess the likelihood of two pathways to paramilitarism in the traditional militia movement—militias allying with White nationalists seeking an ethno-state, or their becoming enforcers for Trump and his allies—we looked at messages on various online forums used by both militias and White nationalists. Two forums, Discord and Iron March, contained private discussions between users, which were accessed and shared online by the independent media collectives Unicorn Riot and Bellingcat.<sup>47</sup> The third forum is public: outward-facing websites for two militia groups, the Oath Keepers and the III Percenters.

The majority of our data is from Discord and Iron March, but we added the militia websites after discovering that militias didn't engage each other as frequently, or in the same way, as White nationalist groups did within these forums (something that may reflect generational differences). While White nationalists engaged in raucous text-based conversations, militias mostly just shared articles or posted memes but rarely engaged in text-based conversations.<sup>48</sup>

### Iron March

The now-defunct forum Iron March began in 2011 as a meeting place for international fascists to discuss ideology and the ideal state. By 2017, civil debate was replaced with a fixed, forum-wide ideology based in racism, misogyny, antisemitism, homophobia, and militarization. Over its six-year lifespan, Iron March users produced more than 195,000 posts and comments across 7,097 unique threads. Of those threads, approximately 82 contained posts and comments deemed relevant to the traditional U.S. militia movement.

### Discord

Discord is a free voice, video, and text chat app, but unlike traditional social media platforms where the default setting for posting is public, Discord was built to facilitate private, invitation-only chat groups. Individuals must be invited to participate in a server and proactively

opt-in to membership. Within servers, users can create channels or spaces dedicated to specific topics and themes. Discord was originally built for gamers to chat during game-play, but far-right groups soon joined the fray, creating numerous servers and sub-channels. Starting in 2017, Unicorn Riot gained access to and published scores of separate servers belonging to White nationalist, neo-Nazi, militia, and other far-right groups; this analysis draws on the 94 servers published as of 2019.<sup>49</sup>

In our analysis we focus on two servers. The first is the "Charlottesville 2.0" server, which was dedicated to planning the 2017 Unite the Right rally and contained 35,606 messages. The second is the "Patriots' Soapbox" server, which includes militias, Sovereign Citizens, and other anti-government individuals, and contains over 1.2 million messages from April 2018 through early April 2020.

### Militia Websites

We also looked at two militia websites—the Oath Keepers and the III Percenters. Both groups are nominally national organizations with local affiliates. In practice, local groups are largely autonomous. Given the horizontal structure of both groups, their websites' content represents areas of agreement across localities.

## PATHWAY 1: WHITE NATIONALISM'S ENFORCERS

There's little evidence in either the Iron March or Discord chats to suggest White nationalist groups are working with militia groups in an organized fashion. Two reasons explain the lack of engagement. First, White nationalists showed utter contempt for militia members' age, appearance, and masculinity. Second, White nationalists viewed militias as unreliable ideological partners because of their refusal to see race as central to their stated concerns. Consequently, we believe it's unlikely the militia movement will morph into a paramilitary for White ethnonationalists.

### Iron March

The militia movement received scant attention in the Iron March data. U.S.

militias were referenced in only 1.2 percent of threads in the message board, and most of these references mocked militia members' age and training. One poster offered this broadside:

Michigan Militia and nearly all Militia Movements are trash and literally boomers larping<sup>50</sup> about being Libertarian An [sic] Cap Liberators in the woods while wearing basic bitch camo.<sup>51</sup>

When the leader of a Florida militia group joined Iron March in 2017, he was met with similar skepticism and derision. One commentator railed, "You are the Jeb Bush of White Nationalist militias."<sup>52</sup> Another sneered, "Most awful collection of patriotard reactionary cosplayers I have ever seen."<sup>53</sup> A third sarcastically asked, "Is this just another one of those Amerifat militia groups that train out in the woods without actually accomplishing anything?"<sup>54</sup>

When militia ideology was referenced, it was harshly criticized. Militia heroes Cliven Bundy and Timothy McVeigh both came in for withering criticism for their libertarian views. Referring to Bundy's standoff with federal agents at his Nevada ranch, for example, one poster noted:

This selfish old rancher won't get off his land to save a [sic] endangered tortoise. A bunch of lolbertarians are now at his ranch protesting, they then were tased by authorities for getting out of control and harassing officers. Serves them right.<sup>55</sup>

Another poster offered a similar description of Timothy McVeigh: "McVeigh is a libertardian who the media uses to paint us as violent terrorists. Why do you like him?"<sup>56</sup>

However, as one response to that query indicates, some posters were willing to consider McVeigh, and by extension militias, as useful instruments for destroying the government, then headed by President Obama, in order to make way for a fascist regime.

Yeah, he was your typical libertard. Personally, libertarians give me the shits and i think their principles and logic are fucking stupid and you basically have to be a yank with very little understanding of historical context

or human society for libertarianism to appeal. But that's beside the point. McVeigh isn't recognized for his ideology, but for his deeds. If it was a muslim who blew up some yank fed. gov't. building, i'd still cheer. If every american government building was applied the ryder truck treatment, the world would be a better place. If they didn't want *their* kids to die, maybe they should have thought about that before they burned all those waco children alive. Or maybe they shouldn't have put their daycare center in a high value strategic target to the opposing force (every decent man in the world is america's opfor) of the United States.<sup>57</sup>

Only a few posters suggested that militia members could be mobilized to join fascists in real world action. However, their goal wasn't forging ideological compromise but conversion. As one poster enjoined: "Join some group that is actually doing something. Go redpill a militia. They are one step away from being fash. They'd already be on our side in RaHoWa [racial holy war]."<sup>58</sup> Another poster argued:

I think it's less important right now for fascists in America to build tiny, ideologically pure, and inevitably ineffectual groups. Instead, we need to focus on cultivating relationships with libertarian gun owners and militias, because even if they deny it, their goal is to protect the white race. The ideology can come later but in the current climate the most important thing is pragmatism and a strong defensive base. It doesn't even matter if these groups have a token black guy or something because they will still end up, whether unconsciously or not, protecting the white race.<sup>59</sup>

#### Charlottesville 2.0 Discord Server

After Unite the Right, militias received outsized media attention, with some commentators suggesting the movement had become the Alt Right's armed wing. But in chats on the Charlottesville 2.0 server, where the march was planned, militias received negligible mentions (about one percent of total messages), most of it also mocking. One poster wrote: "I saw the Indiana Oathkeepers at

the Indy March Against Sharia. A bunch of overweight 40-70-year olds carrying around fuddled out ARs with no mags. Intimidating, to say the least."<sup>60</sup> Another sarcastically offered: "nothing more intimidating than a bunch of old, overweight, low testosterone men."<sup>61</sup> The appearance of militia members' wives also came in for derision: "lol, that oathcucks [sic] wife looks like Chris Farley."<sup>62</sup>

The posters also derided militia ideology. In some cases, posters cast doubt on militias' professed anti-statism, insisting they were actually working *for* the police. One poster argued: "Oathcucks are zero threat because they are cucked for police and military and will absolutely obey the authorities with any request."<sup>63</sup> In one exchange, another poster predicted that if violence broke out, militias would defend the police rather than the rally's organizers.

"There will be plenty of Oathcucks there to chant blue lives matter. We won't have to do it."

"Can't we ban them?? Lol"

"Oathcucks?"

"Yeah...I despise those larpy tryhards"

"They usually stand in the middle with the police anyway."<sup>64</sup>

In still other cases, militias were equated with Antifa. When a poster asked for background on the III Percenter, a poster replied, "Muh values; gun rights; brown nation; 'Judeo-Christian' values. So essentially boomer antifa but with guns and a few know how to use them. Oathcucks."<sup>65</sup>

Despite the Alt Right's suspicions of the militia movement, messages written before the rally do suggest there was a concerted effort to create the right optics for potential converts. In particular, the rally's organizers suggested employing symbols like the Confederate flag to leverage militias' latent racism.

My preference is that people bring Confederate flags over other flags because it is most relevant to the Lee statue and it resonates the most with the populist crowd that is on the fence about us.<sup>67</sup>

Another poster agreed:

The Confederate flag is the BEST optics because it's beloved by legions of Southerners who are on the doorstep of becoming just like us if we can move beyond "heritage not hate." They should be with us already but they've had weak leadership.<sup>68</sup>

There's little evidence, however, of formal coordination between the rally's organizers and the militias that attended the rally. Only a few posts even entertained developing a working relationship: "I bet we could reach out to some of these militia groups to help guard the statue Sunday night." The reply: "vanguard has some members in the militia we could do some networking."<sup>69</sup>

Although the Discord chat doesn't prove this request was made, Christian Yingling, commanding officer of the Pennsylvania Light Foot Militia, told reporters he was approached by rally leaders to provide security but that he told them he couldn't protect just them, he would need to protect everyone.<sup>70</sup> His armed group of 32 men instead came, he said, to provide ideologically neutral "volunteer security."<sup>71</sup> Per some reports from the scene, militia members broke up more fights than police until becoming outnumbered.<sup>72</sup>

Messages exchanged about rally logistics also indicate that the organizers didn't see the militias as supporters. One poster wrote:

It looks like there are now 4 rallies going on at four different parks. Unite The Right, The III%er "Unity" Rally, and two leftist rallies. By the way the III%er rally is being led by a young blond girl who looks like Lauren Southern. Except she sounds like section 8 trash when she talks.<sup>73</sup>

There was also confusion about who the militias were there to defend. One poster was hopeful: "But if things get hairy it'll be a godsend if they're on our side. They open carry salt raifus [sic] like a bunch of peckerwoods."<sup>74</sup> Another poster disagreed: "Oathcuck says they will defend antifa."<sup>75</sup>

## PATHWAY 2: GOP ENFORCERS

It's more likely militias are primed to become enforcers for Trump in his de-

## Patriots' Soapbox Memes about Democrats

Memes posted in December 2019 on the Patriots' Soapbox Discord server.



clared fight against the so-called deep state. In both Discord's Patriots' Soapbox server and on independent militia websites, support for Trump was remarkably uniform. Militia members also consistently parroted Trump's complaints

about "deep state" elites.

For a movement that cut its teeth on hating the federal government and suspicion of executive power, the uniformity of support for Trump in our data represents a major aberration for the move-

ment. While there was no active talk of preparing for a war to defend Trump, our findings suggest traditional militias are sufficiently supportive to mobilize on his behalf or that of down-ballot Republicans. The 2020 presidential election could serve as an inflection point.

### Patriots' Soapbox Discord Server

Although Discord servers are private and thus ideal for frank discussions, the Patriots' Soapbox server<sup>76</sup> was mostly used to disseminate news articles from far-right news outlets. Few discussions emerged around these posts.<sup>77</sup>

To see how Patriots discussed President Trump, we searched for messages that contained "impeach" from August 2019, a month before the impeachment inquiry was announced by Nancy Pelosi,<sup>78</sup> until mid-March 2020, a month after Trump's acquittal. This resulted in approximately 2,778 messages for analysis. Of these,<sup>79</sup> 78 percent were links to articles, 16 percent were novel content by users, and 6 percent were shared memes or tweets.

The links were overwhelmingly to articles in far-right publications such as *Gateway Pundit* and *Breitbart*, or mainstream right-wing outlets like the *Washington Examiner*, with no additional commentary by the user. These articles were uniformly supportive of Trump and critical of the impeachment process.

The 16 percent of user-generated posts were difficult to analyze because the messages were context free—i.e., only the messages containing "impeach" were pulled without conversation on either side, which may have been pertinent. As such, we did a second data pull looking for *all* messages for a shorter time span in the server's most popular channel.<sup>80</sup> For this we focused on 922 sequential messages, which were produced around the House's vote to impeach the President (December 18-20, 2019), most of which weren't articles but shared memes and tweets. But the content remained similar, with most messages concerning Trump and uniformly opposing impeachment. As in the impeachment analysis, these posts spurred minimal interaction.<sup>81</sup>

The third category of posts were memes. The memes about impeachment followed familiar tropes. Democrats

were depicted as hapless and weak, and male Democrats were often feminized.

By contrast, President Trump was portrayed as strong and in command. Although the president's Twitter feed is strewn with grievances, his image on Patriots' Soapbox was of a confident, smiling executive untroubled by the impeachment process.

Memes also depicted Trump and Patriots as engaged in a heroic battle against a shared enemy, described with both traditional Patriot movement terminology (like "NWO" or New World Order) and Trump catch phrases (like "deep state"). Other memes included references to pedophilia, a fixation within QAnon conspiracies, and liberal use of Christian symbols and Bible references.

