A Twisted Love Story: How American Evangelicals Helped Make Putin's Russia and How Russia Became the Darling of the American Right • Power Concedes Nothing: 2020 Was an Extraordinary Year • "We Have to Push the Envelope": A Year After Storming the Capitol, White Nationalist "Groypers" Storm the Right • Can You Ever Trust a Former White Nationalist?
If you are wondering how Russia became the darling of the U.S. Right, historian Katherine Kelaidis, author of the Winter issue commentary “A Twisted Love Story” (page 4) takes us back to how the Cold War thwarted the relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and American evangelicals, and how a shared interest in manufacturing so-called-traditional values brings them to stoking the culture wars from the same side today. “The creation of an Orthodox Christianity under the influence of American evangelical norms had real consequences,” Kelaidis writes, “the rise of Orthodoxy as the newfound spiritual home of white nationalists being one of the more extreme.”

Antonio Gramsci famously stated, “The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters.” How grassroots organizing could vanquish the monsters of our age is the focus of “Power Concedes Nothing” edited by Linda Burnham, Max Elbaum, and María Poblet. Their introduction (page 5) catalogs the overlapping challenges to public and civic health that we collectively endured. “Whether the rich lessons of 2020 are absorbed and put to use by an expanded and more united progressive current in U.S. politics will, in no small measure, shape the future of democracy,” the editors proclaim. Composed just a step back from the brink of electoral collapse, it’s a poignant opening for the book’s collected stories of struggle and victory.

In our first feature “We Have to Push the Envelope” (page 9), PRA Research Analyst Ben Lorber describes how the White nationalist “Groypers” have pushed further into the mainstream with Nick Fuentes as frontman for the Gen-Z hard right. According to Lorber, “Fervent appeals to populist patriotism, hard-edged Christian nationalism, virulent anti-LGBTQ traditionalism, and conspiratorial anti-elitism all helped the groypers modulate their message in the register of the broader MAGA movement, without diluting their movement’s explicit White nationalist and antisemitic core.”

In our final feature, “Can You Ever Trust a Former White Nationalist?” (page 16), Shane Burley writes about right-wing influencers seeking redemption—or perhaps merely a sincere image refresh—and explores who profits from forgiveness when self-styled “formers” become CVE consultants, best-selling authors, and sought-after spokespeople. “All of this deeply complicates questions about which former White nationalists should be trusted as windows into the movement,” Burley writes, “and what accountability looks like for those who want to leave their harmful pasts behind.”

The cover Illustration “Missing Home” was created by Romana Romanysyn and Andriy Lesiv of Studio Agrafka in Lviv after Russia invaded Ukraine and more than half of children in the country became war refugees. The displaced artists reflect on the burden of transience and the universal pull of home in the Art of Activism (back cover).

In between print issues of The Public Eye, PRA is publishing frequently online at politicalresearch.org and religiondispatches.org. We hope you’ll visit us often.

Greeley O’Connor
If someone from 1965 were to arrive in a time machine, there’s likely much about our current state of affairs that would shock them. But I cannot imagine anything that would be more confusing than the love affair between the U.S. Right and Russia—the extent of which has come into stark clarity in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Beyond Donald Trump’s slightly unhinged, but wholly expected, comments praising Putin’s “genius” in illegally invading a sovereign nation, there are plenty of current “mainstream” Republican elected officials who seem unclear as to whether Russian aggression on the front porch of NATO is a good idea or not.

How did this ever happen?

The answer, as with most things wrong with the contemporary GOP, lies in the party’s almost complete takeover by evangelicals that began during the Nixon era.

Throughout the Cold War, the official atheism of communist countries and the suppression of religion behind the Iron Curtain became a rallying cry for the American Right in general and American evangelicals in particular, who made it their mission to save “Godless Russia,” seemingly unaware that before 1917, it had, in fact, been “Holy Mother Russia.”
In a pattern we’ve seen repeated again and again among American evangelicals before and since, they understood the persecution of the local indigenous Christian population and the suppression of a region’s historical Christian institutions to be primarily about themselves. And so, American evangelicals set about converting Russia to Christianity, a task that even a brief look at history would have revealed was already accomplished by the Byzantine Empire in the Middle Ages.

Almost immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union, American evangelicals began to flood into Russia, with a generation coming of age on mission trips to Moscow and Bible-buying fundraisers for St. Petersburg. Instead of meeting with hostility from the Russian Orthodox Church, these Protestant firebrands were generally welcomed. Which is the part of the story that’s perhaps most difficult to explain; Orthodoxy as a faith tradition has spent centuries resolutely opposed to corruption or co-option from outside.

With a fear of foreign contamination that would put the most strident member of the Academie Française to shame, Orthodox identity is resolutely grounded in notions of continuity and purity. Money and political influence are certainly part of the equation here, but there is another factor: on the other side of the Atlantic, the converts were flowing the other way.

The influx of Protestant American converts, many from the evangelical tradition, but also conservative mainline Protestants, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, radically changed the face of Orthodox Christianity in America. Once a church almost exclusively made up of immigrants and their descendants, these Americans with no historical ties to Orthodoxy became a majority in a number of Orthodox jurisdictions in the United States and brought with them their cultural baggage—most importantly the Culture Wars.

The changes were obvious and immediate, both in traditional Orthodox countries and in the diaspora. Of course, Orthodoxy has never been gay-affirming (despite John Boswell’s eloquent but unsubstantiated claims) and abortion had been cause for excommunication since the Middle Ages, but the fact is no one really talked about those pet issues of traditional values” that have been abandoned in the face of secular modernity.

