

Not So Homegrown Hatred:
Neo-Nazis in America

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On January 10, 2018, the body of a nineteen-year-old University of Pennsylvania sophomore was found in a shallow grave in Borrego Park in Lake Forest, California. The body was that of Blaze Bernstein, who had disappeared eight days earlier while he was visiting his family on break from school. Blaze, who was both Jewish and gay, had been stabbed nineteen times in the neck in what many have considered a vicious act of hate (Smith, 2019). Twenty-year-old Samuel Lincoln Woodward was arrested and charged for the murder and personal use of a deadly weapon, and later two hate crime enhancements were added to the charges. Woodward was quickly connected to a group called Atomwaffen Division, a nationwide violent neo-Nazi hate group whose members were linked to the deaths of five people in the United States in eight months from 2017 to 2018 (Boghani, Robiou, and Trautwein, 2019). Over seven decades since the fall of Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany, the Third Reich's anti-Semitic, racist visions persist and are expressed, sometimes violently, in the activities of Atomwaffen Division and other modern neo-Nazi groups. Their members spread hatred, embrace racism, and incite fear using various platforms, and in many cases violence against their perceived enemies is a favored means to articulate their vision for a pure Aryan state.

Neo-Nazis are a segment of the broader continuum of right-wing political movements in the United States. It is important to understand that the neo-Nazi movement is not confined to the United States, which is unsurprising given its roots in the Nazi movement that swept Europe in the 1930s and 1940s, though the discussion here will center on the American neo-Nazi movement and its relationship with the wider domestic terrorism environment in the United States. The primary targets of neo-Nazi hatred, racism, and violence are Jews and all non-white racial groups that they believe threaten the integrity of the idealized homogenous Aryan nation. In the ideal Aryan world, these non-white groups would be exterminated, segregated, or at least

subject to the supreme authority of Aryans (Simi and Futrell, 2015). The mantra of the current American Nazi Party, known as the 14 Words, “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children” (American Nazi Party, 2020; Simi and Futrell, 2015).

American right-wing political thought, as Jack Porter suggests, is a continuum that ranges from respectable, generally accepted conservative thought that characterizes the nation’s Republican party, to those extremely racist, generally offensive and objectionable views that make up the ideological foundation of far-right groups like the neo-Nazis (1982). These far-right extremist groups, in particular those that turn to violence to propagate their message, including the neo-Nazis, represent a significant portion of the domestic terrorism threat the United States faces today. In fact, from 2001 through 2019, violence from right-wing extremists caused more deaths in the United States than violence from Islamic extremists (Deimeke, 2019). Thus, understanding the scope of the domestic terrorism environment in the United States requires an understanding of violent right-wing groups like the neo-Nazis, including their ideological origins, evolution, and the ways in which they recruit, stay connected, and what drives individuals into their fold. Then, with an understanding of these aspects of the movement, it is possible to begin building effective counterterrorism and terrorism prevention resources and programs within the United States.

The ideological foundation of the modern neo-Nazi movement is rooted in the core precepts of National Socialism, commonly known as Nazism. Three guiding beliefs of the German National Socialist Workers’ Party provide a decent bedrock for understanding the core of the National Socialist vision. The first of these beliefs was that the nation was on its way to spiritual ruination as a result of materialism. The second was the unquestionable supremacy of the Aryan race and the vision of a racially homogenous state. The third was the conviction that

the liberal model of government, the foundation of western democracies, was illegitimate and that a corporatist-authoritarian model was ideal. It was these fundamental ideas that formed the foundation from which the post-World War II neo-Nazism emerged (Whitsel, 2001).