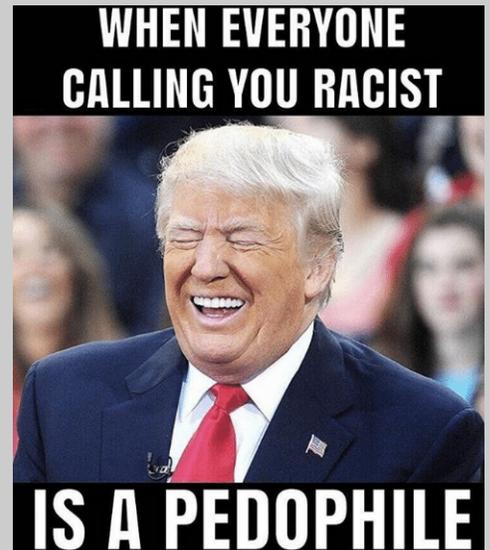
### OATH KEEPERS AND III PERCENTERS WEBSITES

We also consulted the national websites of the Oath Keepers and III Percenters to see how these militias were discussing impeachment. We conducted searches for the word "impeach" on both websites, which returned one article from the III Percenters and eight highlighted blog posts from the Oathkeepers website. Although the Oathkeepers had additional content using the search term, the site curated a selection of posts that we used for analysis. As with the Patriots' Soapbox server, interaction and comments between group members was minimal.

The newsfeeds revealed several notable trends, including uniform support for Trump and opposition to impeachment. Such rock-solid support for any president, even a Republican one, is a new feature for militias. Although Patriots have tended to criticize Democrats more frequently than Republicans, they haven't traditionally supported presidents of either party since they consider the federal government their enemy.

## Patriots' Soapbox Memes about President Trump

*Memes posted in December 2019 on the Patriots' Soapbox Discord server.*



Articles on both websites also portrayed the deep state as a cadre of elites seeking to overthrow the president because he poses an imagined mortal threat to their power.<sup>82</sup> Likewise, Republicans such as Mitt Romney—who voted in favor of impeachment—are depicted as turncoats aligned with "deep state apparatus" and other globalist elites planning a coup against Trump.<sup>83</sup>

To some extent, the deep state discourse adopted by Trump aligns with Patriots' longstanding conspiratorial worldview. Trump tends to describe the deep state by referencing federal agencies militias have opposed since the 1990s, like the FBI, or individuals who worked there, such as James Comey and Robert Mueller. He's also complained about people who work at other agencies militias distrust, including the State Department (Marie Yovanovitch) and the National Security Council (Alexander Vindman).

It's worth noting that Trump's ire against these figures isn't based on their supposedly "globalist" ideology, but their perceived efforts to block his consolidation of personal power, and by extension that of the executive branch. How militias can reconcile their suspicions of federal power with lockstep support for someone who wants to concentrate

presidential power is a larger question. Suffice it to say, the dominance of anti-government ideology in the traditional militia movement is waning. Militias' posture is increasingly pro-state (or at least pro-Trump), and could thus be marshalled (internally or externally) toward paramilitarism.

There's already some evidence paramilitarism is happening on Trump's and Trump-aligned Republicans' behalf. On the Oath Keepers website multiple posts solicited volunteers—especially from members of the III Percenters and other militia, biker, and Patriot groups—to provide security for Trump rallies in Florida, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nevada, New Mexico, and Texas. "Security" was usually couched as protecting Trump supporters from "radical leftist assault."<sup>84</sup> The efforts of Oregon militias detailed above are cut from the same cloth, scaled down to size.

### THE FUTURE AND WHAT IT HOLDS

The traditional militia movement's near lockstep support for Trump, and the activities some militias are already taking to protect him, represent a significant shift for a movement that was born out of suspicion of federal authorities.

Discourses about the deep state partially obscure the contradictions their new stance creates, but can't entirely conceal them, given that Trump's clear aim is to concentrate power.

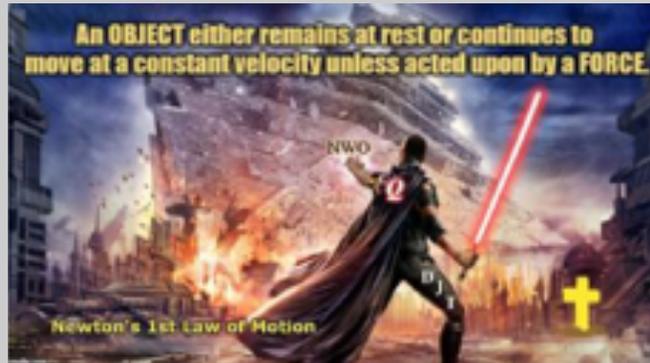
The question that remains is why this shift is happening. Although the messages above don't provide a definitive answer, they point to an explanation. Militias are more pro-Trump than pro-state. Indeed, militias continue to distrust big government, as their embrace of "deep state" rhetoric suggests. These views are why they cheer Trump on—because he wants to wreck portions of the state they despise.

However, the ability to support Trump does involve some ideological realignment. Trump has made no effort to hide his authoritarian impulses and some in the movement, including Ammon Bundy, have publicly repudiated him for it. Local sovereignty has always been central to militia ideology, but efforts to build and defend it have largely failed, as the Bundy's attempted take-over of the Malheur Refuge demonstrated. By embracing Trump, the new generation of militias has accepted, however tacitly, that the power of the federal government, in the "right" hands, may deliver bigger rewards. Should Trump win in November, their orientation toward and defense of aggressive state power is likely to consolidate.

To be clear, the paramilitarization of militias on behalf of Trump and his GOP allies is by no means certain, but fall-out from the COVID-19 pandemic and the upcoming 2020 presidential election campaign season are potential inflection points to watch. If militias do begin to paramilitarize, they aren't likely to coalesce into a national group. The militia

## Patriots' Soapbox Memes about the Enemy

*Memes posted in December 2019 on the Patriots' Soapbox Discord server.*



movement has always been decentralized, and there is little indication from our data that they are actively coordinating with each other, or with newer movements such as the Boogaloo Bois. However, as people from conflict zones with decentralized paramilitaries, such as Colombia and Northern Ireland, can attest, decentralization is no shield from violence.

Jaclyn Fox is a PhD candidate at American University, School of International Service, specializing in political violence and security. Her work explores the changing shape of the far-right movement in the U.S. and across the globe. Specifically, she investigates the links between online rhetoric and offline violence across the far-right ecosystem. Fox is also a doctoral fellow with the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right where she blogs about such topics as far-right violence, disinformation, psychology, gender, and anti-government ideology.

Carolyn Gallaher is a professor at American University. She has written about right-wing paramilitaries in the U.S. and Northern Ireland. Her first book, *On the Fault Line: Race, Class and the American Patriot Movement* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), looked at the rise of the Patriot movement in Kentucky after the Oklahoma City bombing. Her second book, *After the Peace: Loyalist Paramilitaries in Post-accord Northern Ireland* (Cornell, 2007), examined why loyalist paramilitaries took nearly 10 years after the 1998 peace agreement to decommission their weapons and stand down their fighters.

# No Sanctuary

Anti-Abortion “Abolitionists” Go to City Hall



Still of “The Differences Between a Pro-Life Bill and an Abolitionist Bill” uploaded on March 17, 2020, by abortion abolitionist group Free the States. Credit: YouTube.com.

In the spring of 2019, a steady stream of young, White men began appearing at Raleigh, North Carolina, City Council meetings to speak on behalf of the “pre-born.” Sometimes the men appeared with their elementary school-aged children, who read pre-written speeches comparing abortion to slavery. In the months that followed, a 39-year-old man named Zachary Braddy would emerge as their ringleader. In one of his earliest city council appearances, on April 2, 2019, Braddy used the public comments portion of the meeting

to warn of a “great evil occurring in the city of Raleigh, that there are citizens in our very midst that are being led away to death.”<sup>1</sup>

“That is,” Braddy continued, “the pre-born, children in the wombs of their mothers.”

Braddy is an open-air preacher with Gospel of God Ministries, an evangelical Christian group that relies heavily on social media and street preaching to recruit new members and share the gospel. Braddy and other members of the ministry have posts where they preach to the

public, mostly about abortion, homosexuality, and salvation. Braddy’s territory was outside one of Raleigh’s two abortion clinics, where he became well known for harassing people who entered and exited the building.

But that spring, Braddy shifted his venue from outside the clinic to inside the Raleigh Municipal Building. Nearly every month for a year, Braddy and his crew of five to 10 men attended council meetings there, claiming three-minute public comment slots to compare abortion to slavery and the Holocaust and

urge councilmembers to turn the state capital into a “sanctuary city for the unborn.” Sometimes so many of them came that Braddy’s crew effectively monopolized the entire public comment period of the meetings.

One session made national headlines in 2019, when meeting attendees jeered

**Under the Trump administration, the reproductive rights movement has largely focused on protecting *Roe v. Wade*, and far less on the symbolic victories of abortion abolitionists. But it would be unwise to overlook how this network is mobilizing and building alliances across far-right sectors.**

at 13-year-old Addison Woosley, who challenged councilmembers: “Are you choosing to be like the plantation owner flogging the little black child? Or are you going to protest [abortion] even if it going to cost you your life like Martin Luther King, Jr.?”<sup>2</sup>

Weeks later, Woosley appeared on Gospel of God’s podcast, “Truth That Transforms,”<sup>3</sup> alongside Braddy, who explained their focus on city council meetings as following from Christians’ obligation to call on “local magistrates” to “do justice” by ending abortion.

The rhetoric sounded a lot like Matthew Trewhella, a pastor and prominent leader of the anti-abortion movement’s pro-violence wing in the 1990s, who discussed this principle in his 2013 book, *The Doctrine of the Lesser Magistrates*. As he wrote, “The lesser magistrate doctrine declares that when the superior or higher civil authority makes unjust/immoral laws or decrees, the lesser or lower ranking civil authority has both a right and a duty to refuse obedience to that superior authority. If necessary, the lesser authorities even have the right and obligation to actively resist the superior authority.”

Unbeknownst to Raleigh councilmembers and residents, Braddy considers himself an abortion abolitionist: part of a nationwide network of far-right Christians who compare themselves to 19<sup>th</sup>-century anti-slavery activists. Like Braddy, the network advocates for “ministering” in front of municipal and county councils to declare a city or county a “sanctuary for the unborn”—policies that generally seek to ban abortion within city

or county limits, criminalize abortion providers and people seeking abortion care, and block pro-choice groups from operating within the jurisdiction. Abortion abolitionists have also worked closely with state legislators to introduce state abortion abolitionist bills. For them, the work is guided by the need to bring the

“Gospel into conflict with the evil of the age.”<sup>4</sup>

Under the Trump administration, the reproductive rights movement has largely—and understandably—focused on the potential fall of *Roe v. Wade*, and far less on the symbolic victories of groups like the abortion abolitionists. But it would be unwise to overlook the successful ways this network is mobilizing for policy and legislative change and building alliances across far-right sectors. Through their policy activism, abortion abolitionists are normalizing the criminalization of abortion at all stages and creating small but meaningful shifts toward theocracy. If history tells us anything, it’s that fanatical, uncompromising activists can push the Overton Window, creating space for political violence and moving ideas that once seemed radical from the margins to the mainstream.

#### THE ABORTION ABOLITIONIST NETWORK

Arizona Apologia Church pastor Jeff Durbin’s long brown beard, tattoo-filled arms, and appearances (as a martial arts stuntman) on MTV’s *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*<sup>5</sup> make him an unlikely fit for the founder of End Abortion Now, one of the country’s leading abortion abolitionist organizations.<sup>6</sup> Like generations of anti-abortion activists before him, Durbin cites as inspiration anti-slavery abolitionist leaders like John Brown, who died fighting for their cause.<sup>7</sup> But in Durbin’s view, the contemporary anti-abortion movement has become mired in incrementalism, leading to moral and strategic failures, and the need for a more un-

compromising approach instead.