Jerry Falwell’s words have flown across time and space and landed in the mouth of a Russian president. Frequently referring to the “so-called West,” Putin lists the crimes of the NATO nations as including that “They sought to destroy our traditional values and force on us their false values that would erode us, our people from within, the attitudes they have been aggressively imposing on their countries, attitudes that are directly leading to degradation and degeneration, because they are contrary to human nature. This is not going to happen.”

The Russian Orthodox Church and the Russia of today is in no small part what American evangelicals have helped make it, from building literal churches to sending religious educational material, to guiding political policy. In return, both have found a powerful ally very close to the beating heart of American power. Today, as Ukrainian blood flows, some of that blood is on the hands of those American evangelicals who went off to convert a nation that was Christian before Europeans arrived in the Americas. Every mission trip and box of Bibles that arrived “to Russia with love” helped to create this moment. Make no mistake about it.

Katherine Kelaidis is a writer and historian whose work focuses on early Medieval Christianity and contemporary Orthodox identity in non-traditionally Orthodox countries. She has also written for Salon, Ms. Magazine, and The New Republic.
The nation had endured four years of a presidential administration led by a white supremacist, anti-immigrant, self-dealing demagogue whose disdain for the institutions and procedures of democratic governance became ever more entrenched as his presidency unfolded. Trump deliberately attacked democratic norms and unleashed a suite of far-right actors prepared to use Congress, the federal bureaucracy, the courts, the Republican Party, state legislatures, right-wing media, and armed militias in their bid for authoritarian rule. Of course Trump’s particular brand of toxicity seeped into well-tilled soil. Forty years of Republican anti-tax, anti-regulatory, anti-government ideology and governance; backlash against the election of the nation’s first Black president; fear of demographic change; the growth of a far-right, all-encompassing media environment; and long-standing, deeply rooted patterns of white and Christian supremacy set the stage for his election. It took most of us far too long to fully comprehend that Trump’s presidency represented a qualitative increase in the determination and capacity of the right to impose minority rule.

And then, in early 2020, the emergent COVID-19 pandemic layered a public health crisis on top of a crisis of democracy. The pandemic exposed, once again, profound inequalities related to class, race, gender, and immigration status. Debates over the public health measures required to halt the pandemic fed on and exacerbated political volatility. The pandemic also underscored Trump’s unique blend of incompetence, disinterest in actually governing, and profound indifference to human suffering—character traits ultimately responsible for hundreds of thousands of unnecessary deaths, and which likely contributed to defeat in his bid for re-election. As if the public health and democracy
challenges were not enough, the millions of acres burned in 2020 wildfires, unprecedented flooding, and other extreme weather events, deepened awareness of the urgency of climate crisis and the scale of interventions needed to mitigate it. The reckless denialism of the Republican Party is evidence of their willingness to put the lives of current and future generations at mortal risk in exchange for the support of the fossil fuel industry. The campaign had demonstrated that a substantial swath of the electorate is open to a left-of-center political agenda. The campaigns of both Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren in 2020 generated levels of excitement and support that confirmed the existence of a large constituency in favor of governance and policies well to the left of the Democratic Party mainstream. Their platforms, including a Green New Deal, Medicare for All, the cancellation of student loan and medical debt, a humane immigration policy, and higher taxation rates on corporations and the ultra-wealthy made it clear that neoliberal austerity for the poor and precarious was not the only thing on offer. There is an alternative. Though their primary bids failed, their candidacies opened up new realms of possibility and sparked left imagination.

The US left has been neither united nor strategic in its electoral interventions for many, many decades. Since Jesse Jackson’s campaigns for the presidency in 1984 and 1988, and the subsequent collapse of the Rainbow Coalition, some sectors of the left have rejected engagement with the two-party system. Instead, they have adopted an abstentionist stance or launched largely symbolic third-party efforts. More pragmatic sectors of the left tended to vote for Democrats based on a harm reduction framework, while putting little energy into electoral politics. Overextended (and underfunded) on community-based or issue-based organizing projects, and often lacking the skill sets and the organizational vehicles to intervene effectively in the electoral realm, they prioritized other battlefronts.

But beginning about 10 to 15 years ago, these dynamics began to change as local and state-based groups—many of them represented in these pages—started to grapple directly with one of the central ways in which US political power is accumulated and wielded. An important set of organizations emerged that combine social justice values with electoral organizing, and that are determined to build political power independent of the Democratic Party. The 2016 election underscored the importance of these initiatives and brought other left forces in from the abstentionist sidelines. The degree of traction achieved by Bernie Sanders’ campaign together with Trump’s surprise triumph brought home to nearly every

**With any luck, we are in the early stages of an era in which the left strengthens its capacity for effective intervention from one election to the next, shifting the political alignment in a more progressive direction.**

election season was haunted by the prospect of environmental collapse.

**LEFT AND CENTER AGAINST THE RIGHT**

The 2020 elections served as a temperature check on where the country stood after four years of the most intense political polarization since the Civil War. The elections also served as a reading on the relative strength of various political blocs, that is, the capacity of left, right, and center to shape the political terrain. Conservatives, having subordinated themselves to the far right, consolidated the Republican Party around the MAGA agenda of racial and imperial revenge, with Trump as Maximum Leader. White supremacist militias and Q-anon conspiracy theorists were welcomed into the fold. This newly dominant bloc looked eagerly toward another four-year term as an opportunity to double down on white minority, patriarchal rule. Despite a few notable defections from his camp and from the Republican Party, Trump went into the election with the advantages of his incumbency, the dated Electoral College system that confers advantages on white and rural voters, and a roused, highly motivated right-wing base.

