



**Written Testimony of
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**Before the Congress of the United States
Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs**

**“Domestic Extremism in America:
Examining White Supremacist Violence in the Wake of Recent Attacks”
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Chairman Peters, Ranking Member Portman, and esteemed members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this critical discussion on examining white supremacist violence in the United States. My name is Elizabeth Yates. I hold a Ph.D. in Sociology from University of Pittsburgh and I am a Senior Researcher on Antisemitism at Human Rights First, and I have spent my career analyzing trends in violent white supremacy, among other forms of extremism.

Prior to joining Human Rights First, I served as a Senior Researcher at the [National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism](#) (START) at the University of Maryland, contributing to the expansion of their work on domestic extremism and hate crimes. I co-authored numerous reports and articles on topics including extremism in the U.S. military, the growth of anti-Muslim terrorism, mass casualty hate crimes, and extremist disengagement. My analysis and commentary have regularly been featured on local and national news, including the topic of how conspiracy theories have accelerated white supremacist violence. I am honored to appear before you today.

My testimony draws on this experience to outline the ideological and organizational constructs of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, and to explain how it underpins and drives white supremacist terrorism in the United States, including the devastating attack on Black Americans in Buffalo last month. Ultimately, I hope that this conversation will advance a rights-centered approach to proactively and effectively addressing domestic extremism; that is, one that directly confronts the hate and violence of white supremacy, while protecting the rights and freedoms that racially motivated extremists themselves seek to diminish.

This issue is of particular concern to us at Human Rights First, where we have fought for over forty years to advance human rights, with extensive experience working to secure the rights and liberties of refugees and minority communities – those who are often the primary targets of proponents of the Great Replacement theory and associated hateful and misleading conspiracies.

This issue is also of particular concern to our robust cadre of veteran volunteers through our Veterans for American Ideals (VFAI) program. These are veterans who have worked alongside and relied on many of the targeted populations for their safety abroad as well as the advancement of U.S. national security objectives. It is of concern to our veterans who themselves comprise many of the targeted groups, and it is of concern to our veterans and their families who have paid the ultimate sacrifice abroad to protect our democracy and who must now witness domestic extremists attack those hard-fought freedoms here at home.

At Human Rights First, we believe that domestic extremism, and specifically white supremacy, is the greatest existential threat to our democracy and to our work to advance human rights. Misinformation and disinformation depicting refugees, other immigrants, and minorities as a threat to our country is both a human rights issue and a national security issue. That is why we have invested in our Extremism and Human Rights Program to promote efforts to expose the true nature of this threat and help support the development of society-wide extremism

prevention programs. Leveraging our unique experience, expertise, innovation work, and veteran volunteers, we will work to mitigate and ultimately counter this threat.

The Foundations of the Great Replacement Conspiracy Theory

If we are to examine white supremacist terrorism in the United States and the drivers behind the recent attacks, with an eye toward prevention, we must first examine the Great Replacement conspiracy theory. This conspiracy has been manifested in the ideologies of recent white supremacist terrorists, and is a contemporary combination of the racist, antisemitic, xenophobic, and misogynistic conspiracy theories that have driven bigotry and violence around the world for generations.

The conspiracy as we know it today first originated in 2011 and centers around the idea that there is a cabal of malevolent elites – often depicted as Jewish people – whose secret goal is to eliminate, enslave, or otherwise disempower white people by “replacing” this white population through non-white immigration and/or intermarriage. This non-white population, adherents suggest, will be more amenable to the malicious demands of the powerful cabal.

Elements of this racist ideology have animated white supremacist movements across American history. Notably, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* reached the United States in the 1920s, and has served as the basis for viciously antisemitic claims that Jewish people are secretly working to control all forms of political, cultural, and economic power around the world. The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s – the largest mobilization of the KKK to date – was frequently driven by anti-immigrant sentiment, and was saturated with propaganda warning of a national “take over” by Catholic immigrants.¹

In the decades following the Civil Rights Movement, white supremacists organized into paramilitary militias and skinhead gangs would rally against supposed efforts to “exterminate the white Aryan race,”² eventually describing themselves as facing a “white genocide.” Here again, they claimed to be facing an existential threat, orchestrated by a Jewish cabal via violent manipulations of people of color, immigrants, feminists, and other purported enemies. These same conspiracy theories circulated across the Atlantic, alongside distinctly European versions. Using the term “Eurabia,” nativists in France and soon much of the West began to suggest that the growing Muslim population in Europe would result in the Islamist take-over of Europe.³

The Great Replacement conspiracy theory, like the other conspiracy theories from which it draws, is inherently racist. White supremacists frequently draw on enduring stereotypes and select pieces of misinformation and disinformation to depict immigrants and/or non-whites as criminal and violent threats. Furthermore, by claiming that immigrant and/or non-white

¹ Gordon, L. 2017. *The second coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American political tradition*. Liveright Publishing Corporation.