Durbin claims to have over 350 churches globally in his End Abortion Now network,<sup>8</sup> which until recently was dedicated to forming “abortion clinic ministries” to deter people from accessing abortion care. But in November 2018, Durbin expanded the organization’s focus to target legislators and elected officials.<sup>9</sup> The organization developed a six-point plan to “minister” to city councilmembers “on their duty to preserve innocent life within their jurisdiction.” In practical terms, they lobby city councilmembers to declare their jurisdictions “sanctuaries for the unborn.” (Though abolitionists’ core framework is steeped in anti-slavery metaphors, their tactic of proposing abortion “sanctuary cities” evokes a different racial justice framework, muddling the boundaries between the groups’ appropriation of anti-slavery history and contemporary immigrant rights advocacy.<sup>10</sup>)

Before he made his Facebook page largely private, Zachary Braddy’s posts showed he was highly networked with Durbin’s ministry. And he wasn’t the only one. Durbin’s fellow Apologia Church pastor James White called on the Phoenix City Council to adopt an abolitionist measure in April 2019,<sup>11</sup> and that February in New York, bookstore owner Jon Speed<sup>12</sup> requested the same of the Batavia City Council.<sup>13</sup> In addresses to their local city councils, both White and Speed compared abortion to the Holocaust and urged councilmembers to make their cities sanctuaries for the “pre-born” and “unborn,” respectively. Speed appears in *Babies Are Murdered Here*, a documentary produced by Apologia Studios, the media arm of Durbin’s ministry, which has more than 200,000 YouTube subscribers.<sup>14</sup>

Some jurisdictions successfully adopted abortion sanctuary policies. Before they were sued by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) this spring, 10 Texas towns sought to render *Roe v. Wade* illegitimate by banning abortion within city limits and criminalizing abortion.<sup>15</sup> Although the policies in Waskom, Naples, Joaquin, Tenaha, Rusk, Gary, and Wells were largely symbolic, they were successful in further stigmatizing people

seeking abortion care and spreading misinformation about abortion access. And there is evidence to suggest that the network of so-called abortion abolitionists is growing and increasingly influencing more mainstream anti-abortion advocates nationwide.

In February 2020, state and national abortion abolitionist leaders, including Durbin, Speed, and Trehwella, gathered at the “Abolition Now!” conference in Oklahoma City. The conference brought together young, contemporary abortion abolitionists; their forebears, who led the violent wing of the 1990s anti-abortion movement; grassroots activists disillusioned with the mainstream anti-abortion movement’s incremental approach; and Oklahoma state representatives—all strategizing how best to fuse church and state through an abortion abolitionist approach to legislative action.

Hosted by the Norman, Oklahoma-based group Free the States,<sup>16</sup> the conference was the culmination of years of networking and activism, sparked in the early 2010s after movement leaders called for a “reformation” in how Christians fight abortion. One of those leaders was T. Russell Hunter, a former University of Oklahoma grad student turned full-time anti-abortion activist who founded both Free the States and Abolish Human Abortion,<sup>17</sup> which together have helped turn Norman into the center of abortion abolitionist organizing.

For Hunter and his peers, the abortion abolitionist movement is markedly different from its mainstream counterpart. “The pro-life movement has opposed abortion by seeking to compromise with it. Pro-life strategists have accepted *Roe* as the ‘law of the land’ and have focused on trying to regulate the murder of children in the womb to the greatest degree the courts will allow,”<sup>18</sup> Hunter wrote. “As abolitionists we are attempting to bring the Gospel of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ into conflict with the culture of death... The abolitionist calls for the total and immediate criminalization of abortion as murder and never attempts to simply regulate or reduce abortion by treating it as healthcare.”<sup>19</sup>

Conference panels reflected this idea. One session, “Ignore *Roe*: Why In-

crementalism Hurts the Cause to End Abortion,”<sup>20</sup> was led by the co-founder of Abolish Abortion Texas, Bradley Pierce. Pierce’s group claims to have 90,000 members. The group also takes credit for convincing the Texas GOP to propose criminalizing abortion in their official party platform for 2016.<sup>21</sup>

As vice president and co-founding attorney of the Christian homeschooling legal advocacy firm Heritage Defense,<sup>22</sup> Pierce used his panel to describe how he took his legislative approach to abortion

**Since 2018, six state-level abolitionist bills have been introduced in Oklahoma, Texas, Indiana, Washington, Idaho, and Alaska, all seeking to nullify *Roe v. Wade* and treat abortion as murder from the moment of conception on.**

abolitionism to a new level. Founded in 2016, Abolish Abortion Texas quickly built a following by appearing at Texas legislative hearings on abortion. In a post on its Facebook page, the group describes itself as “a grassroots network of Christians in Texas who desire to glorify God and in doing so abolish what He hates—the murder of tens of thousands of babies in Texas every year.”<sup>23</sup> In 2019, Pierce’s group authored a bill, the Abolition of Abortion in Texas Act, which proposed charging abortion providers and their patients with murder. State Representative Tony Tinderholt,<sup>24</sup> whom Abolish Abortion Texas claims as a member,<sup>25</sup> introduced the act.

Although the bill failed to pass, Pierce claims that the publicity it generated led Abolish Abortion Texas’ membership to skyrocket and influenced a wave of new proposals for abortion sanctuaries across the state. Ultimately a dozen<sup>26</sup> anti-abortion ordinances were proposed in Texas, all of which described abortion as murder and made abortion illegal within city limits.<sup>27</sup>

Pierce’s victories were just one example of legislative success showcased at the conference. Since 2018, six state-level abolitionist bills have been introduced in Oklahoma,<sup>28</sup> Texas,<sup>29</sup> Indiana,<sup>30</sup> Washington,<sup>31</sup> Idaho,<sup>32</sup> and Alaska,<sup>33</sup> all seeking to nullify *Roe v. Wade* and treat abortion as murder from the moment of

conception on, even in instances of rape and incest. Some bills seek to only criminalize abortion providers, while others would subject people accessing abortion care to murder charges, life in prison, and even the death penalty.

While much of the Oklahoma conference showcased the efforts of a new generation of anti-abortion activists, the speaker line-up also made clear how much this contemporary network is borrowing approaches and theories from the violent anti-abortion leaders of the

1990s.

Trehwella, an early Operation Rescue activist known for distributing how-to manuals on creating paramilitary militias, was present at the event.<sup>34</sup> While these days Trehwella mostly makes the rounds in the abortion abolition circuit as a pastor and the founder of the Wisconsin-based group Missionaries to the Preborn, he is also lauded as the architect of the Doctrine of the Lesser Magistrates, a real paradigm shift for the anti-abortion movement. Trehwella’s book makes a “militia-like argument” for defying the federal government when it comes to *Roe v. Wade*. At the Abolition Now! conference, Trehwella gave a talk, “Why We Must Disobey the Despot Court,” outlining the necessity of defying federal laws. And in a recent post on his website, Trehwella continued the theme, writing, “We must quit the nonsense that the pro-life movement has taught us for the last 46 years, namely, that our only hope to protect the preborn is to go with hat in hand to the tyrant and ask the Supreme Court to undo their evil. You cannot appease a tyrant. Tyranny must be confronted.”<sup>35</sup>

Also featured prominently at the conference was Rusty Thomas, national director of Operation Save America (OSA), a longstanding anti-abortion organization known for its targeted harassment of abortion providers.<sup>36</sup> Thomas has been



Still of Gospel of God Ministries YouTube video of Zachary Braddy preaching against abortion in the streets of Charleston, North Carolina. Credit: Gospel of God Ministries/YouTube.

part of the effort in Texas to establish “sanctuaries for the unborn,” and testified in favor of one at a city council meeting in Waskom, Texas, as well.<sup>37</sup>

### COMMON CAUSE

Recent events have made it clear that the abolitionist approach resonates across other sectors of the Far Right, particularly among supporters of the Patriot and militia movements. Many anti-abortion and Christian Right activists share the anti-government ideology and revolutionary rhetoric of militia groups, which see abortion not only as murder,

introduce the first-ever resolution proposing a joint sanctuary for the unborn and for Second Amendment rights.<sup>40</sup> The resolution, which is still under consideration, would simultaneously ban abortion and any kind of gun restriction from being enforced in the county. (Since 2018, gun advocates, members of the Patriot movement, and constitutional sheriffs have used the sanctuary framework to block the enforcement of gun-control measures, including universal background checks and bans on assault weapons through introducing “Second Amendment Sanctuary” resolutions and

pro-immigrant “sanctuary city” policies in an interview with *Redoubt News*,<sup>42</sup> a small outlet that calls for Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and eastern parts of Washington and Oregon to become a safe haven or “redoubt”<sup>43</sup> for militia members and other anti-government activists.<sup>44</sup>

“[W]e thought to ourselves as the pro-life community,” Hall said, “if they can declare themselves a sanctuary and resist federal law when it comes to unrighteous causes, why can’t we do it when it comes to righteous causes?”<sup>45</sup>

*Redoubt News* has been a hub for other supporters of abortion abolitionist and militia movement causes. In an April 2020 video on *Redoubt News*’ YouTube channel, Idaho state legislator Heather Scott compared the governor’s COVID-19 shelter-in-place order to a global socialist agenda and called on residents to defy it, reflecting a popular position within the Patriot movement.<sup>46</sup> In 2019, Scott sponsored the Idaho Abortion Human Rights Act, which would criminalize all abortions in the state<sup>47</sup> and was championed by the local abortion abolitionist group Abolish Abortion Idaho.<sup>48</sup>

**“We must quit the nonsense that the pro-life movement has taught us for the last 46 years, namely, that our only hope to protect the preborn is to go with hat in hand to the tyrant and ask the Supreme Court to undo their evil.”**

but as proof of an increasingly secular, tyrannical, and explicitly anti-Christian government.<sup>38</sup>

In January 2020, a pastor named Jordan Hall<sup>39</sup> teamed up with the Richland County Republican Party in Montana to

ordinances across the country.<sup>41</sup>)

Hall often promotes Patriot movement rhetoric on his Facebook page, where his profile picture depicts him wielding a shotgun. He defended his joint resolution by speaking disparagingly about

Along with Washington State Rep. Matt Shea, Scott is well known for supporting the 41-day armed takeover at Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon. In his own legislature, Shea also sponsored a 2019 state bill, the Abolition of Abortion in Washington Act (HB 2154),<sup>49</sup> demonstrating the striking overlap in networks between abortion abolitionists and Patriot movement leaders. Like the Idaho and Texas bills, HB 2154 would ban all abortions and nullify any federal law protecting reproductive rights in Washington, and subject all parties involved in abortion to murder charges.<sup>50</sup> (There is one exception: if a medical provider accidentally kills a fetus while attempting to save the life of the pregnant person.) Shea was notoriously accused of engaging in domestic terrorism<sup>51</sup> when he collaborated with militia leaders to plan and execute the Oregon occupation.<sup>52</sup> And in a manifesto leaked to the press in 2018,<sup>53</sup> “The Biblical Basis for War,” Shea argues that Christians have a right to “kill all males” who support abortion, same sex marriage, or Communism.<sup>54</sup>

Intersections between radical anti-abortion, White supremacist, gun rights, and militia movements is not a new concept.<sup>55</sup> Rather, it’s a convergence that dates back decades. In the 1990s, formidable Christian Reconstructionist Larry Pratt—also executive director of the libertarian group Gun Owners of America—met with neonazis and Christian Identity groups to discuss the idea of forming Christian militias: something many see as the inception of that era’s militia movement.<sup>56</sup> In 1995, when PRA senior researcher Frederick Clarkson was working for Planned Parenthood, he noted that many of the same people were involved in both the violent wing of the anti-abortion movement and 1990s militias.<sup>57</sup>

## AS GOES THE SOUTH

Back in Raleigh, Tara Romano, executive director of NARAL Pro-Choice North Carolina, was troubled to learn that Zachary Braddy—whom she’d first encountered through his street preaching outside abortion clinics—had shifted his focus to harassing city councilmembers and trying to turn the city into a sanctu-

ary for the unborn.

“There is a great deal of misogyny underscoring all of this,” said Romano, who noted the jarring display of Braddy’s mostly male associates crowding into the monthly meetings. “I’m afraid he’s going to keep escalating and escalating the rhetoric. He shows up with this large group of young White men and I believe they’re trying to build power.”

Kamyon Conner, executive director of the Texas Equal Access (TEA) Fund, an organization that helps low-income people in Northern Texas cover the cost of abortion services, has actively fought abortion sanctuary ordinances because she understands the dangers of hyper-local anti-choice activism and how effective their disinformation can be.

Conner warns against dismissing attacks on abortion access in states like Texas and North Carolina as issues limited to the “backwards” South. On the contrary, she said, the South is often a vanguard, with right-wing lawmakers using Texas to pilot draconian policies before rolling them out nationwide. Under the Trump administration, this has certainly been true regarding attacks on asylum seekers and other migrants, and Conner said this has always been the case when it comes to abortion access.