Of course, the main question to be settled by the election was whether a broad enough coalition could be forged to rebound from Hillary Clinton’s disastrous 2016 loss and toss Trump out of the White House. Mainstream Democrats had to at least nod to the left. Bernie Sanders’ 2016
dered why such belated enlightenment always seems to require the sacrifice of Black lives.

In any case, the ruthless suffocation of George Floyd impacted the presidential contest and set off social and political currents that continue to shape today’s national dialogue. Debates over racist policing and incarceration and intractable, racialized economic inequities inevitably filtered into the campaigns. And the right-wing distortion industrial complex mangled anti-racist demands in ways that were guaranteed to energize their base. This continues today, with the Republican base mobilized to discredit any attempt to teach the history of US racism, under the banner of opposition to critical race theory.

IN THIS BOOK

Voters turned out in record numbers in 2020. The 2020 electorate, as compared to 2016, showed the largest increase on record between two presidential elections. Turnout rates increased in every state, in every racial and ethnic group, across gender, and in every age cohort.

The record turnout was driven, at least in part, by the grassroots activists and leaders who tell their stories in this book. This volume of essays provides a close-in vantage point on how many of the organizations that anchor social justice organizing in the US met the challenge of an electoral campaign. The organizations and networks represented here led an array of initiatives across the country. Their work on the ground contributed substantially to the margins needed to defeat Trump.

It is our hope that this volume enables the left to share experiences and insights across organizations, constituencies, issues, and geographies. And that it serves to strengthen the left’s orientation to, and practice in, this arena. Each of its chapters sheds light on a distinct set of organizing challenges, protagonists, and approaches to electoral work. Yet a few themes surfaced again and again.

Most of the organizations represented here focused on some combination of registering and motivating new voters and targeting outreach to “low-propensity voters.” Communities with high concentrations of low-propensity voters—including communities of color—often reflect the results of entrenched patterns of political investment. A party committed to turning out suburban soccer moms is unlikely to prioritize the kind of work it takes to transform a low-propensity voter into a high-potential voter. The strategies implemented by the organizations in this book were based on the conviction that sufficient investment of time and resources—together with culturally savvy messaging—could tap into the potential of low-propensity voters to determine election outcomes.

While COVID-19 forced organizers to innovate on contacting and mobilizing voters at a distance, there is no substitute for the work on the doors. Engaging prospective voters in conversation, listening hard to their concerns, answering basic questions as to how, where, and when to vote—all this is better served by face-to-face conversations than by phone or text—or, at an even further remove, ads. Every mode of voter communication was needed for the scale of outreach 2020 demanded, and the contributions of the tens of thousands of people who phoned and texted were absolutely indispensable. But high-quality work on the doors, in union halls, places of worship, schools, and community centers—unmediated human connection—brings out leadership qualities in canvassers and volunteers, identifies potential activists and allies, and produces experiences that can be mined for lessons that shape future work in ways that other forms of outreach cannot.

Investment in high-cost, fly-in/fly-out consultants and pollsters is often misplaced spending. Donors need to think long and hard about investing in the local organizations and leaders that are committed to staying in place for the long haul—well beyond this electoral cycle or the next.

There are challenges related to aligning work on electoral campaigns with the robust, ongoing relationship-building, grassroots campaigning, and organization-building required to win progressive change. Those challenges can be anticipated and worked with in productive ways. And the relationships and skills acquired in these distinct forms of work can be mutually reinforcing.

The contributors to this book are busy with the work of creating a more just society. The pressure of that work, especially in these turbulent times, leaves little room for reflection and summation. The next battle looms. We are grateful that our contributors found the space to bring us stories of what they did, and why and how they did it.

Some chapters in Power Concedes Nothing focus on electoral organizing in states that were key to the presidential contest. Others reflect on the efforts of progressive networks and alliances engaged in multi-state organizing. The critical role of organized labor in getting out the vote is the subject of several articles. Organizers in communities of color bring attention to the role of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian American voters in 2020.

No single volume on grassroots electoral organizing could hope to be comprehensive. We have not covered every sector of the social justice movement. Nor have we been able to include the work of many indispensable organizations and networks. We hope that the process of summarizing experiences and sharing lessons will continue in many other forms.
2022 AND 2024

While the country took a small step back from a precipice on November 3, 2020, there was barely a pause before Trump loyalists rallied to a new cause—the alleged “steal” of the election. The violent, failed insurrection on January 6 drove home the level of commitment of Trump and his party to remaining in power by any and all means.

The lie that Trump won, and that a Democrat is illegitimately sitting in the White House, serves at least two purposes. The base, feeding on a constant stream of new false narratives, has been provided with a cause, which keeps it inflamed and stokes polarization. And Republican political operatives, in state houses and on election boards across the country have an excuse to introduce laws and procedures intended to constrain democracy and suppress the votes of the constituencies Democrats depend upon.

So here we are in 2022 and the right-wing authoritarians who lost in 2020 are still challenging the results of that election. Each day they demonstrate their dedication to white minority, patriarchal rule. Each day they make clear that they are glad to resort to extra-legal—or even violent—measures, if staying within the bounds of the law serves as a check on their power.