² Southern Poverty Law Center, (SPLC). (Undated). David Lane. <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/david-lane>

³ Fekete, L. (2012). The Muslim conspiracy theory and the Oslo massacre. *Race & Class*, 53(3), 30-47

populations will be more easily manipulated and controlled, they suggest that people of color are intellectually and/or morally less capable than whites. Such rhetoric is deployed repeatedly to depict whites as threatened with extinction.

The Lethal Impact of “the Great Replacement” and White Supremacist Violence

Experts in political violence and extremism have long argued that the perception of an imminent, existential threat is a critical component to violent radicalization.⁴ The Great Replacement conspiracy is particularly lethal not only because it transmits this sense of dangerous urgency, but also because it translates fluidly among distinct geographic and social contexts. That is, the conspiracy has animated and underpinned the justification for mass murderers targeting a multitude of distinct racial, religious, and ethnic communities of people in countries all over the world.

In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the killer who attacked worshippers in a synagogue wrote that he believed Western Civilization was facing “extinction” and that refugees were “invaders”;⁵

The Christchurch, New Zealand killer titled his writings “The Great Replacement” and targeted Muslims in a country he was initially only visiting;⁶

The shooter in El Paso, Texas targeted Latinx people in the United States but wrote that he “supported” the racist screed from Christchurch;⁷

In Poway, California, the shooter first targeted a mosque and then a month later opened fire in a synagogue, claiming that Jews were orchestrating a “planned genocide of the European race”;⁸

And most recently, the killer in Buffalo, New York, spent weeks identifying a locale in which to murder Black Americans. His own screed was largely a plagiarism of the Christchurch shooter’s

⁴ Berger, J. M. (2018). *Extremism*. MIT Press.

⁵ Beckett, L. (2019, October 22). “Pittsburgh shooting: suspect railed against Jews and Muslims on site used by ‘alt-right.’” *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/oct/27/pittsburgh-shooting-suspect-antisemitism>

⁶ Polakow-Suransky, S. and Wildman, Sarah. (2019, March 16). The Inspiration for Terrorism in New Zealand Came From France. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/16/the-inspiration-for-terrorism-in-new-zealand-came-from-france-christchurch-brenton-tarrant-renaud-camus-jean-raspail-identitarians-white-nationalism/>

⁷ Arango, T., Bogel-Burroughs, N., and Benner, K. (2019, August 3). Minutes before El Paso killing, hate-filled manifesto appears online. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/03/us/patrick-crusius-el-paso-shooter-manifesto.html>

⁸ Beauchamp, Z. (2019, May 1). Poway and Pittsburgh: The rise in murderous anti-Semitism, explained. *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/5/1/18524103/poway-synagogue-shooting-anti-semitism>

“Great Replacement” text, but was so sloppy that at times he merely swapped out terms for one victimized community for another.⁹

This heartbreaking trail of violence illustrates how fluidly the Great Replacement conspiracy theory travels across borders and populations.

Unfortunately, these mass casualty attacks are only one element in the larger phenomenon of violent white supremacy and domestic extremism.

Over the last decade in available data, white supremacist terrorism in the United States has increased many times over. Of the 100 white supremacist attacks between 2000 and 2019, 80 of them occurred after 2009, according to the Global Terrorism Database (GTD).¹⁰ And while these terrorist attacks have increased, they have also become more lethal. Mass casualty attacks perpetrated by white supremacist terrorists like the horrific attack in Buffalo, used to be a rare occurrence. Now, they are frequent tragedies.