Historically, Texas has always been an abortion battleground. After all, *Roe v. Wade* originated there. Conner said she would never downplay the importance of the landmark case, but she questions what good it is if people can’t access the abortion care they need because of the ever-growing patchwork of anti-choice state laws. The spread of sanctuaries for the unborn ordinances across Texas, aiming to restrict abortion at the local level, has only made things worse. Conner warns that it’s only a matter of time before we see similar efforts nationwide.

Earlier this year, the ACLU sued the seven Texas towns that declared themselves sanctuaries for the unborn—and sought to outlaw abortion in their city limits—on behalf of the TEA Fund and the Lilith Fund. Even if the ordinances were largely symbolic, the ACLU argued, they suppressed free speech and created confusion about Texans’ legal right to access abortion care. In May, the

ACLU dropped the lawsuit after the cities backed down and revised their ordinances, allowing pro-choice organizations to operate. The jurisdictions also agreed to stop calling Conner and her associates “criminal”—one of the primary reasons Conner had sued.

Even in its early stages, the sanctuaries for the unborn movement has drained precious time, energy, and resources from organizations focused on reproductive health, rights, and justice. However, what the ACLU lawsuit illustrated is that these local battles can be won, if pro-choice advocates take them seriously enough to fight back.

“Anti-abortion extremists are crisscrossing the state in order to limit access to abortion in rural communities that already face barriers to health care,” Conner said. “Politicians could be working to expand access to care that could actually help communities thrive. Instead, they’re choosing to prioritize the political ideology of anti-abortion extremists. It’s not right.”

*Cloe Cooper holds a master’s degree in journalism from the Medill School of Journalism, specializing in social justice and investigative reporting. Cloe tracked, monitored, and organized against anti-immigrant organizations with ties to White nationalism with the Center for New Community from 2009-2012. Her work can be seen at Chicago’s local PBS affiliate (WTTW), Alternet, Social Justice News Nexus, Imagine2050, and Hard Crackers. Cloe is a Research Analyst for Political Research Associates and currently serves on the editorial board of Hard Crackers, a journal documenting the everyday life of those striving to overturn the mess we are in.*

*Tina Vasquez is an award-winning journalist, essayist, and editor with more than 10 years of experience reporting on immigration, racial injustice, reproductive rights, and culture. Now a senior reporter for Prism, Tina was a Senior Reporter with Rewire News, where she covered immigration and reproductive rights. Tina single-handedly shaped the outlet’s first immigration beat, authoring enterprise and longform stories focusing on marginalized communities impacted by immigration enforcement.*

BY ALEX DIBRANCO

## Conservative, Christian, Corporate COVID-19 Opportunism and Betsy DeVos's Education Agenda



Betsy DeVos with school children on April 6, 2017. Credit: US Department of Education/Flickr.

Since her deeply contested confirmation hearings, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos has been criticized for incompetence and ignorance regarding the public education system. But this lens obscures the extent to which DeVos's decisions as secretary are less inept bungling than intentional right-wing strategy. As a 2017 *New York Times* editorial put it, DeVos is “the perfect cabinet member for a president determined to appoint officials eager to

destroy the agencies they run and weigh the fate of policies and programs based on ideological considerations.”<sup>1</sup> And she sees the COVID-19 pandemic as a long-awaited opportunity to reshape education.<sup>2</sup>

From the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic response, DeVos leapt to advance her agenda of privatizing the education system, promoting conservative Christian schooling, and enabling racist, misogynist, and anti-LGBTQ discrimina-

tion. Her commitment to building “God’s kingdom” through private Christian education and her advocacy of free markets and opposition to regulations draws in the Christian Right, libertarian groups, and other secular misogynist and racist actors, like men’s rights activists.<sup>3</sup> Bringing differing ideological groups into collaboration to pursue a common purpose has been a hallmark of U.S. right-wing strategy for decades, facilitated by networks such as the DeVos family-funded

Council for National Policy.

DeVos and her allies have made multiple attempts during the pandemic to move funding to private education, some successful, others thwarted or still-pending. In March, for instance, DeVos used relief funding for “microgrants” that could be used for private education providers, prompting Senator Chuck Schumer (D-NY) to denounce her for using pandemic relief “to augment her push for voucherlike programs.”<sup>4</sup> But that \$180 million was just a start.<sup>5</sup> When Republican Senators Tim Scott and Lamar Alexander introduced a COVID education relief bill in July, they inserted a prior DeVos proposal providing for a permanent tax credit supporting privatized education by up to \$5 billion per year.<sup>6</sup> The bill came in the wake of the under-reported June Supreme Court decision in *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue*, which prohibits states from limiting government funding for private schools to only secular institutions, opening new opportunities for funding religious education.<sup>7</sup>

As the new school year approached, DeVos and President Donald Trump threatened to withhold federal funding to pressure K-12 public schools to reopen for in-person instruction in the fall, rejecting concerns about student, teacher, and staff health. An impasse between the Republican-controlled Senate and the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives on an additional round of pandemic relief funding persisted into October, leaving K-12 schools to begin the semester without additional federal assistance—and without knowing if the final legislation would follow the GOP’s plan to tie its \$70 billion in education support to holding in-person classes.<sup>8</sup> If schools didn’t reopen in person, Trump pitched that this “funding should follow students so parents can send their child to the private, charter, religious, or home school of their choice.”<sup>9</sup> Such a determination would represent a massive influx of funding into the privatized education industry with severe long-term consequences for the stability of the public school system.

The pandemic threatens lasting consequences for public education not only

thanks to the Right’s direct actions, but also liberal organizations and officials operating under the opportunism mindset of “disaster capitalism.”<sup>10</sup> In May, Democratic New York Governor Andrew Cuomo raised alarm bells by announcing a plan to work with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to “reimagine education” following COVID-19, disparaging that “old model of everybody goes and sits in the classroom.”<sup>11</sup> Liberal collaboration with the movement framed as promoting “school choice” is an element of

### **White conservative Christians have viewed education as a vital battleground for decades, protecting the maintenance of White Christian patriarchy in younger generations.**

the DeVos strategy to advance education privatization, and appears to overlook the roots and continuing mission of the privatization project in maintaining racial segregation and advancing Christian supremacy.

#### **SEGREGATION, CHRISTIANITY, AND SCHOOL CHOICE**

White conservative Christians have viewed education as a vital battleground for decades, protecting the maintenance of White Christian patriarchy in younger generations through actions such as contesting desegregation, opposing sexuality education, monitoring textbooks, and dominating local school boards.<sup>12</sup>

Following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision ending segregation in public schools, Southern states worked to maintain White supremacy by providing White families with vouchers to attend one of thousands of new private “segregation academies.”<sup>13</sup> These institutions were sometimes referred to as “freedom of choice schools,” in contrast to what the Right demonized as “government schools.”<sup>14</sup> Many advertised themselves as Christian academies, such as the Lynchburg Christian Academy (now Liberty Christian Academy), founded in 1967 by Southern Baptist Rev. Jerry Falwell as a church ministry. The flight of hundreds of thousands of White students, taking taxpayer dollars with them, drained the funding available to educate

Black children left in public schools.

Outside of the segregationist South, conservative parents and groups campaigned for the maintenance of Christian, White, patriarchal norms in public education in the 1960s and ’70s. Major flash points included sexuality education and curriculum battles, with a particularly heated textbook controversy in Kanawha County, West Virginia, fueling incidents of violence. In 1974, Alice Moore, a mother and wife to a Church of Christ minister, denounced Kanawha

County’s new language arts curriculum emphasizing multiculturalism as anti-White and anti-Christian.<sup>15</sup> The local battle attracted a range of outside Rightist support, from Texan conservative Christian textbook monitors Mel and Norma Gabler, to the White supremacist Ku Klux Klan, to the newly formed Heritage Foundation, which, under the leadership of New Right architect Paul Weyrich, sent two staff members there to support, advise, and learn from the campaign. The battle and resulting publicity helped shape a lasting New Right frame portraying “secular humanism” as a threat indoctrinating children in public schools with anti-Christian beliefs. The 1978 book *Blackboard Tyranny*, by Connaught “Connie” Marshner, one of the Heritage staff members sent to Kanawha County, advised parents on fighting against secular humanism in their own districts.<sup>16</sup>

Over the course of the 1970s, the Supreme Court undermined the viability of segregation academies, barring first taxpayer funding for racially discriminatory private schools and then discrimination in private schools itself. Weyrich, Falwell, and other outraged Christian leaders painted enforcement of these decisions as religious persecution, rather than attempting to defend their prejudice explicitly, rallying evangelicals to the New Right.<sup>17</sup> Falwell, whom Weyrich had recruited to found the Moral Majority, wrote in his 1979 book, *America Can*

*Be Saved!*, that he longed for a day when “we won’t have any public schools. The churches will have taken them over and Christians would be running them.” (Trump originally tapped Falwell’s son, Jerry Falwell, Jr., as education secretary. The younger Falwell chose to remain president of the conservative Christian Liberty University instead, and in August 2020 resigned from that position following a sexual scandal.<sup>18</sup>)

DeVos is not the first education secretary bent on dismantling public education. She follows in the tradition of William Bennett, education secretary under President Ronald Reagan. (Reagan himself campaigned on disbanding the Department of Education, only just formed in 1979 under the Carter administration.<sup>19</sup>) Former Federal Communications Commission Chair Reed Hundt recalled Bennett choosing to withhold support for funding and infrastructure-building in order to weaken public schools over the long-term, expressing the desire for public schools to fail and “be replaced with vouchers, charter schools, religious schools, and other forms of private education.”<sup>20</sup>

When taxpayer money goes to private religious schools through vouchers, it has been used to support theocratic, misogynist, racist, and homophobic educational materials.<sup>21</sup> One of the largest recipients of federal charter school funding distributed by DeVos this April, Responsive Education Solutions (RES), develops conservative Christian-based, White male supremacist curricula under a secular veneer.<sup>22</sup> According to a 2014 investigative report in *Slate*, RES textbooks contained false statements about evolution; defended the Confederate South; referred disparagingly to the “homosexual lifestyle”; and advanced the myth that vaccines cause autism—misinformation with particular relevance as anti-vaxxers have joined protesters opposing stay-at-home orders, seeking allies against the distribution of a future COVID vaccine.<sup>23</sup>

## THE DEVOS-PRINCE FAMILY LEGACY

“Although hardly a household name, if Betsy DeVos has her way, every American could feel her reach,” analyst Rob Boston wrote in 2010 for *Church & State*. “DeVos’

goal is nothing short of a radical re-creation of education in the United States, with tax-supported religious and other private schools replacing the traditional public school system.”<sup>24</sup> Over the course of three decades, DeVos has advanced a conservative, corporate, Christian agenda to expand private religious education under the mantra of “school choice.” Legislation enabling school vouchers—tax money that students can take with them out of the public education system to subsidize private school tuition—has been a key area of her philanthropic investment. Redirecting funding from public to private schools implicitly entails shifting public funding from secular to religious education since two-thirds of private schools (enrolling three-quarters of private school students) are religiously affiliated.<sup>25</sup>

DeVos is positioned at the intersection of two massive conservative inheritances that give her influence as a major donor and the funding to create and run her own education privatization advocacy groups.<sup>26</sup> Her father, Edgar Prince, made a fortune through his automotive business, while her husband, Dick DeVos, hails from Amway wealth.<sup>27</sup> In 2015, *Forbes* reported that the DeVos family foundations alone had given a total lifetime contribution of \$1.2 billion, and the

***The DeVoses’ strategy is also insidious in intentionally couching a right-wing agenda so as to manipulate liberal cooperation.***

family appears annually on the publication’s list of 50 Top Givers, most recently appearing at number 26 with reported giving of \$112 million in 2018.<sup>28</sup>

The extended DeVos-Prince family have been major Christian Right and free market donors for 40 years.<sup>29</sup> The Council for National Policy, a secretive network of influential Rightist figures who assemble annually to strategize, featured DeVos’s father-in-law, Richard DeVos, as the keynote speaker of its January 1983 meeting.<sup>30</sup> The group would also receive substantial funding from the DeVoses and Princes from the 1980s forward.<sup>31</sup> Other major beneficiaries of the two families include the Family Research Council

(FRC), an influential anti-LGBTQ Christian Right organization that Edgar Prince helped found; the Heritage Foundation, a think-tank with significant influence on the Trump administration; the American Enterprise Institute (AEI); and many others.<sup>32</sup>