George Lincoln Rockwell's American Nazi Party (ANP) was the first of the American neo-Nazi organizations of the era, and it laid the groundwork for the future of the neo-Nazi movement in the nation. Rockwell's vision was a political revolution that would end in the establishment of a state modeled after Hitler's Third Reich. Rockwell's ANP, founded in 1959 and which never boasted more than a few hundred members across the country, favored engineering their political revolution through the electorate, though Rockwell was unsuccessful in securing the governor's seat in Virginia in 1965 (Whitsel, 2001). The political revolution as Rockwell envisioned it dissipated with his assassination by a fellow member of the party in 1967, and the ANP, renamed the National Socialist White People's Party, subsequently splintered into various factions. While these factions share ideological roots in the ANP and the dream of a new nation built on National Socialist principles, their split was grounded in debate over whether the way moving forward organizationally should be Rockwell's preferred method of coalition building or outright revolutionary violence (Whitsel, 2001). A reincarnation of the American Nazi Party, by that same name, does exist today, under the chairmanship of Rocky Suhayda, an original member of Rockwell's party of the 1960s (American Nazi Party, 2020). Today, there are three groups that have been noted as the most influential sources of American neo-Nazism, two of which evolved with significant influence from or as an offshoot of Rockwell's American Nazi Party – William Pierce's National Alliance and the National Socialist Movement. The third of these organizations is Tom Metzger's White Aryan Resistance (Simi and Futrell, 2015). It is also important to consider Richard Butler's Aryan Nations as a

significant influence in the development and evolution of the movement (Butler's organization has also been considered to be a prominent arm of the Christian Identity movement, another subset of the wider right-wing extremist scene). It is with the emergence of these organizations that the neo-Nazi movement in America began to change.

William Pierce really entered the neo-Nazi scene in the mid-1960s when he began visiting Rockwell's ANP headquarters in Arlington, Virginia, and he formally joined the party in 1967, months before Rockwell's assassination. After Rockwell's death, Pierce remained involved with the largest faction, chiefly as a propagandist, until he permanently left the organization in 1970 (Zeskind, 2009). Four years later, Pierce founded the National Alliance. In 1985, he established a headquarters in Hillsboro, West Virginia, where the organization began publishing white power books, the most famous and widely circulated of which is Pierce's novel the *Turner Diaries*. The novel depicts a violent revolution and race war in the United States intended to exterminate non-whites. The novel was supposedly the inspiration and blueprint for Timothy McVeigh's bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995 (Simi and Futrell, 2015). Pierce also used the West Virginia headquarters to run Resistance Records, a white power hate music label.

Hate music is a unique, fundamental staple of the wider modern white power movement. The white power music scene in America emerged in the 1990s as a particularly popular method of spreading the message of Aryan supremacy, racism, and hatred, as well as recruiting members. The hate music favored by neo-Nazis and other subsets of the white power movement features lyrics that espouse Aryan nationalism, anti-Semitism, white power, race war, and even anti-immigration, anti-race mixing, and white victimization. Today, hate music continues to represent a fundamental unifying feature within the white power movement, especially for neo-

Nazis, and provides a means for members of disparate groups within the movement to gather and share in their common ideological heritage as racial extremists at house parties, bar shows, and even music festivals (Simi and Futrell, 2015).

The National Alliance also began to take advantage of the recently available internet to build a digital presence. Pierce died in 2002, and the National Alliance took a serious blow in membership, driving the group toward a more decentralized, loosely organized structure, which many groups since have voluntarily favored as an organizational method. The National Alliance also fractured into some splinter organizations following Pierce's death, such as Billy Roper's White Revolution.

The National Socialist Movement (NSM), formed in 1974, was a direct outgrowth of the American Nazi Party. Robert Brannen and Cliff Herrington, deeply involved members of Rockwell's ANP, founded the NSM in Minnesota as the National Socialist American Workers Freedom Movement (Southern Poverty Law Center). Jeff Schoep took over leadership of the organization in 1994, renamed it the National Socialist Movement, and was largely responsible for bringing the organization to the forefront of the neo-Nazi scene around 2004 with recruiting efforts following William Pierce's death in 2002 (Simi and Futrell, 2015; Southern Poverty Law Center). The NSM now stands as the largest neo-Nazi organization in the United States with 61 chapters in 35 states by 2009. The organization is best known for large staged protests and rallies, of which many early ones featured full-scale Nazi uniforms complete with the swastika armbands, though the group eventually elected to step away from the theatrical garb after substantive ridicule from other organizations and leaders, including William Pierce (Southern Poverty Law Center). This is interesting to consider within the wider context of right-wing movements that have elected to 'clean up' their public image to make themselves more

presentable to a wider public audience on the surface and draw more members into their fold, confining their most extreme visions to their private worlds. Like the National Alliance, the NSM boasts its own hate rock music label, NSM88 Records, as well as a website complete with a newsletter and propaganda pamphlets. The NSM is unique in relation to the National Alliance, however, in its formation of a Women's Division and its recruitment efforts directed specifically at younger demographics through its Viking Youth Corps (Southern Poverty Law Center).