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The midterm elections of 2022 and the presidential election of 2024 are shaping up to be pitched battles. Trump enablers, acolytes, wannabes, and bankrollers are doing everything in their power to gain ground in 2022 and restore Trump in 2024. A Trump restoration would be far worse than his election in 2016. He has shown all of us who he is and what he stands for. And if health or criminal prosecution takes him out of the running, other would-be strongmen are lining up to take his place. A GOP victory, whether by quasi-legal means or by what amounts to a coup, would signal a truly profound degeneration of the political space. As many have noted, right-wing resurgence and the figure of an authoritarian strongman with fascistic leanings are phenomena not limited to the United States. But, given the place and power of the US in global politics, the further shredding of democratic norms and institutions and/or a Trump restoration would likely incur disastrous consequences, both nationally and globally. Said another way, the stakes in 2022 and 2024 remain extraordinarily high.

We may be sure that the social justice organizations that share their experiences in this book are fully alert to what hangs in the balance for the constituencies and issues they represent. Whether the rich lessons of 2020 are absorbed and put to use by an expanded and more united progressive current in US politics will, in no small measure, shape the future of democracy.

OUR TITLE

We take our title from a speech given in 1857 by the brilliant abolitionist Frederick Douglass. Here is the paragraph in which the phrase appears:

This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress. In the light of these ideas, Negroes will be hunted at the North and flogged at the South so long as they submit to those devilish outrages and make no resistance, either moral or physical. Men may not get all they pay for in this world, but they must certainly pay for all they get. If we ever get free from the oppressions and wrongs heaped upon us, we must pay for their removal. We must do this by labor, by suffering, by sacrifice, and if needs be, by our lives and the lives of others.

We encourage you to read the whole speech.

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Max Elbaum is a longstanding activist in the peace, anti-racist and radical movements. He is the author of Revolution in the Air and is currently an editor of Convergence (formerly Organizing Upgrade).

María Poblet is a longtime community organizer with roots in Buenos Aires, Guadalajara, and East Los Angeles. She was instrumental in building Causa Justa :: Just Cause and currently serves as the Executive Director of Grassroots Power Project and as a board member of the Bay Area Rising Action Fund.
On January 6, 2021, White nationalist Nick Fuentes stood outside of the U.S. Capitol, addressing a crowd of thousands, as rioters streamed into the building. Hailing the "American people rising up and taking our country back," Fuentes urged the crowd to "not leave this capitol until Donald Trump is inaugurated President." They were there, he reminded them, to "put Donald Trump back in office…so that he can take every last illegal alien and throw them back over the border," and so "we can finally free ourselves from the parasitic global special interests." While Fuentes agitated outside, his movement's blue "America First" flag was among those carried by insurrectionists into the Capitol, and one groyper sat in Vice President Mike Pence's chair in the Senate chamber.

One year later, Fuentes may remain under federal scrutiny in ongoing Capitol insurrection investigations. However, while other far-right formations present that day, such as the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers, have seen their national momentum falter, Fuentes' America First/groper movement—a largely online and anonymous network of Gen Z White nationalists and hard-right paleoconservatives that inherited the legacy of the 2016-17 Alt Right—has seen its profile continue to rise. Fuentes and America First have attracted the support of national and local Republican officials, become a countercultural force among Gen Z conservative activists, and cast a long shadow over the MAGA Right, all while fortifying and expanding their organizational infrastructure. As a bevy of nationalist and populist figures jostle to claim the mantle of Trumpism, Fuentes seeks to secure a place for White nationalist concerns within the shifting consensus that defines movement conservatism. His momentum both accelerates and reflects the mainstreaming of White nationalism in U.S. politics, and highlights the challenges posed to existing "counter-extremism" strategies in the face of an increasingly normalized Far Right.

GOSAR’S EMBRACE

One month after the Capitol insurrection, U.S. Representative Paul Gosar (R-AZ) made a surprise appearance as the headline speaker at the groypers' second annual America First Political Action Conference in Orlando, Florida (AF-PAC II). In a move that would become an opening salvo for the post-Trump era, Gosar addressed the crowd of White nationalists as "American patriots," and repeat-
ed the groyper mantra, “America First is inevitable,” to raucous applause. In his own speech that evening, Fuentes laid out the movement’s guiding White nationalist principles around demographics and identity, warning against America losing its “White demographic core” and insisting that, “White people founded this country, this country wouldn’t exist without White people, and White people are being bullied.”

Despite attempts to distance himself from the more explicitly racist comments made by Fuentes, Gosar was the only sitting elected official to accept the invitation to speak at AFPAC II. The next day, Gosar’s defense of attending the conference suggested that he considered the groypers a worthwhile constituency within a big-tent conservative coalition. “We thought: There is a group of young people that are becoming part of the election process, and becoming a bigger force,” Gosar told The Washington Post. “So why not take that energy and listen to what they’ve got to say?”

That summer, the Gosar campaign seemingly planned a campaign fundraiser alongside Fuentes, leading to significant national outcry, including from some conservatives. “America First does not mean Sieg Heil,” tweeted one evangelical radio host, “but Gosar is willfully aligning with those who act like they think it does.” Ultimately the event was not held, but Gosar dismissed calls to denounce the groyper leader, making a case for inclusion that would soon be echoed elsewhere on the post-Trump Right. “Not sure why anyone is freaking out,” he tweeted on June 28. “I’ll say this: there are millions of Gen Z, Y and X conservatives. They believe in America First. They will not agree 100% on every issue. No group does. We will not let the Left dictate our strategy, alliances and efforts. Ignore the left.”

