

Trump's Presidency: The Symptom and the Agitator

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In August of 2017, in Charlottesville, Virginia, Jason Kessler organized a white nationalist rally to protest the city's plan to take down a statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee. The rally turned into a three day violent protest involving both white nationalists and Black Lives Matter activists, culminating in the fatal incident of a man driving through a crowd and killing a woman. Nearly every American media platform turned their attention towards the harsh events that were unfolding in Charlottesville, including remarks made by President Trump that angered many. In a CNN article, author Elliott McLaughlin wrote that Trump condemned hate incited by "all sides," but never condemned the real root of the problem — the white nationalists. Rather than refuting their attitudes, Trump's comments validated them. But even after the rally ended, Americans were affected by Trump's ignorance towards it. His comments represented a reality many didn't want to face; the United States was still a place with overt racism and harmful patriotism. And in recent years, this narrative has only become clearer.

Given that Trump won the election in 2016, it can be assumed that many people believed that his language was not a dealbreaker — a scary thought that we must seek to address and understand. Many argue that hateful rhetoric awarded Trump the 2016 presidency and sparked a resurgence of white nationalist ideology. This phenomenon can be seen in the rise in race-driven violence since the 2016 election like the Charlottesville rally. It is important for us to critically analyze this idea by asking the question: is Trump's presidency a symptom of the problem or is it fueling the fire for white nationalist ideology to spread? I argue that it's both: white nationalism has always existed in the United States, but it has been amplified in recent years as a result of Trump's influence.

Violence and public display of allegiance to white nationalism has risen in recent years and is threatening American democracy. The Southern Poverty Law Center found that 364 pro-Confederate rallies took place between June and December of 2015. Similarly, a *Time* article written by Vera Bergengruen and W. J. Hennigan published in 2019 reported on the rise in domestic terrorism acts done by members of the far right. "From 2009 through 2018, the far right has been responsible for 73% of domestic extremist-related fatalities, according to a 2019 study by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). And the toll is growing. More people — 49 — were murdered by far-right extremists in the U.S. last year than in any other year since the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995." These statistics should evoke fear and frustration as it shows we aren't as isolated from white nationalism as we may hope to be. FBI director Christopher Wray pointed out before the House Homeland Security Committee in September of 2020 that domestic violent extremists are a growing threat to American democracy (*Worldwide Threats to the Homeland*). Clearly there is a problem of white nationalism infiltrating the American political landscape, which has resulted in more violent domestic crimes. Perhaps this is because there is a new face to advocate for and push the agenda — Donald J. Trump.

Do a majority of Americans see a direct correlation between a racial divide and Trump's election? A report presented by the Pew Research Center in 2017 found that "overall, 60% of Americans say Trump's election has led to worse race relations in the U.S." This data allows us to understand a more broad perception of Trump by the general public. Though this research does not provide an explicit explanation for this, it insinuates that Trump's constant role of being in the public eye has motivated race wars to become more obvious. Moreover, the diction used to describe the survey — *worse* race relations — suggests that race relations have always been an issue, which is critical to consider.

Some people may think that civic racial divisiveness was at its peak in the latter half of the 20th century and overlook the traumatic experiences of the transatlantic slave trade. American-Canadian scholar Henry Giroux brings up this way of thinking when he writes, "Of course, Trump is only a symptom of the economic, political, and ideological rot at the heart of casino capitalism with its growing authoritarianism and social and political pathologies that have been festering in the United States with great intensity since the late 1970s." Though I do appreciate that he acknowledges the historical context of today's America, I disagree with his point that it has been happening since the 1970s. In accordance with Rose Brewer — a professor at the University of Minnesota — I think that white nationalist rhetoric and culture has persisted since the slave trade started in the 1600s, but things like the media have exposed its rising popularity.

Indeed, the United States was founded on the basis of racial hierarchy by conquest and imperialism. Conquest then turned into the systemic exploitation of Black bodies, putting white people — and more specifically white men — on a pedestal in order to expand their influence and power. Brewer asserts that "the radicalism which informs Black liberation today raises the issue of how the long arc of struggle is continuous rather than episodic. In fact my assertion is bold. The contentious uprisings of the last few years are rooted in the history of the Black liberation struggle." In making this point, Brewer urges us to think about the historical roots of our problems today and to understand that said issues haven't popped up out of nowhere; they have been here the whole time. Much of the struggle for racial equality we feel today has always been present, but perhaps in more discrete ways. So in this manner, Trump is a symptom of centuries of race-driven oppression.