The White Aryan Resistance (WAR) is another of the organizations at the helm of the American neo-Nazi movement. Founded by Tom Metzger in the 1980s as the White American Political Association (Simi and Futrell, 2015), WAR claims to be an “educational repository on the benefits of racial separation, highlighting the dangers of multiculturalism and promoting racial identity and a territorial imperative” (White Aryan Resistance). Metzger spent time as a member of the John Birch Society, though he left the organization due to their unwillingness to be properly openly anti-Semitic, and climbed to the top of David Duke's Knights of the Ku Klux Klan as grand dragon of California (Simi and Futrell, 2015). He was also a media producer. In the 1980s, Metzger recognized the utility of television to reach a wider audience, and was one of the most prolific users of television to spread messages of hatred and racism. He produced white supremacist programs on over sixty cable systems in forty cities, including a 30-minute cable broadcast show called “Race and Reason”, in which a host dressed in Nazi garb espoused hatred and encouraged violence against minorities. “Race and Reason” reportedly reached one million viewers in Pennsylvania, Atlanta, Austin, Memphis, Idaho, and various California cities (Deimeke, 2019). The WAR continues to maintain a significant internet presence and recruits younger members, advocating lone-wolf activity to avoid the vigilance and subsequent repression directed at more formalized groups (White Aryan Resistance).

Richard Butler's Aryan Nations is another important case in the study of the growth of the neo-Nazi movement in America, and arguably produced or influenced many of the movement's early violent actors. Richard Butler founded the Aryan Nations in 1977 after a stint in the Christian Identity church. The group is particularly notable for hosting the annual Aryan World Congress, the first of which occurred in 1981 on Butler's property in Hayden Lake, Idaho. The Congress attracted big names in the white power world, including WAR's Tom Metzger. Robert J. Matthews was also among those attracted to the Aryan World Congress, and he would go on to establish another group, The Order, of which many members met at the Congress. Members of Aryan Nations and The Order were responsible for the murder of Denver radio host Alan Berg in 1984 and a Missouri state trooper in 1985. The group began to falter in the 1990s, losing more than half its state chapters by 1997 as Butler's health worsened and the group was nearly crippled as a result of a lawsuit filed by the Southern Poverty Law Center that cost Butler \$4.8 million. Butler died in 2004, and Aryan Nations also splintered into offshoot groups, which have been moderately active in the last decade, though not particularly noteworthy beyond flyer passing and the occasional small-scale rally (Southern Poverty Law Center).

From traditional political action and printed propaganda in the era of Rockwell and Pierce to hate rock record labels and cable television programs, it is evident that the neo-Nazi movement has learned how to take the technological evolutions of the world and turn them into new, revolutionized ways to spread their doctrines of hatred, racism, and violence. It is the technological revolution that came with the internet, and in particular the advent of social media, however, that has proved perhaps the most significant and influential platform for the neo-Nazi movement, and the entirety of the far-right, in the last two decades. Simi and Futrell point out that "the survival and growth of the white power movement depends on the Internet" (2015, pg.

87). As of 2017, over half of the world's population, nearly 52%, was using the internet, and over 88% of North America and 80% of Europe have access to the internet (Valeri, 2018, pg. 152). The spread of hate on the internet is not new - it has been a phenomenon since the internet itself was introduced to the public in the early 1990s. At that time, Stormfront.org came online with a bulletin board in 1990 and went public in 1994. Created by Don Black, former Klan member in Alabama, Stormfront is generally considered to be the first white supremacist internet site, and serves as a forum for members and sympathizers of the white nationalist movement to connect and disseminate relevant information, opinions, and propaganda (Valeri, 2018; Stormfront). Similar forums and chat sites exist in what are known as the Deep Web and Dark Web, which are largely inaccessible through normal internet browsing services (which allow us to search the surface web) and therefore provide a generally undetectable platform for individuals and groups to connect (Valeri, 2018). Such sites have included 4chan, 8chan, and Gab. In recent years the existence of these sites has become increasingly visible to the public thanks to trends within the violent wings of the far-right movement in which individuals have posted manifestos prior to carrying out lethal attacks, detailing their plans and their reasons for doing so. Two of the most famous recent cases are Anders Breivik, who killed 77 people in Norway in 2011 after disseminating his manifesto online, and Patrick Crusius, who murdered 22 people in a Walmart in El Paso, Texas also after making an online post detailing his intentions (Valeri, 2018; Macklin, 2019). Members of these sites have also often taken the opportunity to venerate such individuals for orchestrating these attacks and encourage further violence. Since an August 2017 white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia that left one anti-racism protestor dead after being run down by a vehicle, many internet providers have been cracking down on extremist, racist websites. These crackdowns largely come after a highly publicized