As the year progressed, Gosar doubled down. His social media accounts became emmeshed with the groyper ecosystem, adopting the aesthetics and buzzwords of the movement, and the broader online Far Right, in a steady stream of “edgy” memes and video montages (most notoriously an anime-style video in which an avatar of Gosar appeared to kill his House colleague, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez). He regularly retweeted Fuentes and other groypers as long-time White nationalist Vincent James Foxx, veteran of the Rise Above Movement, and when scores of groyper accounts were banned from Twitter in December 2021, Gosar took to Gab to personally welcome them to the platform.

But even more significant than Gosar’s embrace of Fuentes was the consistent lack of meaningful pushback from most other conservative leaders, signaling their tacit acceptance and normalization of White nationalists as an acceptable part of the conservative coalition.

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The GOP’s silence on Gosar’s increasing public alliance with Fuentes and other members of the Far Right stands in sharp contrast to how the party handled leaders’ flirtation with White nationalism during much of the Trump presidency. In early 2019, for example, former Iowa Congressman Steve King (who also spoke at AFPAC II) was stripped of his committee assignments by fellow House Republicans after asking, “White nationalist, White supremacist, Western civilization—how did that language become offensive?” But such tacit endorsements no longer appear as taboo.

The groyper movement has clear, long-term aspirations to influence, antagonize, and ultimately reshape the rightward flank of U.S. conservatism in its image, as Fuentes explained in a May 28, 2021 episode of his “America First” show: My job, and the job of the groypers and America First, is to keep pushing further. We—because nobody else will—have to push the envelope. And we’re gonna get called names. We’re gonna get called racist, sexist, antisemitic, bigoted, whatever…and when the party is where we are two years later, we’re not gonna get the credit for the ideas that become popular…but that’s ok. That’s our job. We are the right-wing flank of the Republican Party, and if we didn’t exist, the Republican Party would be falling backwards all the time, constantly falling backwards, receding into the Center and the Left. So we have got to be on the Right, dragging these people kicking and screaming into the future, into the right wing, into a truly reactionary party. And it’s incremental—we’re not gonna drag them all the way over—but if we can drag over the furthest part of the Right further to the Right, and we can drag the Center further to the Right, and we can drag the Left further to the Right, then we’re winning.

While many other White nationalists, in the final years of the Trump presidency, roundly rejected any strategy to intervene in mainstream politics, the groypers took the opposite tack. They wrapped their fixation on White demographics and identity in the flag and the cross, and pledged to wrest control of the MAGA movement away from establishment conservatives who, in their inflexible devotion to the nominally raceblind neoliberal consensus, had buried White identity politics and betrayed the true promise of Trump’s agenda.

The groypers struck their first blow against the conservative establishment in late 2019, when the movement made headlines with a series of provocative in-
Interventions at campus events sponsored by Turning Point USA, driving leaders like Charlie Kirk and Ben Shapiro to debate White nationalist views on immigration, demographics, White identity, opposition to U.S. support for Israel, and more. But even as this groyper rebellion made waves—drawing both media attention and condemnation from mainstream conservatives—it underscored a deeper obstacle: that in the lingering shadow of White nationalist violence at events like the 2017 “Unite the Right” rally, anyone associated with the movement remained anathema to the establishment Right, and its ideas were denied a hearing in the conservative conversation.

The groypers found their opportunity to shift this dynamic in the waning days of the Trump presidency, and their actions set the stage for Gosar’s AFPAC II endorsement the following winter. After November 3, 2020, when Trump insisted the election had been stolen, Fuentes and the groypers quickly became frontline players in the emerging Stop the Steal coalition, taking to the streets at the Million MAGA March in Washington, D.C., and organizing protests at state capitols in Michigan, Georgia, and elsewhere alongside other leaders such as Alex Jones and Ali Alexander.

At a moment when some of the conservative establishment lent tepid support to Stop the Steal, Fuentes and the groypers were all in, presenting an energetic and youthful face at the protests, and bolstering their image as Trump’s loyal vanguard along the way. Highly publicized groyper chants such as “Destroy the GOP!” designed to inflect Stop the Steal with an insurgent, anti-establishment tone for a conservative movement at a crossroads, made national headlines.

Their energy caught the attention of Gosar, too. The Congressman had been one of the earliest backers of Stop the Steal—at one rally, organizer Ali Alexander called Gosar the “spirit animal of this movement.” On December 9, Gosar tweeted, “Let’s keep our momentum” alongside a meme from a groyper account that photoshopped Fuentes, Gosar, and Trump into seeming battle formation, with a military helicopter overhead and a caption praising Fuentes for “mobiliz[ing] the country in the streets.”

In this December 9, 2020 re-tweet, Gosar helped promote Fuentes as a key leader of the Stop the Steal movement, then underway.

In 2021, following Gosar’s appearance at AFPAC II, Fuentes continued to exploit
opportunities to edge the groyper brand further into the conservative big tent. He rallied the America First banner under popular causes such as “Big Tech censorship” and opposition to COVID-19 public safety measures, and deepened relationships with prominent right-wing personalities like Alex Jones, gaining access to new audiences and influential networks across the far-right ecosystem. Fervent appeals to populist patriotism, hard-edged Christian nationalism, virulent anti-LGBTQ traditionalism, and conspiratorial anti-elitism all helped the groypers modulate their message in the register of the broader MAGA movement, without diluting their movement’s explicit White nationalist and antisemitic core.

