

## SKIN IN THE GAME REVISITED

by  
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One September weekend in 1995, a few thousand people met at a convention center in Seattle to prepare for an apocalyptic standoff with the federal government.<sup>1</sup> At the Expo, you could sign up to defend yourself from the coming “political and economic collapse,” stock up on beef jerky, learn strategies for tax evasion, and browse titles by writers like Eustace Mullins, whose white nationalist classics include *A Study of the Federal Reserve*,<sup>2</sup> published in 1952, and a work from 1968, *The Biological Jew*.<sup>3</sup>

The sixth-annual Preparedness Expo attracted national attention because it served as a clearinghouse for the militia movement—a decentralized right-wing movement of armed, local, anti-government paramilitaries that had recently sparked its most notorious act of terror: the 1995 bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building by right-wing paramilitaries Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols. A series of speakers told expo attendees the real story: the attack had been perpetrated by the government itself as an excuse to take citizens’ guns away.

White nationalists argue that whites are a biologically defined people and that once the white revolutionary spirit awakens, they will take down the federal government, remove people of color, and build a state of their own. Not a lot of Black folks show up at gatherings like a Preparedness Expo, public town halls in an extensive right-wing counterculture in which white nationalism is a constant, explosive presence. As a Black man at these gatherings, I was regarded by white nationalists as a subhuman, dangerous beast.

In the 1990s, I was the field organizer for a six-state coalition working to reduce hate crimes and hate groups in the Pacific Northwest and Mountain States region.

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<sup>1</sup> Serge F. Kovalski, *A Show of Strength for Militia Movement*, WASH. POST (Sept. 24, 1995), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1995/09/24/a-show-of-strength-for-militia-movement/539d59ca-3daa-4f8b-9b83-c6e4c2178df9>.

<sup>2</sup> EUSTACE CLARENCE MULLINS, *A STUDY OF THE FEDERAL RESERVE* (1952).

<sup>3</sup> EUSTACE MULLINS, *THE BIOLOGICAL JEW* (1968).

We did a lot of primary research, often undercover. A cardinal rule of organizing is that you can't ask people to do anything you haven't done yourself; so, I spent that weekend as I spent many—among people plotting to remove me from their ethno-state.

It helped that, despite its blood-curdling anti-Black racism, at least some factions of the white nationalist movement saw me as a potential ally against their true archenemy: Jews. At the expo that year, a guy asked me about myself. I told him that I had come “on behalf of a few brothers in the city.” We needed to resist the federal government and we were there to get educated. I said I hoped he wouldn't take it personally, but I didn't shake hands with white people. He smiled; he totally understood. “Brother McLamb,” he concurred, “says we have to start building broad coalitions.”

So together we went to hear Jack McLamb, a retired Phoenix cop who ran an organization called Police Against the New World Order, make a case for temporary alliances with “the Blacks, the Mexicans, the Orientals” against the real enemy: the federal government controlled by an international conspiracy. He didn't have to say who ran this conspiracy because it was obvious to all in attendance—just as it is already obvious to many of us in the room today.

From the time I documented my first white nationalist rally in 1990 until today, white nationalism has made its way from the margins of American political life to its center. I've expanded my own organizing from doing antiracist organizing in small northwestern communities to fighting for inclusive democracy on a national level.

If I had to give a basic definition of the movement—something I've often been asked to do, formally and informally, by folks who've spent less time hanging out with Nazis than I have—my response today would not be much different than it was when I began to do this work over 30 years ago. American white nationalism, which emerged in the wake of the 1960s civil rights struggle and descends from white supremacy, is an authoritarian social movement committed to building a whites-only nation, and antisemitism forms its theoretical core.

That last part—antisemitism forms the theoretical core of white nationalism—bears repeating. Let me explain.

The meteoric rise of white nationalism within national discourse over the course of Donald Trump's presidential campaign and freshman administration—through Trump's barely-coded speech at fascist-style rallies, his support from the internet-based “Alt Right,” Charlottesville, January 6, and his placement of white nationalist popularizers in top positions—produced a shock wave of revelation for people across a wide swath of the political spectrum.