An Accelerated Threat in the Context of Social Media

It is not only the ideological and rhetorical tenets of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory that make it so lethal, it is also its propagation in a society continuously transformed by the Internet and, particularly, social media. In the context of white supremacist violence, I see this transformation primarily as an increase across five dimensions of the movement: 1) Decentralization and accessibility; 2) Ideological fluidity; 3) Transnationality; 4) Speed in radicalization; 5) Mainstreaming. To understand the role of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory in white supremacy, we have to account for this context. Below, I address each of these components.

Decentralized and Accessible: White supremacy today, like other forms of contemporary social organization, is a “networked”¹¹ field: decentralized, largely without gatekeepers, and with diverse sources of influence and funding. This networked organization makes the movement especially difficult to counter. In recent years, many of the most violent white supremacists are individuals who became immersed in white supremacist content exclusively online. But while these terrorists might have been operationally independent, they must be understood as members of deep and complex extremist online eco-system. At the same time, organized groups still operate within the movement, typically recruiting individuals from mainstream platforms and engaging them with increasingly extreme content in private online spaces, before, in some cases, in-person. This networked organization makes the movement especially difficult to counter.

⁹ Confessore, N. and Yourish, K. (2022, May 16). Replacement Theory, a fringe belief fueled online, is refashioned by G.O.P. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/15/us/replacement-theory-shooting-tucker-carlson.html>

¹⁰ National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). (2021). Global Terrorism Database [Data file]. <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>

¹¹ Castells, M. (2012). *Networks of outrage and hope: social movements in the internet age*. Polity.

Furthermore, white supremacists have been able to operate in virtual spaces with relative impunity. When content may violate a platform's terms of service, extremists use a range of strategies to overcome moderation, including disguising extremist content with innocuous titles, creating false accounts, or developing more toned-down rhetoric to introduce extremist ideas while avoiding content that would get them removed. The result is that anyone could be exposed to such content, and further, than anyone to whom it appeals can easily access more of this content.

Ideological Fluidity:

This organizational decentralization is also reflected by an ideological fluidity among white supremacists and other domestic extremists. Without traditional leaders or gatekeepers, individual extremists may “pick and choose” among elements of different movements they encounter online.¹² Influencers and leaders in the movement use this fluidity to their advantage. For example, after the 2020 election, white supremacists aggressively recruited new adherents among followers of the conspiracy known as QAnon, mobilizing especially around shared antisemitic tropes.¹³ In other cases, parallels in the anti-immigrant rhetoric of the militia movement and white supremacists reflect the increasing presence of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory across ideologies.

Transnationality: Transnational connections between and among white supremacists have existed for decades, but the Internet and social media have quantitatively and qualitatively transformed such relationships and the spread of extremist conspiracies. Today, the most violent online spaces among white supremacists are global, providing opportunities for white supremacists and fascists from the United States, Canada, Europe, and elsewhere, to interact and network. These interactions have directly facilitated the global spread, potency and lethality of Great Replacement conspiracy theory. Although some U.S. white supremacists have traveled abroad and built direct in-person relationships with international white supremacist groups, this network should be understood more as one of influence than of operational organizing. That is, the transnational connections are a result of the networked character of the movement, again, making it even more difficult to counter.

Rapid Radicalization: The quantity and accessibility of online extremist content has resulted in an acceleration of the radicalization process for many white supremacists and other domestic extremists. Data from the START at the University of Maryland showed that in the last decade and a half of available data, the average radicalization time for criminal extremists in the United

¹² Blee, K. (2018, December 8). In Chow, K. (Host). What the ebbs and flows of the kkk can tell us about white supremacy today. [Audio Podcast Interview, December 8]. *CODE SWITCH*. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2018/12/08/671999530/what-the-ebbs-and-flows-of-the-kkk-can-tell-us-about-white-supremacy-today>

¹³ Miller, C. (2021, April 21). “Neo-Nazis and White Supremacists Are Coding Their Language On Telegram To Recruit More People.” *Buzzfeed News*. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/christopherm51/neo-nazis-white-supremacists-telegram-recruit>

States decreased by more than 50 percent, from 15 to 7 months.¹⁴ Given the increasingly online social world since the start of the pandemic, this process has likely only increased.