**The groypers have become a countercultural presence, especially on the nationalist flank of the broader Gen Z Right, leaving their imprint on the culture—and with it, the politics—of a rising generation of conservative leaders.**

In late April, Fuentes tweeted that he had been barred from boarding an aircraft on the way to headlining a Florida rally against “Big Tech Censorship,” and that he had been placed on a federal no-fly list in retaliation for his participation in the January 6 Capitol insurrection—an assertion that remains unconfirmed. Over the next week, a bevy of MAGA media figures, including Mike Cernovich, Dinesh D’Souza, Daily Wire hosts Matt Walsh and Andrew Klavan, Lauren Chen, Michael Knowles, and others, along with contrarian journalist Glenn Greenwald, boosted the narrative on their shows and social media accounts, framing Fuentes as a victim of political persecution. “Maybe there is more common ground than previously thought possible,” Fuentes offered in a May 3 tweet thanking several figures for what would have once seemed their unlikely support. “We have to be imaginative in order to defeat powerful forces.”

Even while many of these figures stressed various disclaimers about how they disagreed with a number of Fuentes’ views, their sympathetic coverage was nonetheless a coup of its own. In a conservative discourse saturated with competing postures of martyrdom at the hands of Big Tech, the Biden administration, and other “regime” overlords, Fuentes eagerly branded himself as “the most censored man in the world” and the premier “civil rights icon” of the victimized Right. In the months that followed, leaders such as U.S. Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-FL) continued to circulate calls to take Fuentes off the no-fly list. Fuentes’ Twitter ban in July elicited another chorus of conservative condemnation, with Dinesh D’Souza bemoaning that Fuentes “is now the most banned person on the Internet…targeted not only by the tech companies but also by the federal justice system for no other reason than thought crimes.” The interview, in turn, was lauded by the groypers as a new milestone in their long march towards overtaking the mainstream. While notoriety eventually caught up with Richard Spencer, today this infamy may be Fuentes’ smoothest path in.

In December 2021, hard-right Arizona state senator Wendy Rogers walked through the door Gosar had opened. “Thank you, Nick Fuentes. We love you,” Rogers tweeted after Fuentes called her “based.” She continued, “Because Nick Fuentes said I am BASED, I am now truly BASED. It is official.” Rogers had previously called Fuentes’ removal from the no-fly list, given interviews to close Fuentes ally Lauren Witzke on the antisemitic outlet TruNews, and, one week before praising Fuentes online, sat down for an in-person interview with local groyper activists.

Celebrating the endorsement, Gosar remarked on Gab that Rogers is “certainly very based—some might say she’s even catching up to me! Keep up the great work, Wendy!” This call-and-response between Fuentes and the GOP’s hard-right flank, like so many others, shows his incrementalist strategy paying off in real time.

**CHANGING THE CULTURE**

Meanwhile, Fuentes and the groypers continue to hold significant sway among Gen Z conservative leaders. On college campuses, multiple groups within state and national organizations like California College Republicans and Republicans United have close ties to the groyper movement (even self-identifying as groypers) and have hosted events featuring movement leaders. Other new far-right Gen-Z groups angling for conservative influence, like the American Populist Union, have consciously adopted Fuentes’ talking points and style, while shying away from hardline White nationalism and antisemitism, in a bid to ride the movement’s wave.

Departing from other White nationalist formations, the groypers eagerly highlight support from conservative leaders of color, such as former host of BlazeTV’s “The White House Brief” Jon Miller and MAGA rapper Bryson Gray (whose anti-Biden “Let’s Go Brandon” song went viral in late October 2021), and welcome activists of color into the movement base, hoping to blunt charges of White nationalism. While much of the movement base remains anonymous, 2021 saw many groypers network publicly at conservative conferences, work within youth institutions like the Leadership Institute, organize America First camping retreats and “White Boy Summer” meetups, and circulate elsewhere as Fuentes’ ambassadors across Gen-Z conservative institutional and cultural life, lending the blue America First hat brand recognizability among many activists on the young Right.
In one notable example, at least two major influencers featured on Republican Hype House—a large political account on TikTok that commanded over 1.2 million followers and 51 million likes before it was banned in October 2021—were enthusiastic groypers⁵⁴ who incorporated White nationalist themes into their video content, and promoted Fuentes and the movement regularly on their own accounts. In these ways and others, the groypers have become a countercultural presence, especially on the nationalist flank of the broader Gen Z Right, leaving their imprint on the culture—and with it, the politics—of a rising generation of conservative leaders.

While its internal growth and digital reach has been hobbled by steady deplatforming⁵⁵ from most social media sites, payment processors, and streaming services, America First has built a team of staff and interns, professionalized its design and video production capacity, and acquired⁵⁶ its own streaming platform, which now hosts almost two dozen other far-right streamers in addition to Fuentes. At a time when the rest of the White nationalist movement has mostly avoided large offline mobilizations (aside from tightly-scripted flash demonstrations and the occasional closed-door conference), Fuentes has repeatedly taken the groypers movement to the streets⁵⁷ throughout 2021, holding public meetups and sometimes confrontation-al rallies across the country.