Betsy and Dick DeVos have followed in this legacy of supporting right-wing causes. In the 1990s, their foundation’s largest grants went to FRC and Focus on the Family, but the couple developed their philanthropy into the 2000s with a focus for Betsy on education privatization and for Dick on weakening unions through so-called right-to-work legislation.<sup>33</sup> Their foundation has continued to provide substantial funding to organizations supporting Sec. DeVos’s agenda during the current administration, such as support, from 2017-2018, for the Alliance for School Choice (\$1 million), where she previously served as chair of the board; the Acton Institute (\$300,000) and the Mackinac Center for Public Policy (\$650,000), two Michigan-based think-tanks supporting school vouchers and right-to-work legislation; and AEI (\$1.25 million), where Betsy previously served on the board and Dick currently does.<sup>34</sup>

The couple also invested in for-profit companies in the right-wing privatization world, like virtual schooling pro-

vider K12, Inc., developing corporate partners who would in turn support their agenda. In 2000, former Reagan Education Secretary William Bennett co-founded K12 with a former McKinsey consultant to provide online education “centered in the Judeo-Christian tradition” to virtual charter schools and homeschoolers.<sup>35</sup> From 2005 on, K12 worked with the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) to design and promote model legislation for states that would allow virtual school expansion, taking on a secular image in acquiring profitable state and local school district contracts.<sup>36</sup>

Funding of advocacy, research, and legal organizations demonstrates the

DeVoses' strategic understanding of the greater impact that policy change can have versus direct charity. Speaking in 2001 to "The Gathering," a meeting of wealthy conservative Christians, Sec. DeVos rejected the suggestion that Christian education should rely on direct philanthropic support rather than seek taxpayer funding through vouchers.<sup>37</sup> "We could give every single penny we have, everybody in this room could give every single penny they had, and it wouldn't begin to touch what is currently spent

charter schools have taken over about half of the Detroit public school population, de facto segregation has increased as White students leave more integrated schools for Whiter districts.<sup>42</sup> Waste, corruption, and lack of oversight can be problems with charter schools across the country, but Michigan stands out for the lack of regulation resulting from DeVos's influence.<sup>43</sup> From 2006 to 2014, \$7.7 million went to 72 charter schools that never opened.<sup>44</sup> A majority of Michigan charter schools are run by for-profit com-

DeVos used her discretion over \$350 million in higher education relief funds to use the bulk of the money—intended for struggling colleges and universities—to give small colleges total grants of half-a-million dollars each without assessing their need.<sup>50</sup> Under the original funding formula, compared in a Center for American Progress analysis, many of these schools were allocated only a few thousand dollars or, at most, tens of thousands.<sup>51</sup> Giving them \$500,000 instead drained the pool of available funding for public universities in need. The decision, though it might look like bungling, is in fact continuous with DeVos's agenda of prioritizing private religious education at the expense of secular public education. It provided substantial extra money to almost 90 percent of U.S. faith-based colleges, according to Ben Miller, a former DoE staffer and a CAP education analyst.<sup>52</sup> (For instance, Calvin Theological Seminary, based in DeVos's hometown of Grand Rapids, Michigan, was awarded \$500,000 rather than its original allocation of \$71,301; the private Christian college is also a grantee of the DeVoses' foundation.<sup>53</sup>)

K12, Inc., which brought in more than \$1 billion in revenue in 2019, anticipates greater profits from the current crisis, as school districts and students seek remote learning options this school year. But the company expects this will last beyond short-term adjustments. Timothy Medina, K12's chief financial officer, said on an April quarterly earnings call, "We believe the effects of Covid-19 will be a lasting tailwind to online education."<sup>54</sup> K12 is part of a 2020 Heritage Foundation "National Coronavirus Recovery Commission" to design policy moving forward, which so far has largely recommended lifting regulations and standards for online schooling services, changes that would last beyond the current pandemic and further virtual education despite poor student outcomes.<sup>55</sup>

The \$180 million DeVos already distributed for microgrants and incentivizing, expanding, or launching new virtual schools is just a drop in the bucket compared to \$5 billion per year in proposed tax credits for contributions to private education providers.<sup>56</sup> DeVos advocated

## **The pandemic has offered DeVos an opportunity to pour hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars into her privatization agenda.**

on education every year in this country," she argued, and touted education reform as a way to "advance God's Kingdom."<sup>38</sup> While the DeVos family foundations donate around \$100 million total per year, as education secretary with influence over government policy and funding, DeVos is directing hundreds of millions to privatization and pushing to redistribute billions.

The DeVoses' strategy is also insidious in intentionally couching a right-wing agenda so as to manipulate liberal cooperation. In 2002, William Bennett introduced Dick DeVos for a speech at the Heritage Foundation that discussed another element of the family's long-term strategy to push school privatization: liberal allies. Dick urged caution among his fellow conservatives in publicly supporting vouchers and "education choice," to avoid turning off liberals who would otherwise buy into the idea of education freedom and push the agenda for them.<sup>39</sup> For instance, following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, New Orleans witnessed the complete dismantling of its traditional public schools—an example lauded by the DeVos-founded American Federation for Children—thanks to entities including the liberal Gates Foundation.<sup>40</sup>

In her home state of Michigan, Betsy DeVos took advantage of Detroit's struggling public school system to push a massive expansion of for-profit charter schooling—but without success in producing better student outcomes.<sup>41</sup> Since

panies accountable to shareholders and not student outcomes or the public.<sup>45</sup> This includes K12, Inc., which operates the largest charter school in the state.<sup>46</sup>

### **SEEING OPPORTUNITY IN CRISIS**

"The current disruption to the normal model is reaffirming something I have said for years," DeVos announced this April, as the COVID-19 pandemic swept the country. "We must rethink education to better match the realities of the 21st century."<sup>47</sup> The pandemic has offered DeVos an opportunity to pour hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars into her privatization agenda, taking advantage of the Education Department's discretionary power over COVID relief funds hurriedly passed by Congress—or using her position to redirect funding in what appear to be illegal actions. In September, a federal court ruling struck down a DeVos policy requiring school districts to allocate a greater share of relief funds toward private schools. The policy eschewed the typical federal formula, which allocates funding based on low-income student population, in favor of using total student population—increasing the amount going to private schools, which disproportionately serve more wealthy students.<sup>48</sup> An Education Department spokesperson responded to the lawsuit with a right-wing talking point, denouncing "that so many favor discriminating against children who do not attend government-run schools."<sup>49</sup>



The “Oppose Betsy DeVos Protest,” Washington, D.C., on January 29, 2017. Credit: Ted Eytan/Flickr.

for these “Education Freedom Scholarships” last year at an ALEC meeting sponsored by K12.<sup>57</sup> On July 22, Republican Senators Tim Scott and Lamar Alexander introduced the School Choice Now Act, which added a permanent version of DeVos’s proposed tax credit among the emergency pandemic appropriations for privatized education.<sup>58</sup> A recent Supreme Court decision would prohibit states from requiring that this funding go only to secular schools, representing a potentially substantial transfer of public funding from secular to religious education if passed.

### EXPANDING RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, REDUCING DISCRIMINATION PROTECTION

On June 30, 2020, the Supreme Court ruled in *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue* that states must include religious schools in programs providing student aid to attend private schools, opening the door to dramatically expand taxpayer funding for faith-based schools. The case was brought by the Institute for Justice—a long-time DeVos foundation grantee also known for its opposition to affirmative action—to challenge state “Blaine amendments” that prevent public funding from going to religious schools.<sup>59</sup> In a January op-ed for USA

Today, DeVos urged SCOTUS to clear the path for expanded public funding of religious schools, writing, “we are espe-

falls, the court has made things even worse by opening the door for further attacks on state decisions not to fund reli-

**One notable outcome of a reckless push for in-person instruction—without providing resources for recommended safety precautions—is that it encourages parents to exit the public education system.**

cially eager for the Supreme Court to put an end to the ‘last acceptable prejudice’ made manifest in bigoted Blaine Amendments to 37 state constitutions that deny students the freedom to pursue faith-based education.”<sup>60</sup>

Following the court’s ruling, DeVos released a statement “calling on all states to now seize the extraordinary opportunity to expand all education options at all schools to every single student in America.”<sup>61</sup> Lily Eskelsen García, former president of the National Education Association, worried that the decision will make it harder for states to resist DeVos’s pressure to fund private religious schools. She commented in a statement, “At a time when public schools nationwide already are grappling with protecting and providing for students despite a pandemic and mounting budget short-

falls, the court has made things even worse by opening the door for further attacks on state decisions not to fund reli-

gious schools.”<sup>62</sup> Greater taxpayer funding to religious schools means more students vulnerable to legal discrimination under DeVos’s policies. Earlier this year, the Department of Education issued a new religious exemption allowing any “educational institution that is controlled by a religious organization” to disregard Title IX civil rights protections for students without losing federal funding by claiming the requirements violate their religious tenets.<sup>63</sup> The exemption can even be claimed retroactively, after a sex discrimination claim has already been filed. A letter from a group of Democratic senators this February warned this “could provide federally-funded faith-based institutions and student organizations a license to discriminate against students, employees, and beneficiaries who are



The "Oppose Betsy DeVos Protest," Washington, D.C., on January 29, 2017. Credit: Ted Eytan/Flickr.

LGBTQIA+, as well as women."<sup>64</sup>

It's also an opening to end anti-discrimination protections for other groups. The DeVos Department of Education has severely reduced accountability for discrimination by schools, not only with respect to Title IX and sexism, homophobia, and transphobia but also racism, xenophobia, and ableism.<sup>65</sup> Know Your IX board member Wagatwe Wanjuki situates DeVos's actions on Title IX as "part of a decades-long movement to eradicate civil rights in America, particularly in relation to education, [and] part of the backlash to desegregating schools long ago." She continues, "That, I think, is going to be one of the Trojan Horses for the right-wing to bring back segregation to schools, and basically use federal money at their will ... I think this shows a really good example of how you can't separate White supremacy from male supremacy."<sup>66</sup> (See sidebar: "Catering to Male Supremacists with Title IX.")

### REOPENING: ROUTES TO MAKING PRIVATIZATION PERMANENT

In July, DeVos and Trump announced that public schools would have to reopen for in-person instruction in the fall, rejecting health and safety concerns, a decision that has been attributed to Trump's

desire to reopen the economy before Election Day.<sup>67</sup> DeVos walked back an initial threat to withhold federal funds from public schools unwilling to comply (which would have been illegal); instead, the GOP proposed tying tens of billions in relief funding to in-person reopening. School districts were already facing budget shortfalls of up to 25 percent due to plummeting tax revenue, and DeVos has further strained resources by pushing their funding to private schools.<sup>68</sup> In August, Trump said that school funding in a proposed \$70 billion K-12 education relief package should "follow students" to privatized alternatives if public schools did not reopen.<sup>69</sup> (Ultimately, the beginning of the school year came and went without an agreement on this second round of relief funding; as of October, the entire COVID-19 relief package, including education funding, remained stuck at an impasse.)<sup>70</sup>

While DeVos claimed that her advocacy to physically reopen public schools arose from concerns about children's education, that rationale conflicts with her long-term support for private virtual schooling, even in the face of its poor educational outcomes. But one notable outcome of a reckless push for in-person instruction—without providing resources

for recommended safety precautions—is that it encourages parents to exit the public education system.

This summer saw a spate of reporting on economically privileged parents, wary of school reopening plans, hiring private teachers for expensive home-schooling pods—moving their children out of the public education system, which often also means removing tax dollars, too.<sup>71</sup> An industry quickly sprang up to meet the new demand, and the conservative Foundation for Economic Education (FEE) has lauded "entrepreneurial teachers" who are "cashing in on the opportunity."<sup>72</sup> This exit from the public education system for parents with the financial resources to do so exacerbates economic inequity and encourages de facto segregation, with children of color disproportionately left behind.

By hamstringing public schools' ability to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic through temporary crisis measures that balance needs for safety and education, wealthy and White flight to privatized education can turn temporary adjustments into more permanent changes. While Betsy DeVos is obviously unqualified to support a thriving public education system, her actions during the pandemic made clear how she was most likely selected for a very different set of competencies: a lifetime's experience in undermining secular public education, expanding private religious schooling, and reinstating standards of White, Christian male supremacy.

In that respect, she is more than qualified to advance such a transformation.