Mainstreaming: Finally, social media has played an important role in the growth and mainstreaming of white supremacist ideas throughout common culture and institutions, including explicit and implicit references to the Great Replacement conspiracy theory. For example, this theory has been central to the ideology of the Identitarian movement, a xenophobic wing of white supremacy whose adherents have propagated the conspiracy on mainstream social media sites for much of the last seven years, although many such groups were eventually removed.¹⁵

White supremacists' use of social media to mainstream their goals, often toning down particular vile rhetoric, has been part of their strategy to gain more followers. For example, the Patriot Front, a leading white supremacist group in the U.S., tightly controls their public image, ensuring that public-facing content excludes explicit racism, relying instead on calls to Patriotism, European identity, and civic nationalism. Other white supremacist groups, such as the so-called Groyperers, work directly to build relationships with political representatives.¹⁶ These groups have used these tactics to successfully infiltrate and navigate spaces of public discourse often furthering components of the same narratives and principles that violent extremists use to justify acts of terrorism.

Human Rights First is Confronting the Threat

Human Rights First has established critical areas of action in challenging the threat of violent white supremacy.

This is why we launched our Extremism and Human Rights Program to promote a strategy that challenges white supremacy and allows us to support related prevention efforts in a number of ways. This program will leverage several unique tools, including our extensive litigation capabilities, to counter this threat.

For example, through our coalition of U.S. military veterans and allies, Veterans for American Ideals (VFAI), we have worked to track and expose patterns in extremist recruitment of members of the military community. In recent testimony to the House Veterans Affairs

¹⁴ Stanton, Z. (2021, February 11). The problem isn't just one insurrection. It's mass radicalization. *Politico*. [https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/02/11/mass-radicalization-trump-insurrection-468746?](https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/02/11/mass-radicalization-trump-insurrection-468746?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main-trump-insurrection-468746%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&hpt=hp-top-table-main-trump-insurrection-468746%3Ahomepage%2Fstory)

¹⁵ Davey, J. and Ebner, J. (2019). "The Great Replacement": The violent consequences of mainstreamed extremism. Institute for Strategic Dialogue. <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Great-Replacement-The-Violent-Consequences-of-Mainstreamed-Extremism-by-ISD.pdf>

¹⁶ Macdonald-Evoy, J. (2022, February 22). The "Groyper army" is looking to make white nationalism mainstream. It has key allies in Arizona politics. *AZMirror*. <https://www.azmirror.com/2022/02/22/the-groyper-army-is-looking-to-make-white-nationalism-mainstream-it-has-key-allies-in-arizona-politics/>

Committee,¹⁷ my colleague Chris Purdy outlined such extremist strategies and built the case for pursuing restorative solutions to online veteran radicalization, including increased veteran engagement by civil society and government alike. VFAI members seek to continue their service to America by upholding, defending, and advocating for human rights at home and abroad. Many veterans of our 10,000 member coalition have spoken out and are concerned about white supremacy and domestic extremism. Through their voices and actions they've demonstrated a desire to engage in substantive efforts to counter it. VFAI is dedicated to empowering our veteran community to be active voices in this field.

Also, our groundbreaking Innovation Lab brings together technologists, advocates, and researchers to develop investigative tools to advance the cause of human rights, including efforts to counter white supremacy and other forms of domestic extremism.¹⁸ For example, we recently launched “Raditude,” a search tool that tracks users and narratives across Youtube. Using Raditude, researchers identified 16 channels that were posting banned content from the white supremacist group Patriot Front, demonstrating and exposing how extremist groups continue to evade social media bans in order to mainstream their content.

At the same time, researchers used SurVAI, another Innovation Lab tool which uses computer algorithms to detect violent footage in video, to review 800 leaked videos from Patriot Front’s internal files. Our analysis showed that the seemingly defensive shields members carried at events were truly meant to be used for violence against perceived enemies at public rallies, as evidenced by their training practices. As these examples show, innovative technology will be a critical tool in challenging white supremacists’ organizing, on and offline.

Recommendations for Civil Society and Government

Reject the Cycle of White Supremacist Violence: As a society we must refuse to allow fear-mongering extremists to transform contemporary anxieties into violence and oppression as they have done throughout our nation’s history. Civil society must invest in rights-centered extremism and violence prevention programs at every level. Every wave of white supremacist violence in this country has been animated by conspiratorial and racist rhetoric, in response to large-scale social changes.