This shock has been a source of frustration within communities of color and some Left circles, where liberals, progressives, and libertarians are rightly accused of having kept their heads in the sand while more vulnerable populations sounded the

alarm about the unending blare of everyday hate, state violence, and the undermining of the practice of democracy.

This is an understandable reaction. It's one I share. But six years after the publication of my essay *Skin in the Game*,<sup>4</sup> one fact clearly remains; while many of us committed to democracy have long recognized that the country we live in is not the one we are told exists, it doesn't mean we understand the country that does.

I'm a firm believer it is not fact but often opinion that is stranger than fiction and today, I'm here to provide a strange assertion of my own. We're defeating white supremacy, but we're losing ground to white nationalism. I imagine this statement may have confused you. Aren't they the same thing? Simply put, no—and I continue to believe the distinction is critical.

White supremacy in the United States is a system of social control and disparities formed to exploit indigenous populations, Blacks, poor whites, immigrants, and women's sexual reproduction to maintain the political, cultural, economic, and social domination of those identified as white. Some examples include chattel slavery,<sup>5</sup> the Indian Removal Act of 1830,<sup>6</sup> the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882,<sup>7</sup> Jim Crow,<sup>8</sup> 'Operation Wetback' in 1964,<sup>9</sup> and anti-miscegenation laws not struck down until 1967, to name but a few.<sup>10</sup>

Morally and legally defeated by the Civil Rights movement, de jure white supremacy (legally recognized) gave way to de facto white supremacy (generally known to exist in society, economy, culture, policies, and services, even if not legally authorized) during the 1960s.

While white supremacy in the United States is a *system* designed to maintain control over people of color and the sexuality and reproductive rights of all women, white nationalism is a *social movement* advancing a cultural and political narrative singularly focused on the creation of a white-ethno state. Yet we in civil society and academia continue to conflate the terms and intentions of the two. I believe that often leads civil society to a mismatch of strategies and confuses public understanding.

For years, I too had similar challenges in distinguishing between the two, until the moment a pop culture experience opened my eyes.

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<sup>4</sup> Eric K. Ward, *Skin in the Game*, THE PUBLIC EYE, Summer 2017, at 9, <https://politicalresearch.org/2017/06/29/skin-in-the-game-how-antisemitism-animates-white-nationalism>.

<sup>5</sup> MICHELLE ALEXANDER, THE NEW JIM CROW 25–26 (2010).

<sup>6</sup> Indian Removal Act of 1830, Pub. L. No. 21-148, 4 Stat. 411.

<sup>7</sup> Chinese Exclusion Act, Pub. L. No. 47-126, 22 Stat. 58 (1882).

<sup>8</sup> *Jim Crow Laws*, HISTORY.COM, <https://www.history.com/topics/early-20th-century-us/jim-crow-laws> (Sept. 11, 2023).

<sup>9</sup> Kelly Lytle Hernandez, *Mexican Immigration to the United States*, ORG. AM. HISTORIANS MAG. HIST., Oct. 2009, at 25, 27.

<sup>10</sup> *Loving v. Virginia*, 388 U.S. 1 (1967).

It was February 1993, and I was in a mall multi-screen movie theater in Eugene, Oregon. The kind of theater where, as a teenager, you would sneak from screen to screen. But I was staying put in my seat, as I was there to see one movie: *Falling Down*.<sup>11</sup>

The film stars Michael Douglas as the fictional William Foster, a recently unemployed aging white male who feels alienated and lost in the changing world around him. When his erratic behavior and temper results in being disinvited to his daughter's birthday party, he decides he has the right to be there anyway. Foster sets out across Los Angeles, but when his car breaks down, he travels on foot. The film escalates as he engages in a violent spree of assaults and murders. He's portrayed through most of the film as a sympathetic anti-hero, justified in his violent targeting of gangs (Latinos), untrustworthy immigrants (a Korean shop owner), the "lazy poor" (homeless), union workers (a city employee), feminists (his wife), and the state itself (symbolized by law enforcement).

At first, Foster represents the white supremacists who seeks a return to a past that will never reappear. In *Falling Down*, he begins by trying to reclaim what he believes is his manifest destiny, the right to be in control. He seeks to reinstate a time before the Civil Rights movement, when people of color and women knew their places. It's not by coincidence that he tells a Korean storeowner, before destroying merchandise, "I'm rolling prices back to 1965."