*Alex DiBranco is the co-founder and executive director of the Institute for Research on Male Supremacism (IRMS). A sociology PhD candidate at Yale University, writing her dissertation on the U.S. New Right movement infrastructure from 1971-1997, she was a member of The Public Eye editorial board, formerly PRA's Communications Director, and currently is affiliated with the Berkeley Center for Right-Wing Studies.*

## Catering to Male Supremacists with Title IX

Secretary Betsy DeVos has moved forward controversial policies aligned with her theocratic, misogynist, anti-transgender agenda while the media and the public are distracted by the pandemic. In cohort with men's rights and Christian Right groups, she stripped away Title IX protections supporting gender equity in educational access, not simply rescinding Obama-era guidelines to address campus sexual misconduct and transgender students' equal access to school facilities, but regressing sex discrimination protections by decades.

In May, the Department of Education released a 2,033-page Title IX rule rolling back protections for student sexual harassment and assault survivors. The lengthy rule is challenging for even experts to parse, much less survivors seeking to understand their rights, and that might be intentional.

DeVos appears to fully expect her new regulations will prevent Title IX investigations: the rule includes a financial analysis estimating that universities nationwide will save \$189 million per year from the case reduction that will result from implementation.<sup>73</sup> A lawsuit against the new rule brought by 17 state attorneys general plus the attorney general of Washington, D.C., who together also unsuccessfully sought a delay in the rule's implementation, argues, "The rule will reverse decades of effort to end the corrosive effects of sexual harassment on equal access to education."<sup>74</sup>

Similar to how the Right couches its privatization agenda in the neutral language of "school choice" to facilitate liberal support, Title IX opponents have used the frame of restoring "due process" over the past decade. Alexandra Brodsky, a lawyer and cofounder of the advocacy group Know Your IX, explained in a May 2020 webinar that "men's rights activists have weaponized vague concerns about due process to advance their ultimate agenda, which is impunity for sexual harm."<sup>75</sup> One way to prevent schools from taking action, Brodsky states, "is to erect onerous requirements that deter victims from coming forward to their schools, and then tie schools' hands if and when they do receive reports."<sup>76</sup> In this vein, the new rule restricts actionable sexual harassment to that which is "severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive." But as Nicole Bedera, a fellow at the Institute for

Research on Male Supremacism, writes in a *Time* op-ed, "almost no sexual harassment is considered objectively offensive." Bedera instead found that "Title IX administrators labeled most types of sexual misconduct or discrimination as 'not that bad,' including everything from unwanted hugs to removing clothing in the workplace to death threats from physically violent abusers."<sup>77</sup>

While there isn't space here to explore the rule's many problems, one example of what the new "due process" will look like is harrowing. Under DeVos's changes, in a formal investigation, an accused rapist can refuse to undergo cross-examination, in which case any statements they have made—including an admission of guilt—cannot be taken into consideration.<sup>78</sup> This shields perpetrators, providing them with an easy means to block or invalidate damning evidence from investigations. It seems obvious that someone who has committed assault would likely refuse to cooperate when that choice enables them to avoid repercussions. The Education Department touts cross-examination as "truth-seeking" and claims the policy provides all parties with "equal opportunity" and "the same limitations" in not being able to compel testimony. But if a survivor decides not to undergo the additional trauma of cross-examination about their assault, again the perpetrator benefits, by the dismissal of all victim statements—including, the Department specifies, those found in "police reports, SANE [Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner] reports, [and] medical reports" (emphasis in the original).<sup>79</sup> It's a win-win situation for perpetrators.

Lawsuits filed by the American Civil Liberties Union and New York state attorney general argue that the new rule will prevent schools from taking the same action on sex discrimination as they can for other forms of discrimination.<sup>80</sup> And that, Brodsky emphasizes, is exactly what men's rights activists want: to "single out sexual harassment for special treatment," designing a complicated set of procedures and restrictions just for addressing sex discrimination.<sup>81</sup> The justification for this position is founded on the misogynist portrayal of woman as deceitful and the societal refusal to believe women that is part of rape culture.

An investigative report released by *The Nation* on August 14, 2020, the day DeVos's Title IX rule went into effect, reveals the influence of men's

rights groups and their allies on the new regulations. When DeVos announced her decision to rescind Obama-era guidelines in September 2017, the Department of Education had already been working for months with the National Coalition for Men Carolinas (NCFMC), Families Advocating for Campus Equality (FACE), and Stop Abusive and Violent Environments (SAVE). DeVos's top civil rights official at the time, Candice Jackson, corresponded directly with these groups—all founded on the claim that women frequently make false accusations of sexual violence—drawing on them for (inaccurate) information about sexual assault, asking to collaborate on op-eds, and arranging a meeting with DeVos. The Education Department even hired attorney Hans Bader, SAVE's primary funder, who was a driving force behind the new regulations.<sup>82</sup>

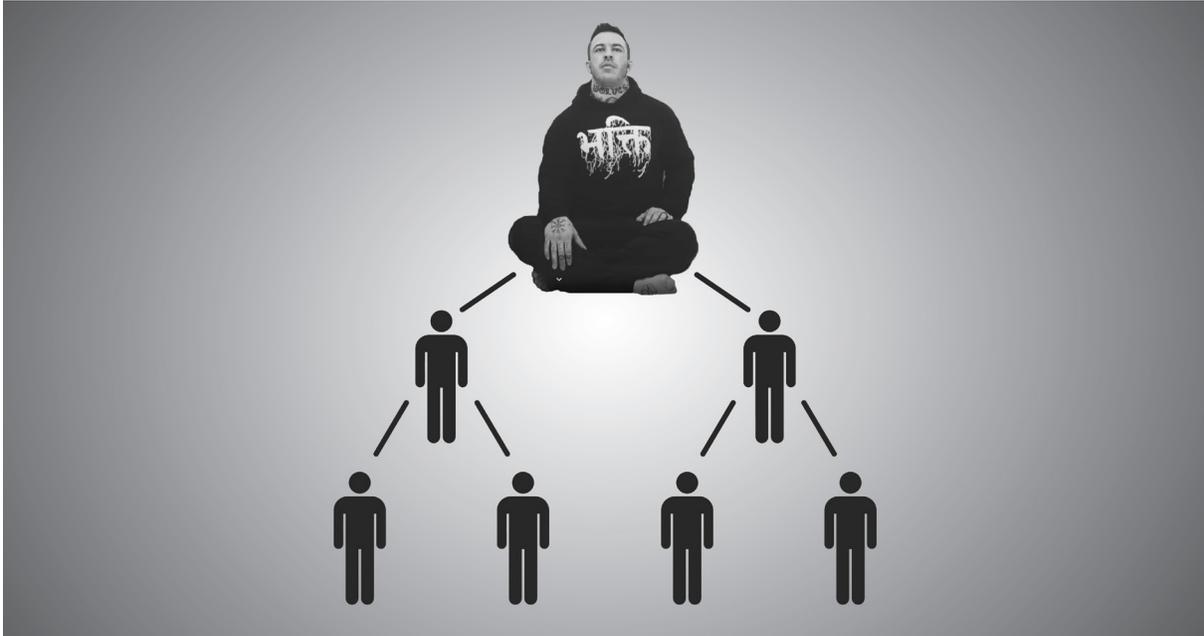
FACE, a mostly female-led organization, does not identify as a men's rights group. But like so-called equity feminists and groups such as the Independent Women's Forum (IWF), FACE uses rhetoric that maligns women who report harassment or abuse as likely making false accusations.<sup>83</sup> Organizations in the broader right-wing network have also mobilized in defense of the new Title IX rule. IWF, where former Trump advisor Kellyanne Conway was a board member, joined the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), another DeVos grantee, and the Koch-connected Speech First in filing to mount a defense of the new rule.<sup>84</sup> Speech First President Nicole Neily is a former IWF executive director and has worked at the Cato Institute and FreedomWorks; the organization's board of directors includes Kim Dennis, chair and cofounder of DonorsTrust.<sup>85</sup>

Under the cover of the pandemic, the DOE issued another Title IX-related document in May: a memorandum asserting that policies that provide nondiscrimination protections for trans student athletes violate Title IX and threatening to rescind funding for school districts that permit trans athletes to compete in accordance with their gender identity. This aligns U.S. education policy with the position of Christian Right groups including Alliance Defending Freedom, which has received DeVos funding, and Concerned Women for America, as previously reported by PRA senior research analyst Heron Greenesmith.<sup>86</sup>

—Alex DiBranco

# Total Life Reform

The Real Consequences of the Far Right's Self-Help Grift



*Wolves of Vinland founder Paul Waggener: "As with most pyramid schemes, Waggener is marketing a program promising to make other men as financially and socially successful as he is, while his financial success depends entirely on his followers' willingness to give him money." Credit: Image of Waggener from a still of "Operation Werewolf - Incremental Progression," YouTube.com.*

Right from the start, the Werewolf Elite program is billed as your last chance. Not just to take control of your fitness, get your finances in order, or meet life goals, but for manhood, for "Total Life Reform" (TLR). The Werewolf Elite program is the latest package for purchase from Paul Waggener, co-founder of the far-right Odinist cult the Wolves of Vinland and proprietor of a growing family of fitness, lifestyle, and spirituality products built around his carefully cultivated outlaw persona. Waggener's various self-help programs have become a strange pathway to far-right ideas, normalizing them by appealing to insecurities, subcultural signifiers, and the desire to build strong friendship circles. Just as happened in the "pick-up artist" community, where lonely men were introduced to the anti-

feminist ideas of the mansphere when tuning in to learn how to pick up women, Waggener's programs build on the appeal of strength and loyalty to connect self-improvement with far-right ideas about racial tribalism.

Waggener is infamous not only on the Far Right, where his brand of racialized paganism and male tribalism inspires admiration, but in weightlifting, motorcycle, and black metal circles. He started out founding the "folkish" heathen group Wolves of Vinland in the early- to mid-2000s, which mixed the organizational style of outlaw bike crews, such as the Hell's Angels, with pagan mysticism. Around 2015, seeking to market his ideas and products to a larger audience, he founded Operation Werewolf: a small business empire including a webzine, self-published books, clothing, workout

routines, and a growing list of associated enterprises flowing from his tribalist philosophy. In Operation Werewolf, Waggener tempered the Wolves' open White supremacist rhetoric and opted instead for a sort of "tribalism for all people" ideology, in the hopes of attracting a broader swath of men. It worked, and over the past few years the business has gone international, inspiring other groups and companies.<sup>1</sup>

At each step along the way, Waggener has monetized his growing audience, never missing a chance to launch a new product or business. While his project mimics multi-level marketing—a sort of Amway for ethno-nationalists—Waggener draws his customers toward violent fascism by laundering in far-right ideas.

## THE ODINIC WOLF CULT

The Wolves of Vinland began<sup>2</sup> as an outlet for Waggener and his brother Matthias, who as teens were neonazi skinheads in Cheyenne, Wyoming.<sup>3</sup> The brothers' goal was to flesh out their type of Ásatrú: a racially-specific form of



Operation Werewolf Logo. Credit: YouTube.com.

Nordic neopaganism. While most self-described heathens—people reviving pre-Christian Germanic religions—eschew racist politics, a substantial minority see heathenry as intended for people of Northern European descent alone.<sup>4</sup> Waggener eventually became “Grandmaster” of the Galdraguild, a heathen mystic organization focused on runes.<sup>5</sup> Despite his position, he saw the mystical elements of heathenism in metaphorical

In 2014, Jack Donovan, who would go on to become a significant far-right author and thought leader, traveled to Ulfheim, the Wolves' compound near Lynchburg, Virginia, to write a profile of the group.<sup>7</sup> He was so impressed by their ritual “Baldr’s funeral” (where members get drunk and set a ship on fire) that he

joined the group, which shared many of his ideas about masculinity and the need for identity-based male “tribe[s].”<sup>8</sup> The emerging ideology amounted to what Matthew N. Lyons calls “gang masculinity,” wherein men use extreme fraternalization—building bonds through extreme behaviors such as violence—to exclude women and reinforce

toxic masculinity.<sup>9</sup> Donovan cut ties with the Alt Right after the deadly Unite the Right gathering in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017, and parted ways with the Wolves the following year; he now says he wishes “White Nationalists would burn my books and stop following me.”<sup>10</sup> But his time with the group nonetheless left a permanent imprint.<sup>11</sup>

The Wolves' folkish politics—namely, that only White people were allowed

views were clear.