**GROYPERS VS. POPULISM, INC.**

As conservatives deliberate their future in the post-Trump era, Fuentes aims to bring White nationalist ideas on immigration, demographics, and White identity further into the conversation. Circumnventing his Twitter ban, Fuentes engaged in a rare public debate on December 5, 2021 with several young conservative leaders in a Twitter Spaces voice chat room. “You agree with me on certain things,” he told the group, “but you can’t say it.” Among the group of leaders in the Twitter Space that night were National Review fellow Nate Hochman and American Moment President Saurabh Sharma, who were recently profiled in The New Republic as part of a wave of radical young intellectuals who want to take over the American Right; “populist culture warriors” who want “to see Republicans abandon their fealty to free-market dogmas, embrace traditional Christianity, and use the levers of state power to wage the culture war for keeps.” The chat room featured young people with connections to the Trump White House, the Claremont Institute, National Review magazine, the America First Policy Institute, American Moment, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, and other outfits, who cast themselves as the true inheritors of the spirit of Trump’s “America First” revolution. Self-styled radical dissidents and hard-edged traditionalists, they also, like the groypers, admire paleoconservative forerunners like Pat Buchanan, and see themselves fighting a two-front war against a society ruled by degenerate elite liberal institutions on the one hand, and an out-of-touch, Reaganite conservative establishment on the other. But unlike Fuentes, they eschew explicit racial nationalism in favor of a broader nationalist and populist agenda. The coalition they represent—which groypers derisively call “Populism, Inc.”—seeks to orient the post-Trump Right around some variant of economic and cultural nationalism. Admirers of firebrands like Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and Missouri Senator Josh Hawley, they often champion defense of “Western civilization” as an ostensibly non-racial set of transmissible cultural values and political traditions, and emphasize multiracial populism and the importance of base-building among conservative minority groups. “You’ve gotten a lot of kids based and we respect that for sure,” admitted one among the assembled group, speculating that Fuentes is “probably a better influence than Ben Shapiro on young men who might otherwise be [mainstream] conservatives.”

**Consequently, Fuentes continued, the Right must recognize the ongoing race war on traditional White America, and help Whites band together to advocate for their interests.**
sand with fantasies of what one interlocutor called “an encompassing American identity,” “transmissible Anglo-American culture,” or some other ostensibly race-neutral category, but must ultimately acknowledge the real elephant in the room: White identity politics. Attempting to redpill his interlocutors on the central tenets of White nationalism, Fuentes argued that “the White race is real,” and that race more broadly is an “essential part of a person”, a “biological fact...like a taxonomy.” Consequently, he continued, the Right must recognize the ongoing race war on traditional White America, and help Whites band together to advocate for their interests. Only by orienting itself explicitly (though not exclusively) as the party of disaffected White Americans, Fuentes insisted, could the GOP fortify its power base against the Left for decades to come.

Some responded by allowing that “maybe it would be ideal” if White identity politics was a viable central organizing principle on the Right, but that “even if we wanted to reverse the last 100 years of immigration...it’s just not plausible.” By the end of the call, however, others had conceded that Fuentes was “influential and...a lot of what he says is good,” dialing back their disagreement to one largely of style, not substance.

“IT’S TIME TO SHIFT THE CENTER AGAIN”

The debate illustrated just how radically the playing field has shifted for the movement in the last two years. During the latter half of the Trump presidency, the task at hand for the groypers, as Fuentes explained to followers on an April 2019 members-only broadcast, had been to “break away” from the toxic Alt Right and “form a new periphery...get in there, introduce the talking points, infiltrate, start converting people, and build bridges...Bit by bit we start to break down these walls and we start to get back in...and then one day, we become the mainstream.”

Nearly three years later, White nationalism continues to move mainstream. On September 22, 2021, as the Biden administration began to forcibly deport thousands of Haitian immigrants at the Texas border—a choice widely condemned by progressives as a continuation of Trump-era immigration restrictions—Tucker Carlson introduced his audience of millions to the core terminology and principles of White nationalism, claiming that Biden was promoting “an unrelenting stream of immigration” to “change the racial mix of the country...in political terms, this policy is called the ‘Great Replacement’: the replacement of legacy Americans...to reduce the political power of people whose ancestors lived here, and dramatically increase the proportion of Americans newly-arrived from the Third World.” It was far from the first time Carlson had used replacement rhetoric, but his deployment of the terms “Great Replacement” and “legacy Americans”—language lifted directly from the White nationalist canon—marked a new milestone.

The next day, groypers had even more reason to celebrate when Charlie Kirk, leader of the campus-based organization Turning Point USA and longtime groyper foe, said the quiet part even louder, calling on Texas to “deputize a citizen force [and] put them on the border,” and arguing that the arrival of Haitian immigrants was “about diminishing and decreasing White demographics in America.” This was a radical departure from the days of the late 2019 Groyper Wars, when Kirk responded to a groyper’s question about non-White immigration, changing demographics, and maintaining “our White European ideals” by calling “arguments...
A broader politics of White reaction and rage continues to take root across conservatism. This takes form in deepening policies of minority voter suppression, pervasive moral panic over “critical race theory,” revisionist histories of the Capitol insurrection and more.

outsider is more than ever a strategic asset in a broader conservative movement awash with self-styled outsiders, affording the groypers an unprecedented degree of call-and-response interaction with the MAGA Right.

As the conservative movement lurches further right, the ideas he represents dwell in proximate and dynamic tension with other, less explicitly racist strands of populist nationalism also in ascendence. If the America First wing of the GOP continues to gain influence through the 2022 midterms, Fuentes’ early maneuvering could edge the groyper brand even further into the conservative big tent.