post brings attention to the site, as when the Daily Stormer (another message board chat website) mocked victims of the Charlottesville incident (Valeri, 2015). Various neo-Nazi groups have also taken up use of social networking platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. The National Socialist Movement even went so far as to create their own social networking site, New Saxon (Simi and Futrell, 2015).

In addition to serving as a platform for extremists to connect with and encourage one another, the internet has become an extremely useful resource in drawing people into their movements. The internet is a great way to disseminate large amounts of information, including propaganda, to enormous numbers of people in an incredibly short period of time. Unfortunately, this applies to propaganda pushed by extremists from all ends of the spectrum. With access to the internet widely available to so many people around the world, the likelihood that an extremist message will reach a wide audience is pretty high, especially when a vulnerable individual is directly looking for that content. A simple internet search of *white power* yields the Stormfront website, and a quick search on the American Nazi Party yields their current website. Vulnerable individuals are drawn into movements, through the internet or otherwise, in a variety of ways: in other words, there is not one single path that can be traced in which an individual comes to join an extremist movement and further becomes a violent member of that movement. Clark McCauley usefully presents the radicalization process in a four-step outline in which no step must be first or necessarily come before another. Radicalization is defined here as the process by which an individual identifies, embraces, and engages in furthering the ideology and goals of an extremist group. In McCauley's process, an individual comes into contact with the movement in some way, often times through the internet, during a turning point in that individual's life when something significant is changing (consider perhaps a soldier returning to normal life from a

combat zone, disenchanted with the government). The individual engages in some form of activism related to the movement, whether it be an in-person or online meeting, a rally, or a protest. The individual develops considered and consistent beliefs that align with the movement, beliefs that may also reaffirm personal beliefs that the individual held before exposure to the movement. Finally, (though not necessarily last), the individual engages in regular participation in activism related to the movement (Southers, 2013). For this process to be particularly effective, certain conditions generally need to be met that make the individual receptive to a movement's message. The first is an individual feeling or the physical reality of alienation or isolation from their mainstream community, which in many cases can turn an individual to the internet. This alienation is usually based on some sort of perceived grievance, such as injustice or oppression, and it drives the individual to seek out like-minded people who are experiencing the same perceived grievances, and encourage that individual to speak out and take action against those responsible for their grievances (Southers, 2013). This is otherwise known as an enabling community, an excellent example of which are the online chatrooms widely used by members of the neo-Nazi movement and the far right. In these online chatrooms and message boards, an individual can find themselves among hundreds of thousands of people who share in their worldviews and encourage violent action on behalf of the movement.

The shift toward extensive use of the internet for connection and recruitment reflects another shift in the American neo-Nazi movement: an organizational shift. Rather than the traditionally organized hierarchical groups of Rockwell's ANP era, neo-Nazis are turning to small, decentralized, cell-based structures, and even encouraging simple lone-wolf violence. Recall the White Aryan Resistance website, which explicitly advocates lone-wolf violence to avoid the detection and repression by law enforcement that is often directed at well known,