“They hate Black people,” said Katie McHugh, a former *Breitbart* editor who dated Alt Right leader and Wolves member Kevin DeAnna. According to McHugh, who publicly renounced the Alt Right in 2019,<sup>13</sup> the Wolves regularly use racial slurs internally, including calling Black people “Unters,” short for the Nazi term *Untermensch*, or sub-human.<sup>14</sup> Waggener had played and sung in the National Socialist Black Metal band Valhalla Saints in Cheyenne, doing split records with other neonazis and singing songs about skinhead attacks.<sup>15</sup> And as he would argue on the masculinist podcast *The Pressure Project*, he saw tribalism, including xenophobic racialism, as an inherent piece of the human psyche:

Who wants to live in a world where there's no differences...tribalism is always gonna be the nature of human beings... I don't care what this does to my social standing to say that humans are animals and as animals there is a difference in their breeding. And that there's a difference in their ethnic type. It makes them different, characteristically speaking.<sup>16</sup>

Like many folkish heathens, the Waggeners consider the Wolves' racial tribalism a positive alternative to the street violence of their skinhead roots. The Waggeners' ideology is inspired by the traditionalism and belief in male supremacy of fascist philosophers like Julius Evola, who saw the modern world as a degenerated mess that had lost its natural spiritual hierarchies, gender roles, and warrior ethic. Waggener's goal is to return men to identity segregated tribal groups.<sup>17</sup> They were also inspired by the European New Right's identitarian ideas, particularly Guillaume Faye's *Archeofuturism*, which proposed re-creating an archaic image of tribal cultures inside a modern technological setting.

Much of the Wolves' racial rhetoric follows a popular thread on the Alt Right opposing global “mono-culture,” suggesting those in power want to meld cultures to make people easily controlled consumers. “The mono-culture we refer to is the idea that we, as people, are all the same, no matter what our backgrounds, race, or culture. The reason

**Just as lonely men were introduced to anti-feminist ideas when tuning in to the “pick-up artist” community, Waggener’s programs connect self-improvement, strength, and loyalty with far-right ideas about racial tribalism.**

terms, more about creating discipline, mental focus, and physical transformation than supernatural magic.<sup>6</sup> Dissatisfied with other racist heathen groups, such as the Asatru Folk Assembly (which lacked Waggener's focus on fitness and personal success), he envisioned the Wolves as a more radical organization, emphasizing ecstatic rituals and pushing members to self-improvement and fight training.

to join—were firm, but not advertised. They viewed race as an essential ingredient to building tribal alliances, but they rejected the rhetoric of pan-European collaboration and activism found in much of modern White nationalism. Instead they were fond of saying they were “Wolves nationalist”: loyal to members of their specific organization rather than all people of European descent.<sup>12</sup> Despite this rhetorical sleight of hand, their

this is dangerous at the present time is not so much the philosophy as much as it is who is pushing it on us and why," Matthias said in a 2013 interview with Hunter Yoder, a folk artist who runs the website The Hex Factory.<sup>18</sup> This rhetoric has a certain currency because it tries to echo an anti-capitalist, anti-globalization talking point about the destruction of indigenous cultures, while avoiding explicitly racist language. Like Donovan, the Wolves claim to offer an alternative to what they call the "Empire of Nothing"—the global culture of capitalism—inspired by Evola's position of refusing to engage in contemporary politics.<sup>19</sup> While they frame this as apolitical, it's actually an intentional strategy in post-war fascist circles to recontextualize far-right politics as cultural, artistic, or meta-political<sup>20</sup>—a means of influencing culture and identity more than immediate politics, with the hopes of changing politics further down the line.<sup>21</sup>

## APOLITICAL?

In reality, the claims of apoliticism are a smokescreen. Kevin DeAnna was an early Wolves member who joined Waggener's group while he was organizing the far-right campus organization Youth for Western Civilization (YWC). DeAnna also worked at the Leadership Institute, a major conservative movement organization and the primary training ground for young right-wing activists, and as a staff writer of the conspiracy-laden *World Net Daily*.

DeAnna also wrote commentary pieces for Richard Spencer's *Radix Journal*, the White nationalist publisher *Counter-Currents*, the "race realist" organization American Renaissance, and the virulently anti-immigrant webzine *VDARE*. And from these perches, DeAnna sometimes promoted the ideas surrounding the Wolves. Writing for *Radix* under the pseudonym "Gregory Hood," DeAnna argued that the Wolves could help Whites reclaim a tribal identity in a vapid world.<sup>22</sup>

The group doesn't seem to be for everyone, and pagan blood rituals, boxing, and a "barbarian" ethos is hardly going to appeal to the Orthosphere anytime soon. But for all the talk about Archeofutur-

ism, a new tribalism, or the European New Right's return to paganism, there seem to be few other groups actually executing these ideas in the real world—even if some of the "Wolves" themselves are blithely unaware about the implications of what they are doing. And more importantly, it's something that can be done right now—without waiting for a "collapse," or a metapolitical shift.<sup>23</sup>

DeAnna got other Alt Right figures involved, too, including Devin Saucier, an American Renaissance staffer, and Scott Greer, a contributor with *The Daily Caller*.<sup>24</sup> A group of them lived in an Arlington, Virginia, apartment they dubbed "the Hate House," which became a center of Alt Right activity and Jack Donovan's home base when visiting the Washington, D.C., area.<sup>25</sup> Amanda Prevette also became a member of the Wolves while working at *World Net Daily*.<sup>26</sup> While the Wolves maintained a public persona of political neutrality, they had become a social center for the growing Alt Right and were openly welcoming active racialist leaders.

As the Alt Right became increasingly supportive of the Wolves, the Waggeners were invited to speak on White nationalist podcasts and radio at outlets like *Red Ice Radio*, *Millennial Woes*, and *Counter-Currents Radio*.<sup>27</sup> The publicity helped

**The Wolves frame their movement as apolitical, but it's actually an intentional strategy in post-war fascist circles to recontextualize far-right politics as cultural or artistic.**

them raise \$3,000 to build a meeting hall at their Ulfheim compound, and they even received support from *Counter-Currents* publisher Greg Johnson.<sup>28</sup> Brad Griffin from *Occidental Dissent* also voiced his admiration for the group, suggesting he had been up to Ulfheim to see what they had built.<sup>29</sup> Swedish nationalist and bodybuilder Marcus Follin, known as the Golden One on YouTube,<sup>30</sup> met and trained with the group when he came to the U.S. to speak at American Renaissance.<sup>31</sup>

When Donovan created the Wolves' "Cascadia" chapter in 2015,<sup>32</sup> the group began holding events on property owned

by folkish heathen and anti-feminist author Juleigh Howard-Hobson.<sup>33</sup> Juleigh and her husband David had caught the ire of Portland activists when they tried to attend a 2009 event with Holocaust denier David Irving, and were also allegedly members of European Americans United.<sup>34</sup> All of which is to say that, while Paul may present the Wolves as outside of contemporary politics, they are centered directly at the heart of White nationalism.

## THE BIRTH OF OPERATION WEREWOLF

In 2013, Waggener published a YouTube video of him and DeAnna working out by lifting car parts in a scrap yard.<sup>35</sup> The ad hoc exercise tape marked the birth of Operation Werewolf<sup>36</sup>—a synthesis of Waggener's training regimen and his ideas about tribalism, "militant strength culture,"<sup>37</sup> and "rewild[ing]," which he began expressing in the zines *Iron and Blood* and *Rewildyourlife*.<sup>38</sup> The Wolves had developed away from the traditionalist heathenry seen in many racial Ásatrú groups, and now focused more on paganism's mystical underpinnings, which Waggener taught were tools men could use to be successful. The "Odinic path," in his teachings, was more about modeling your life on the "Germanic hero aesthetic," where a man aspires to

physical excellence through training and discipline.<sup>39</sup> With Operation Werewolf, he would train men to build their own Wolves-like tribes. Following his tribalism for all peoples approach, he included non-White followers in a decision that seemed equal parts ideology and business acumen.<sup>40</sup>

Operation Werewolf became a clearinghouse for his writing, but also a business. This began by selling his introductory zines and book *On Magic*, which boiled down his years in esoteric Germanic groups. He designed clothing based on the same rough aesthetic he was cultivating, mixing pagan symbolism with the

junkyard appeal of biker gangs. Slogans like “only the inferior strive for equality” were emblazoned online,<sup>41</sup> though he avoided clear-cut White nationalist rhetoric.

Since around 2015, Waggener has built a growing spiderweb of businesses, most drawing on his existing fanbase. He became a personal trainer, created workout programs (such as the powerlifting program *Barbaric Rites*), and released new music in several genres: country music marketed under his own name; neofolk under the band name *Totewolf* (a combination of the “Death’s Head” symbol worn by the Nazi *Schutzstaffel* or *SS* with werewolf imagery); his band *The Pale Riders*,<sup>42</sup> which adopted the basement aesthetic of Nazi black metal bands in Eastern Europe; another black metal band called *Hunter’s Ground*; and his new fashwave project *A Neon Funeral*.<sup>43</sup> His label, *Wolf’s Head Records*, publishes some of his music,<sup>44</sup> as well as other artists like the guitarist *David Lee Archer*,<sup>45</sup> and a YouTube channel called *Anarchist Films* hosts some of his music videos.

In 2020, he started the *Werewolf Elite Program*: a self-help scheme targeted at fans who had started their own tribes on the *Operation Werewolf* model. For around \$250-\$400 per year, *Elite* members can access a message board, some spurious investment advice, and five weekly posts from Waggener that amount to a spiritually-infused physical and mental training program.<sup>46</sup>

*Operation Werewolf* encourages the use of initiation rituals, based on Waggener’s readings of esoteric traditionalism, so that recruits must advance through different rankings, similar to belt levels in martial arts.<sup>47</sup> Advancing to each stage requires paying additional fees,<sup>48</sup> attending the *Wolves’ “Conclave”* in Lynchburg,<sup>49</sup> and rigid tests of one’s physical fitness and achievements in learning various fighting styles, runic spiritual practices, and financial accomplishments, like business creation and micro-investing.<sup>50</sup>

These hierarchies, which Waggener regards as both natural and reflective of individual achievement,<sup>51</sup> also help reinforce the sense that the *Werewolf Elite* program is worth the time, energy,

and money involved. What he’s offering followers who buy into his *Total Life Reform* program is an “alchemical process” wherein men transform body and mind through suffering, and become heroes of their stories.<sup>52</sup> As he writes in the primer to the *Elite* program, *It’s Not Enough*:

We must impose our own trial of fire and flame so that what emerges on the other end is something entirely new. It will burn away weakness, cowardice, and hesitation. It will also burn away those things that are holding us back - be they unwanted people, unhealthy influences, or unconscious fears. ... [The] goal is to secede from mainstream culture and live a new one... In other words, we propose to *create a people*.<sup>53</sup>

The different “tribal” groups inspired by the *Wolves of Vinland* and *Operation Werewolf* are seemingly independent, bound together only by an informal network and common aspiration, but Waggener’s example looms large.

**What he’s offering followers who buy into his *Total Life Reform* program is an “alchemical process” wherein men transform body and mind through suffering, and become heroes of their stories.**

And their numbers are growing. *Operation Werewolf* is able to maintain its credibility thanks to the inability (or unwillingness) of tech companies to deplatform them. Although various *Werewolf* accounts have been suspended, including at Instagram,<sup>54</sup> PayPal,<sup>55</sup> Venmo, Stripe, and video sites including Vimeo,<sup>56</sup> they have a currently active YouTube channel, under Waggener’s name, with over 12,000 subscribers as of this writing. Waggener’s Instagram functions as a primary center of propaganda, where he regularly promotes his brand. The group’s Telegram channel is an active recruiting ground. They wanted to move people to a private, subscription-based message board system where it is harder to deplatform, which is one reason why the *Werewolf Elite* forums were created. Waggener’s appeal can also be seen in a more recent attempt at crowdfunding (which netted over \$19,000), where he complains they’ve been “targeted in cow-

ardly digital attacks by the enemies of free speech and strength” that shut down their social media pages.<sup>57</sup>

## OPEN FOR BUSINESS

Along with these programs, Waggener sells branded content, including ten self-published books of his writing and a branded notebook, called *Master Logs*, where you track your progress in his programs.<sup>58</sup>

Much of Waggener’s advice is about becoming independent from the “modern world,” including through self-employment. Waggener offers himself as a heroic archetype to emulate, both physically—his website and social media feature idealized images of him shirtless and covered in tattoos—and financially, as a self-made man un beholden to corporate bosses. The problem, though, is that his model of financial independence comes directly from extracting money from his followers. Through his multiple businesses, Waggener seems

able to patch together a reasonable living. The community he’s cultivated has also created a series of businesses, from powerlifting gyms to clothing brands, yet there’s little evidence they are successful beyond attracting other *Operation Werewolf* adherents. As with most pyramid schemes, Waggener is marketing a program promising to make other men as financially and socially successful as he is, while his financial success depends entirely on his followers’ willingness to give him money.