There is a relationship between the media and Trump in regards to the rising popularity of white nationalism. Conservative media organizations like *Fox News* give Trump the space to spread hateful rhetoric, largely because he uses his platform to steer said media in an advantageous way for himself. Reporters Aaron Sankin and Will Carless of *The Washington Post* use *Fox News* host Tucker Carlson as an example for his biased reporting on Trump and white nationalism: "Carlson's repeated surfacing of white supremacist rhetoric has earned him a devoted set of fans among online racists." Devoted fans and certain media personalities give Trump and his ideals more publicity, and it has become normalized, infiltrating American life on a daily basis. Not only do said media organizations normalize the inexcusable behavior of Trump and white nationalist groups, they also have a reputation for the spread of misinformation and deception, misleading people to accept Trump's agenda, including white nationalist ideals. But some critics might say that it isn't solely Trump who is the issue. Though I agree that Trump is not the only entity spreading hateful rhetoric — things like the media and white nationalist rallies are also responsible — he is the largest figure in national politics, and his words reflect the state of political discourse. The normalization of

white nationalist beliefs because of Trump has continued to agitate the issue of racism and white nationalism in the United States.

It's important to understand the factors that led to Trump being elected in 2016 and identify how he established a voting base of white nationalists. A key feature of Trump's agenda was the plan to deport illegal Mexican immigrants — made evident by his phrasing of “Build the Wall” — and a ban on Muslims entering the US. Moreover, Trump famously called Mexicans rapists and criminals, later labeling them as “bad hombres” during a phone call with the President of Mexico (Goldstein and Hall). The xenophobic discourse of Trump has certainly been an example of how he perpetuates white nationalist rhetoric. *Washington Post* reporter Eli Saslow describes Trump's actions during the 2016 presidential campaign in his book *Rising Out of Hatred* writing, “What Trump said during those next months was that he wanted to ban Muslims from entering the United States. He said he was the ‘law and order candidate’ in the age of Black Lives Matter. He said he was qualified to be president in large part because of his ‘beautiful, terrific genes--a wonderful inheritance’” (250). Trump's political agenda while campaigning was heavily based on white domination, even if it wasn't explicitly advertised as such.

The notion of white domination is what should be interpreted from Donald Trump's famous campaign slogan. University of Colorado-Boulder anthropology professors Donna Goldstein and Kiera Hall write: “To white, native-born, heterosexual men, he offered a solution to the dilemma they had long faced as the ‘left-behinds’ of the 1960s and 1970s celebration of other identities. Trump was the identity politics candidate for white men.” The authors offer the idea that the slogan is targeted towards white, heterosexual men who feel that they have been ignored by mainstream politics. The scholars' claim is one that has become quite noticeable in recent years due to the growing debate over immigration policy. With his slogan, Trump alludes to the idea that immigration has ruined the country and its foundations. It leads us to pose the question: What measurement does one use in determining America's greatness? Trump's idea of greatness, as described by Goldstein and Hall, is likely an America where white men dominate and intimidate minorities and women. Trump victimizes the white male situation, which is exemplified through Trump's discussion of white genocide in South Africa.

White nationalist ideology like the resurgence of the concept of “white genocide” has been indirectly associated with Trump. White genocide in South Africa has been brought to the attention of many white nationalists in the United States because the neo-Nazi newspaper *Daily Stormer* published many articles about it (Sankin and Carless). Not only does Trump believe in the existence of problems like white genocide, he encourages others to believe it too. In 2016, for example, he retweeted a message from the account @WhiteGenocideTM, giving people the impression that he supported the ideology. And those speculations were affirmed when Trump later directly tweeted “IT'S HAPPENING” in reference to white genocide in South Africa. There is no evidence to suggest this claim. Sankin and Carless write, “On Stormfront, Trump's tweet was seen a welcome sign of an impending race war that users hope will drench the planet in a cleansing bloodbath.” The reporters assert that Trump encourages behavior like this to persist in the United States today. While I do agree with this claim, I also think that a lot of Trump's language prior to this specific Tweet had been a welcome sign for race wars. It may have just been that this instance was more apparent because, as discussed above, “Make America Great Again” was fundamentally racist.

Trump's performance at the 2020 Presidential debate, on September 29th, is another prime example of accepting white nationalist behavior. When debate moderator Chris Wallace asked Trump whether or not he condemned white supremacy, he responded, "Proud Boys, stand back and stand by. But I'll tell you what: Somebody's got to do something about antifa and the left" (McCammon). For many Americans it seemed to be a frightening moment; our own Commander in Chief could not condemn something so horrible like white nationalism in front of the nation. Massachusetts Senator Ed Markey tweeted, "Donald Trump won't condemn white supremacists because he is one." With over 350,000 likes, it is indicative of many critics' reactions, reaffirming that Trump is an agitator of white nationalism. Trump's inability to answer the question suggests he relies on white nationalists as a voting base—a horrifying thought for many Americans.

The Charlottesville rally was not an anomaly, but rather became the new normal in part because of Trump's presidency and also because of the neglect of dismantling the long history of white nationalism in America. But by dismissing Trump's prominent role in the normalization of white nationalist rhetoric and his racist actions, our complacency becomes part of the problem. As the face of the United States, it is important that Trump be held accountable, and maybe then we can dismantle the broader systemic problem of white nationalism.

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