organized groups. The Atomwaffen Division, the neo-Nazi group that has dominated the news in recent years, is a shining example of this. Recall that a member of the Atomwaffen Division was responsible for the death of Blaze Bernstein in 2018, and members of the group were linked to the deaths of five people in eight months from 2017 to 2018. Brandon Russel, a National Guardsman in his early 20s, founded the Atomwaffen Division in Tampa, Florida in 2015. Atomwaffen espouses and encourages a hatred of minorities, gays, and Jews, drawing much of their ideology from a man named James Mason, a neo-Nazi who published a newsletter called *Siege* in the 1980s, which advocated terrorism and “dropping out of the system” to carry out lone wolf violence (Thompson, 2018). Atomwaffen members are dispersed nationwide, but they engage in a relatively unique phenomenon: meetings they call hate camps. Members gather in the desert and train in paramilitary tactics to prepare for what they believe is an impending race war (most often known across the wider white nationalist scene as racial holy war, or RAHOWA). Often this paramilitary training comes from former or active members of the United States armed forces. Atomwaffen recruits from within the U.S. military in order to take advantage of the knowledge and training it provides and turn it into a weapon against their enemies, including the U.S. government. The movement draws soldiers and veterans in particular who have become disenchanted with the government after stints in combat zones. This trend is not confined to Atomwaffen or the neo-Nazi movement specifically: groups across the spectrum of the far-right intentionally recruit from the military. In fact, in the history of the United States, membership in the white power movement has consistently surged in the aftermath of warfare with the return of veterans from combat (Thompson, 2018). In 2017, 18-year-old member Devon Arthurs brought the group to the attention of law enforcement when he murdered two of his roommates, fellow Atomwaffen members, and told police they had been planning bombings and

intended to target civilians. The primary mode of communication for members of Atomwaffen dispersed throughout the nation? Internet chat rooms. Sam Woodward was praised online as a “one-man gay Jew wrecking crew” following the murder of Blaze Bernstein (Thompson, 2018).

With the spike in the online activity of and actions taken by individuals in the name of neo-Nazism and other far-right ideologies, the American public and the U.S. government have increasingly begun to recognize that these groups represent a significant threat to American safety and security. However, the United States faces a unique roadblock in addressing the threat posed by neo-Nazis and other right-wing extremists: the First Amendment. At the same time that the First Amendment protects the right of American citizens to express dissenting opinions and criticisms of the government without fear of censorship or retaliation, it also allows extremists and racists to freely spread their hate speech and bigotry far and wide, online, in print, and through whatever other means they choose. As Tom Metzger once noted, "You can say whatever you want without being censored. We can reach hundreds of thousands of people and that's more than we could do at any rallies or speeches on the street" (Deimeke, 2019). Until an individual or a group becomes violent, First Amendment protections severely limit the scope of actions that the government can take to prevent the spread of the hate speech and racism so prevalent among the neo-Nazi movement and the wider community of the far-right. In fact, the decision in *Brandenburg v. Ohio* in 1969 ensured that the only time an individual's speech may be restricted is when it directly incites “imminent lawless action” (Deimeke, 2019). Unfortunately, much of the viewpoints and speech expressed online in the neo-Nazi and other communities, while advocating racism and violence, do not directly indicate the threat of imminent violence and therefore remain protected. When an online post does indicate imminent violence, such as with Breivik's manifesto before the murders in Norway of Crusius' online post before the murders in

El Paso, the difficulty lies in identifying those cases and taking action before it is too late, which can be nearly impossible when the majority of those who view those online posts in those chatrooms are fellow members of the movement and encourage the forthcoming violence.

Despite these restrictions, private technology companies have the license and opportunity to regulate speech where the government cannot. As private companies, entities such as Facebook and Twitter and even internet providers, do not have to extend First Amendment protections to their users and can moderate speech that might be offensive or unacceptable to minimize the ability of these groups to reach large audiences that might not otherwise be exposed to their messages. This license comes from Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996, which clears private companies of any liability for content posted to their sites by third party users. However, Section 230 also allows private companies to moderate and remove any third-party content without being punished for restricting speech protected by the First Amendment (Greenblatt and Selim, 2019; Deimeke, 2019). Unfortunately, this does also mean that companies may choose not to moderate offensive or harmful content, and cannot be punished for doing so. At any rate, any action to moderate or restrict content and speech protected under the First Amendment, even by private companies, must include careful consideration of civil liberties and work to not unnecessarily curtail them.

The American neo-Nazi movement has proven persistent and adaptable across the decades, and adept at taking the technological advantages of the world and yielding them as weapons in their war of hatred and racism. The neo-Nazi movement has also proven to be increasingly violent, representing a significant threat to the safety of the American public. Understanding these components of the movement and the legal limitations that exist when it comes to preventing the spread of racist, offensive, and hateful speech is a necessary first step in

the effort to design measures that may help to minimize such speech, and by extension the violence that it incites. Just as the United States has worked hard to implement measures to ensure that the American people feel protected from the threat of Islamist terror following the attacks of September 11, 2001, so must the government and the private sector work to ensure that they continue to address the very real threat to public safety that has come from members of the neo-Nazi movement in America.

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