But over the course of the film, Foster realizes violence and intimidation aren't enough to return to the past, so instead he starts to carve a path of violence to create something new.

I held my breath and watched in horror as Foster transformed from a "time has passed you by" white supremacist into a bona fide white nationalist. As I left the theater, I finally understood that white supremacy had a new competitor, and it was called "white nationalism."

If white supremacy is a system of disparities and bias is used to exploit and maintain control, white nationalism seeks the complete removal of Jews and people of color from the United States altogether. White nationalists seek to dismantle the current state and replace it with a white-only ethno-state. In short, ethnic cleansing.

Unlike white supremacy, white nationalism is rooted in the antisemitic belief that Jews are responsible for the defeat of white supremacy and seek to destroy the "white race" through mass immigration, gay marriage, and a host of inclusionary policies.

White nationalists in the United States perceive the country as having plunged into unending crisis since the social ruptures of the 1960s, which supposedly dis-

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<sup>11</sup> FALLING DOWN (Warner Bros. 1993).

possessed white people of their very nation. The successes of the Civil Rights movement created a terrible problem for white supremacist ideology. White supremacy—inscribed de jure by the Jim Crow regime and upheld de facto outside the South—had been the law of the land and a Black-led social movement had toppled the political regime that supported it. How could that have possibly happened? Some secret cabal, some mythological power, must be manipulating the social order behind the scenes. This diabolical evil must control television, banking, entertainment, education, and even Washington, D.C. It must be brainwashing white people, rendering them racially unconscious.

What is this arch-nemesis of the white race, whose machinations have prevented the natural and inevitable imposition of white supremacy? It is, of course, the Jews.

Jews function for today's white nationalists as they often have for antisemites through the centuries: as the demons stirring an otherwise changing and heterogeneous pot of lesser evils. At the turn of the 20th century, *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*—a forgery, first circulated by Czarist secret police in Russia in 1903, that purports to represent the minutes of a meeting of the international Jewish conspiracy—established the blueprint of antisemitic ideology in its modern form.<sup>12</sup> It did this by recasting the shape-shifting, money-grubbing caricature of the Jew from an anti-religious caricature to a racialized one. Upper-class Jews in Europe might have been assimilating and changing their names, but under the new regime of antisemitic thought, even a Jew who wholeheartedly converted to Christianity would still be a Jew.

In 1920, Henry Ford brought *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* to the United States, printing half a million copies of an adaptation called *The International Jew*,<sup>13</sup> and the text has had a presence in American life ever since. Walmart stocked copies on its shelves and for a time refused calls to take them down—in 2004. But it is over the past 50 years—not coincidentally the first period in U.S. history in which most American Jews began or were permitted to regard themselves as white—that antisemitism has become integral to the architecture of American racism.

Rather than seeing white supremacy as a system worth reviving, and despite the mythos charm of “Make America Great Again,” the white nationalist embrace of antisemitism allows it to situate white supremacy as a failed experiment and not one worth revisiting.

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<sup>12</sup> SERGYEI NILUS, *THE PROTOCOLS OF THE LEARNED ELDERS OF ZION* (Victor E. Marsden trans., 1922); *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, U.S. HOLOCAUST MEM'L MUSEUM, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/protocols-of-the-elders-of-zion> (last visited Jan. 18, 2024).

<sup>13</sup> *THE INTERNATIONAL JEW* (1920); *The International Jew: 1920s Antisemitism Revived Online*, ANTI-DEFAMATION LEAGUE: BACKGROUNDER (Jan. 20, 2017), <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounder/international-jew-1920s-antisemitism-revived-online>.

In 2014, a commentator lamented on the pages of *Stormfront*, a popular white nationalist website:

I think the past actions of some whites (slavery and conquering land) has damaged the race a lot. It has opened the door to multiculturalism. We are made to feel guilty about these past actions. Foreigners say whites should support multiculturalism and not whine about it because in the past they came to our lands and conquered and forced there [sic] culture on us. It's KARMA.<sup>14</sup>

As Yair Rosenberg writes in his superb essay in the January 19, 2022 issue of the *Atlantic*, “Unlike many other bigotries, anti-Semitism is not merely a social prejudice; it is a conspiracy theory about how the world operates.”<sup>15</sup> White nationalist leaders and strategists utilize the antisemitic conspiracy as an organizing narrative on their drive to power—one that seeks to draw from all elements of society, especially those who cling to the dying vestiges of white supremacy.