Waggener also runs a copywriting and branding company, the *Berkano Initiative*, which offers advertising services and branding training. In one presentation, he explains how he built customer loyalty among *Operation Werewolf* members by cultivating an aesthetic that evokes the “branding archetype of the *Outlaw*,” and much of Waggener’s advice amounts to emulating the marketing techniques of companies like *Levi’s* and

Harley-Davidson. This reveals the intentions behind Operation Werewolf, where tone and style are a means of selling a product. The Elite program bills itself as spiritual self-improvement, but ends up as a small business seminar.<sup>59</sup>

While tightlipped about who hires the Berkano Initiative and its associated ad agency, Rogue Advertising, Waggener claims he's provided support to financial businesses and has done copy work for Joy of the Trade, a high-risk investment training program run by trading guru Jeff Zananiri.<sup>60</sup> Mostly, though, his work is about selling the principles that gained him Operation Werewolf recruits back to the men who have followed him as a sage.

"We will hit the pavement to back alleys and fly to distant locales in order to bring you directly into the room with copywriters and convicts, power brokers and pimps, branding experts and black metal maniacs," reads the Berkano Initiative's initial contact email. A digital copy of the Berkano Initiative's *Brand Builder's Bible* will run you \$47 (on sale).<sup>61</sup> More recently, Waggener has announced a new project, the Virtuous Circle Artist Collective, in which members pay \$50 a month to access what is essentially an art-focused Facebook group.<sup>62</sup>

Like many far-right grifters, Waggener has also focused on alternative medicine. Drawing on a family connection through a brother who works for a CBD company in Colorado,<sup>63</sup> Waggener has hawked CBD products to his followers.<sup>64</sup> And following an obsession with gender roles<sup>65</sup> common within Operation Werewolf, Waggener has also urged his followers to consider testosterone therapy.<sup>66</sup> Waggener takes a more pragmatic approach, saying that it doesn't really matter if falling testosterone is intentionally caused by some nefarious actor or "just a product of living in the modern world."<sup>67</sup> Arguing that testosterone governs men's ideology, Waggener has said, "If your test levels are crashed you are perceiv-



Still: Paul Waggener, left, in his music video "Love Is Death in Your Veins" depicting a lifestyle characterized by heavy drug and alcohol use, tattoo culture, and hypermasculinity. Credit: YouTube.com.

ing the world like a fucking female."<sup>68</sup> Operation Werewolf has also argued that recruits should get their testosterone levels checked and consider getting on Testosterone Replacement Therapy (TRT) to maintain "maximum high" levels of the hormone.<sup>69</sup> The group has also promoted a Colorado provider, Brian Komleske, working with a clinic called Sculpted Med, which Waggener says he coordinated with to get his supporters on testosterone, suggesting he gets some type of financial support for doing this.<sup>70</sup> (Komleske did not respond to requests for comment.)

### INFECTING SUBCULTURES

Waggener's reach has been profound in several intersecting subcultures where his brand of toxic tribalism has gained currency, including weight-lifting, martial arts, and pagan circles. The #OperationWerewolf hashtag has been used around 25,000 times on Instagram.<sup>71</sup>

One such subculture is among the followers of Greg Walsh, a weight trainer<sup>72</sup> who has worked with Operation Werewolf.<sup>73</sup> His fitness company, Wolf Brigade, has provided private workshops for attendees of Operation Werewolf's

Conclave events, along with other fitness and athletic companies, including Norse Fitness (known for adding Nordic pagan symbolism to their workout clothing).<sup>74</sup> Another example is Vengeance Strength Kvlt, a Nashville gym that matches Operation Werewolf's style, branding, and rhetoric, and the owner of which has worked directly with both Paul and Matthias Waggener. In 2017, the gym gained notoriety when it posted a message to its website that seemed to echo Alt Right ideology: "Instead of becoming victims to life's circumstances, join the rebellion against the world's complacency and sloth. Take the Profane Oath to do battle against that force which degrades humankind into the disgusting, diseased, incapable, grey masses that you see before yourself."<sup>75</sup> (Former Wolves member Jack Donovan also tried to establish a presence in the power lifting community by setting up a tattoo studio in a popular weight lifting gym in Portland, Oregon, called Kabuki Strength Lab.<sup>76</sup>)

In the martial arts world, former skinhead and Atlanta-area Jiu Jitsu instructor Joshua Buckley has become a high-profile supporter of Operation Werewolf. Buckley is known for his work with fre-

quent American Renaissance author and speaker Sam Dickson in manipulating tax liens for financial gain.<sup>77</sup> He's also authored books on folkish paganism in collaboration with Michael Moynihan, editor of the 1993 book *Siege: The Collected Writings of James Mason*, which inspired the accelerationist terrorist organization Atomwaffen Division.<sup>78</sup> The Waggeners themselves have been influential in martial arts circles and own their own Jiu Jitsu gym in Lynchberg called Devotion Jiu-Jitsu.

Pagan circles have also been influenced by Operation Werewolf, partially because of Waggener's complex esotericism. The Wolves' offerings in terms of heathen magic, runework, ritual, and "ecstatic rites" are attractive to many men alienated by more conventional pagan organizations, which they dismiss as "historical re-enactment" groups lacking real vitality. Well-known occultist Craig Williams, of Anathema Publishing, joined Operation Werewolf and had Waggener write a foreword for his book on gnosticism.<sup>79</sup> This caused enough controversy that a campaign to remove Williams and another Operation Werewolf associate from the lineup of a Montreal occult festival forced the entire event's cancelation.<sup>80</sup>

## RADICALIZING MEN AND THE WOLF-NAZI PIPELINE

While Waggener is profiting off the radicalization of his fans, and his militant rhetoric at times seems like just another extension of his branding mentality, his relative consistency in interviews and his writing suggests he's still a true believer. But either way, whether Waggener's ultimate aim is ideological or financial, he is cultivating an apocalyptic us vs. them mentality among his followers. Matthias Waggener suggests they are an "Odinic Wolfcult";<sup>81</sup> members see themselves as the resurrection of an ancient ideal: sitting at the edge of civilization to protect it, and thus un beholden to the morality and strictures of contemporary society.<sup>82</sup> Within this model Operation Werewolf adherents are encouraged to ready themselves for revolutionary situations, when the outside world tries to interfere with their tribe—a message that can both radicalize some associates while providing

cover to those already embracing White nationalism.

The Wolves' rhetoric is about turning inward and creating a revolutionary counter-culture, a dual-power situation where participants retreat from the world. It's a perspective, echoed by Evola, where spiritual, anti-modern men stand apart from the world, waiting to inherit a new world when the current order collapses.<sup>83</sup>

But while part of the TLR program celebrates male stoicism, it simultaneously cultivates male violence. Recruits are required to undergo combat training, and are encouraged to own and train with firearms. Building on Jack Donovan's essay "Violence is Golden,"<sup>84</sup> Waggener argues that violence is the essential force by which men apply their will to situations to determine human events and that men should be prepared for violence from anyone from state authorities to antiracist activists.<sup>85</sup> His work has included guides to improvisational weapons, including how to hurt people with Maglites, loose change, bottles, and pens.<sup>86</sup> "Why do we humans feel that we can demand equal treatment with mewling words? We must obtain respect with our actions, not as a right, but with a cold fury...we have to be prepared to fight for our place in this world, to kill for it, if necessary," writes Waggener.<sup>87</sup>

Although Waggener has made efforts to sanitize his rising professional profile, the Wolves' rhetoric has continued to be radical. Recently Waggener has discussed rehabilitating the memory of Charles Manson as more spiritual outlaw or "shaman" than serial killer—an argument similar to that used by neonazi accelerationist groups like Atomwaffen Division.<sup>88</sup> (One Wolves member sells art and clothing adorned with apocalyptic war imagery, images of guns, and Charles Manson's picture through a project called Wolfchild A. D., and recorded a YouTube video with Waggener.<sup>89</sup>)

Waggener's various brands have also become a catch-all for White nationalists looking for a more publicly acceptable presentation. The American Front, historically one of the most violent skinhead gangs, tied to numerous murders and acts of terrorism,<sup>90</sup> has started promoting

Operation Werewolf. Two high-profile American Front neonazis from Oregon, the brothers Jake and Gabriel Laskey (at least one involved in desecrating a synagogue<sup>91</sup>), began flying the Operation Werewolf banner on social media; they also worked out of a weapons store outside Eugene, Oregon, called Wolfclan Armory, owned by their parents, using the werewolf aesthetic.<sup>92</sup> A founding member of Ravensblood Kindred, an Atlanta heathen group that's openly supportive of White nationalism, has been photographed wearing Operation Werewolf apparel.<sup>93</sup> The group is affiliated with both the folkish heathen Asatru Folk Assembly and the neonazi Wotan Network and its members attended Richard Spencer's 2017 speaking event at Auburn University.<sup>94</sup> Waggener also promotes Wandervögel, a loose U.S. organization named after the volkisch German nature group, which focuses on blood and soil rhetoric.<sup>95</sup>

This August, Waggener announced that Operation Werewolf will shut down as an entity at the end of 2020,<sup>96</sup> having previously shown some dissatisfaction<sup>97</sup> with his lack of control over those flying the Operation Werewolf flag. But in his announcement, he also clarified he is just shifting his attention to other enterprises, and intends to bring his network of followers with him as he focuses on his other companies, which purvey the same message. He's maintaining the pay-for-play online community centered around the Virtuous Circle, where artists from the Operation Werewolf network can pay \$50 a month to be a part of a Facebook Group.<sup>98</sup> In other words, this particular name may be retiring, but what it represents will live on, as Waggener continues to profit off his position as a sage to his community, to mobilize men to follow his example, and to seed his philosophy, including White and male supremacism, along the way.

*Shane Burley is a writer and filmmaker based in Portland, Oregon. He is the author of Fascism Today: What It Is and How to End It (AK Press). His work has appeared in places such as Jacobin, AlterNet, In These Times, Truthout, Waging Non-violence, Labor Notes, ThinkProgress, ROAR Magazine, and Upping the Anti.*

### Could Anti-Government Militias Become Pro-State Paramilitaries?

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### Total Life Reform

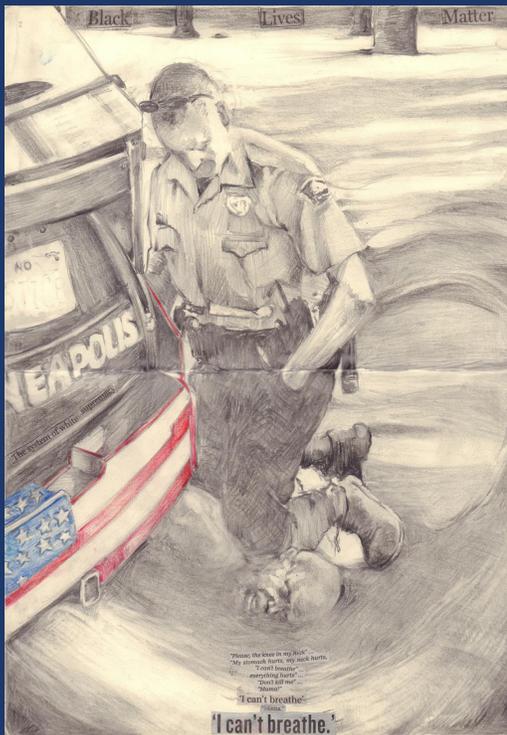
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## The Art of Activism: An Interview with cover artist Shea Justice



George Floyd (2020), Shea Justice

2020 has been a turbulent and destabilizing year. Your work reflects particularly salient themes for our current moment. How has this year impacted your art?

2020 has validated many things reflected in my art over the years. The drift towards fascism, the backlash against civil rights for women and African Americans and LGBTQ rights and other targeted groups. America was never created based on equal rights for all of its citizens and the backlash has been a tradition almost as old as the country itself.

As of November 2020, we've already seen the largest civil rights movement in our country's history occur over the past six months. What are some of the images from this incredible movement that you want to live on in our memories?

The death of George Floyd by the cop. There are so many others in terms of protests, mask wearing, police assault on peaceful protesters, that it's hard to choose. All of it should live on in our memories about the era and the president we are living under. The overriding question being, "What country are we?" and "What country do we want to be?" Clearly, from this election, we are divided on this question.

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