For instance, after a wave of largely Catholic immigration in the 1920s, the KKK warned that the Pope would soon enter the United States and declare himself emperor.¹⁹ Later, in the years following the Civil Rights Movement, white-power militias whose adherents were concerned

¹⁷ Purdy, C. (2022, March 31). Testimony to the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, “Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism.”

<http://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR00/20220331/114556/HHRG-117-VR00-Wstate-PurdyC-20220331-U1.pdf>

¹⁸ Innovation Lab, (2022). Human Rights First. <https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/campaigns/innovation-lab-tech-for-human-rights>

¹⁹ Blee, K. (1991). *The women of the Klan: Racism and gender in the 1920s*. University of California Press.

with advancements in human rights, claimed to be fighting a “Zionist Occupied Government.”²⁰ Today, white supremacists, concerned with demographic shifts, argue that cabals of elites are intentionally replacing people of European descent with immigrants and refugees from around the world to consolidate power.

By examining earlier iterations of such conspiracies in historical context, we can clearly see the deliberate machinations of those who advance the Great Replacement conspiracy theory. We know that propagating these narratives is deliberate tactic used by extremists, their sympathizers, and foreign adversaries to sew societal division and discontent – and they are succeeding. According to one recent study, one-third of Americans say they are concerned that immigrants are being brought to the country by a group of people for political gain.²¹ The same study showed that one in five younger Americans has heard of plans to implant microchips in people to make them easier to control. Since the beginning of the coronavirus crisis, the number of Americans who believe in conspiracy theories—which are often rooted in racist tropes—has soared, as has distrust of the media.²² This means that even more Americans are potentially turning to extremist content to shape their views about our society and our democracy and we must not cede our national and local narratives to conspiracy and red herrings about our history and present circumstances. As a society, we must reject this urge to scapegoat and point fingers and instead emphasize our common humanity.

Hold Perpetrators of White Supremacist Violence Accountable: At Human Rights First we believe that justice is a cornerstone of our democracy, and we must therefore pursue accountability for those who abuse human and civil rights and violate the law, no matter their affiliation. Persons or entities who facilitate or engage in white supremacist motivated hate crimes and terrorism must be held accountable and federal, state, and local government efforts to pursue justice must match the level of the growing threat. The FBI reported that the number of hate crimes in the United States rose in 2020 to the highest level in 12 years – propelled by increasing assaults on Black and Asian-Americans²³ and yet most of these crimes are never prosecuted.

Provide Sustained and Coordinated Support to Survivors: The impact of trauma caused by white supremacy can be long-lasting and generational. Trauma inflicted on individuals and communities can leave them, and their children, and grandchildren, crippled with despair and

²⁰ Belew, K. (2018). *Bring the war home: The white power movement and paramilitary America*. Harvard University Press.

²¹ AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. (2022). *Immigration Attitudes and Conspiratorial Thinkers: A Study Issued on the 10th Anniversary of The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research*.

apnorc.org/projects/immigration-attitudes-and-conspiratorial-thinkers

²² Zitelmann, R. (2020, June 29). How many Americans believe in conspiracy theories?

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/rainerzitelmann/2020/06/29/how-many-americans-believe-in-conspiracy-theories/?sh=89691b85e94c>

²³ Nakamura, D. (2021, August 3). Hate crimes rise to highest level in 12 years amid increasing attacks on Black and Asian people, FBI says. *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/hate-crimes-fbi-2020-asian-black/2021/08/30/28bede00-09a7-11ec-9781-07796ffb56fe_story.html

grief that can impact their ability to flourish and function in society. Federal and state governments must do more to provide sustained and coordinated support to survivors who are often left without the resources and networks to rebuild and address this trauma.

Ensure Transparency and a Rights-Centered Approach to Prevention: The federal government must proactively and transparently work to disrupt violent domestic extremist networks while ensuring civil rights and civil liberties are protected. A public health-based and rights-centered approach to extremism and violence prevention must be expanded through authorization; including enhancing existing federal grants and programming that advance evidence-based strategies and empower communities to address extremism. Federal data should be regularly publicized regarding domestic extremism and hate crimes investigations, arrests, charges, prosecutions, etc. Similarly, Congress should mandate transparency regarding resource distribution to specific types of domestic extremism investigations and ensure compliance with oversight requests.