The 2015–2021 national “alt-right” mobilization is an example of this. A fall 2017 Ipsos poll for Thomson Reuters and the University of Virginia Center for Politics found that while most Americans reject white nationalist affiliations, 31%–39% do agree with major tenets expressed by white nationalist leaders on race and belonging.<sup>16</sup>

The physical impact of the consolidation has been felt in horrifying ways in all parts of the country:

- Nine African Americans murdered during the middle of a church service in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015.
- The attempted bombing of the home of philanthropist George Soros in October 2018.
- The murder of 11 Jews in Pittsburgh at the Tree of Life Synagogue just a few days later.
- The 3 people murdered in the California shooting of 20 people, mostly Latino, at the Gilroy Garlic Festival in July 2019.
- Less than a week later, the August 3, 2019 shooting at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas where 23 people were murdered and 26 injured

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<sup>14</sup> @Jm313, *Slavery and Imperialism Ruined the White Race*, STORMFRONT (Mar. 9, 2015, 2:34 PM), <https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t1092007/#post12698548>.

<sup>15</sup> Yair Rosenberg, *Why So Many People Still Don't Understand Anti-Semitism*, ATLANTIC (Jan. 19, 2022), <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/01/texas-synagogue-anti-semitism-conspiracy-theory/621286>.

<sup>16</sup> IPSOS PUB. AFFS., REUTERS/IPSOS/UVA CENTER FOR POLITICS RACE POLL (Sept. 11, 2017), [https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2017-09/2017%20Reuters%20UVA%20Ipsos%20Race%20Poll%209%2014%202017\\_0.pdf](https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2017-09/2017%20Reuters%20UVA%20Ipsos%20Race%20Poll%209%2014%202017_0.pdf).

by a gunman who had written an anti-Latino and -immigrant manifesto.

- And most recently, the May 14, 2022 mass shooting that occurred in Buffalo, New York at a Tops Friendly Markets supermarket. Ten people, most who were Black, were murdered.

While we might look at these acts of violence as nothing more than tragic mass shootings fueled by each respective killer's hatred for Blacks, Jews, or Latinos, the truth is that in each hate crime, the killers carried a collective motivation that drove each violent act and it was called antisemitism. In each of these horrific acts, the killer believed he was engaging in an existential war with a "global Jewish plot" that the white nationalist movement calls the "Great Replacement Theory." In fact, the murderer in Buffalo crafted a 180-page document highlighting how antisemitism framed and focused his anti-Black racism.

To be clear, while anti-Black racism, Islamophobia, anti-Latino xenophobia and other forms of bigotry certainly existed in each of these respective tragedies, it is equally true that in each mass shooting, antisemitism formed the bigoted theoretical narrative that served as self-justification.

When folks ask me, skeptically, where is the antisemitism in the white nationalist movement, it can feel like being asked to point out a large elephant in a small room. From the outset of my research on white nationalism all those years ago, it was clear that antisemitism in the movement is everywhere, and it is not hidden.

"Life is uglier and uglier these days, more and more Jewish," William Pierce wrote in *The Turner Diaries*. "No matter how long it takes us and no matter to what lengths we must go, we'll demand a final settlement of the account between our two races," the narrator promises at the book's conclusion. "If the Organization survives this contest, no Jew will—anywhere. We'll go to the uttermost ends of the earth to hunt down the last of Satan's spawn."<sup>17</sup>

Scratch below the surface of most mission-driven hate crimes against Sikhs, Muslims, Jews, Blacks, and Latinos, and you will find the equal-opportunity poison, the ideology of antisemitism. Contemporary antisemitism, then, does not just enable racism, it also *is* racism; for in the white nationalist imaginary Jews are a race—the race—that presents a direct, existential threat to whiteness.

Even before the surge in antisemitism that has accompanied the global COVID pandemic, documented incidents in the United States had reached a new high: over 2,000 in 2019, a 12% increase over the prior year, according to ADL's Center on Extremism's annual tabulation.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> WILLIAM PIERCE (ANDREW MACDONALD), *THE TURNER DIARIES* 64, 199 (2d ed. 1980).

<sup>18</sup> *Audit of Antisemitic Incidents 2019*, ANTI-DEFAMATION LEAGUE (Apr. 2, 2020), <https://www.adl.org/resources/report/audit-antisemitic-incidents-2019>.

Contemporary social justice movements are quite clear that to refuse anti-racism is an act of racism; to refuse feminism is an act of sexism. To refuse opposition to antisemitism, likewise, is an act of antisemitism. Arguably, not much more should need to be said than that. But I suspect that much more does need to be said. Moreover, if antisemitism exists in glaring form at the extreme edge of political discourse, it does not exist in a vacuum; as with every form of hateful ideology, what is explicit on the margins is implicit in the center, in ways we have not yet begun to unpack.

By insisting that Jews are nothing more than “white,” and that antisemitism is a fringe prejudice, we are unwittingly aiding the white nationalist movement, by shielding their core beliefs from view and protecting them from direct attack. The Jewish community is right to be concerned in this moment of the antisemitic conspiratorial impulse coursing across American contemporary culture: from the grievances that propelled a B-list reality TV star into the presidency, to the bigoted proclamations of too many Black athletes and hip-hop artists, to those elected officials sitting within the halls of Congress and state legislative bodies across the country.

The most common theme in the hate messages sent to me, a Black civil rights leader, is that I’m a puppet; whatever I’ve accomplished—whatever we’ve accomplished as a Black community over the last 70 years—is to the credit or the blame of whoever is using me for some greater agenda. The conspiracist belief that Jews are the all-powerful puppet masters behind a range of concerns from left to right—everything from economic inequality to civil rights gains by the Black community—whips up conspiratorial fervor by appealing to everyday folks who feel like the elites are holding out.

As others have stated, antisemitism convinces us we’re punching up when we’re punching down. Antisemitism is about not being clear on where power really resides. Taking antisemitism seriously as a threat to everyone’s civil rights and humanity means challenging it wherever and however it arises, within our own ranks as well as in those we oppose.

Antisemitism is an equal opportunity ideology. Antisemitism crosses every line of race, political party, and primary stances on a wide range of issues. Like the novel coronavirus, this virulent ideology disproportionately impacts the most vulnerable—the Jewish population—but in fact imperils us all. Because it doesn’t look like anti-Black racism, we may think it’s not a big deal. But I think it’s the biggest deal. Antisemitism is an effective conspiracy theory that dehumanizes all of us.

Antisemitism has real impact beyond just hate crimes. It distorts our understanding of how the actual world works. It isolates us. It alienates us from our communities, from our neighbors, and from participating in governance. It kills, but it also kills our society.

The racist conspiracy of antisemitism seeks destruction of inclusive democracy. Antisemitism isn’t just bigotry toward the Jewish community. It more accurately utilizes bigotry toward the Jewish community—and those seen as proximate to it—

to deconstruct democratic practices, and it does so by framing democracy as a conspiracy rather than a tool of empowerment or a functional tool of governance.

From education to climate change to migration policy to managing a global pandemic, antisemitic conspiracy theories enable bad public policy. The allowance we make for entertaining these conspiracy theories in public policy debates detracts from the real issues impacting us all, such as deregulation and greed.

But a sincere warning to those who seek to convert the struggle against antisemitism into yet another form of unprincipled “identitaire” politics:<sup>19</sup> challenging antisemitism can’t be used to secure—or be manipulated to win—partisan or ideological disagreements. We can’t choose only to point it out when it comes from white nationalists; nor can we ignore or treat it more harshly when it’s expressed by racial minorities. Hypocrites don’t solve problems, they reinforce problems. The fight against antisemitism must be value-based or it is nothing.

Within social and economic justice movements committed to equality, we have not yet collectively come to terms with the centrality of antisemitism to white nationalist ideology and the authoritarian moment the United States finds itself in. Until we do, we will fail to understand this virulent form of racist authoritarianism that is rapidly growing in the United States today.

It is desperately time for us to have that conversation.

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<sup>19</sup> *Identitairians*, EUR. CTR. FOR POPULISM STUD., <https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/identitairians> (last visited Jan. 18, 2024).