In an age where losing one’s Twitter account is seen on the Right as a badge of honor, and leaders like Fuentes are embracing ideologically-aligned alternative sites like Gab—where Fuentes has amassed nearly as many followers as he once had on Twitter—standard interventions like deplatforming (long effective at limiting the reach of radical Right movements) face fresh challenges. Similarly, the strategy of “naming and shaming” White nationalists within conservative institutions may offer diminishing returns, as the once-pervasive pressure to expel and quarantine White nationalist ideology gradually softens within a conservative movement that’s increasingly adding that ideology to its toolkit and opting not to purge, but to protect and expand, its ranks.

With the 2022 midterms on the horizon, the America First movement has launched a 501c4 political action nonprofit, and has pledged to endorse and run its own candidates for office. At least three groyper candidates—Maryland House of Delegates candidate Shekinah Hollingsworth, West Virginia Congressional candidate Michael Sisco—and California Congressional candidate Nick Taurus—have already launched electoral campaigns. Whether or not Fuentes and his followers are able to deepen their inroads into the big-tent GOP coalition, the ideas they carry with them have already arrived.

Conservatives “need to take the Trump legacy and build on top of it,” Fuentes told followers on a May 2021 episode of America First, adding that “2020 showed us that 2016 was not nearly enough.” The conservative attitude going forward, he continued, should be that:

We have to go further, we have to go harder, we have to be more radical, more revolutionary...at an accelerating pace, never stopping, never relenting, never moderating...Donald Trump was the beginning, was a starting point, and the real way to carry on his legacy...[is] to take the baton and carry it through to its logical conclusions...We love Trump, but he was a first step. We’re the next step....For a long time, people were afraid of going further to the Right, they didn’t wanna be thought of as the furthest to the Right. I wanna be the furthest to the Right! I wanna be the furthest Right reactionary and drag everybody over.

Donald Trump had shifted the Center before, Fuentes continued, but this was a new era. “So it’s time to shift the Center again.”

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A
fter leaving behind her career on the Far Right, it only made sense for Katie McHugh to turn over emails from her former bosses, colleagues, and boyfriend. McHugh had been an Alt Right favorite, an editor at Breitbart News who helped funnel far-right ideas into mainstream conservatism. She emailed and spoke regularly with Trump’s senior White House aide Stephen Miller, who advised her to re-purpose content from White nationalist sources like VDare for her posts at Breitbart. She was dating White nationalist writer Kevin DeAnna, a member of the “folkish” heathen cult the Wolves of Vinland and a contributor for Alt Right leader Richard Spencer’s Radix Journal, and attended parties with people from groups like American Renaissance. When she was fired in 2017 for social media posts that proved too racist and Islamophobic even for Breitbart, her life appeared to go into a tailspin.

In 2018, she had started saying she wanted out. Her relationship with movement leaders and DeAnna had broken down, and she says she was rethinking the ideas she’d once claimed as her own. Several months later, McHugh was connected with anti-radicalization groups and journalists, saying she wanted to undo some of the harm she’d caused. She started considering what she knew about the movement, and what documentation she had. One of the most obvious smoking guns was a cache of emails she’d received from Stephen Miller, where he helped set the anti-immigrant agenda at Breitbart, and spoke relatively openly about his intentions.

To McHugh, their significance was obvious. “Perhaps the most influential advisor to the president is thinking he has to build concentration camps and he is separating children from their mothers and fathers,” she told me in 2020.

She sent the emails to the Southern Poverty Law Center, in what would become the first of multiple information dumps to SPLC. She earlier had given leaked emails to the Atlantic, part of a flurry of releases of once private correspondence. Names, records, insider information, pseudonyms—it was all available. The news that Miller—and by extension, the Trump White House—had substantial ties to leading White nationalist organizations like VDare and American Renaissance made a splash. It was one of the most significant leaks in the Trump years, showing exactly how organized White supremacy was pushing on the U.S. immigration system.

For McHugh, it was, at least in part, a bid for redemption. “Certainly you be-
come scared, but you know in your soul that it is the right thing to do,” she said. “These are extremely bad people; they are going to hurt more people. I have to do something.”

But some antiracist activists and observers expressed skepticism among themselves, given the role McHugh had played in mainstreaming White nationalism. Today, McHugh’s story isn’t unique. While White supremacists have always lingered on the edges of the political Right, the Alt Right’s rebranding efforts grew their numbers. It stands to reason that the ranks of those now trying to leave the movement could grow as well. And so, over the last few years, the idea of the remorseful “former White nationalist” has come into vogue, featured in popular books, a catalogue of TED Talks, and a growing industry of media figures who’ve built personal brands out of being a “former.”

Some of them have landed positions as consulting experts with “Countering Violent Extremism” organizations that present themselves as non-partisan opponents of “extremism”—defined so vaguely that they often make no distinctions between groups advocating far-right violence and those fighting against them.⁹

All of this deeply complicates questions about which former White nationalists should be trusted as windows into the movement, and what accountability looks like for those who want to leave their harmful pasts behind.

SEEKING REDEMPTION

For Christian Picciolini, a former White nationalist who’s made it his life’s work to help others leave the movement, a guiding principle is understanding that “not everybody is going to be convinced that people have changed.”

“It’s healthy to be skeptical about people who have done and said awful things to suddenly change, and I think we need to hold them to account,” he said. “I also think we can’t have the blanket statement of ‘nobody can change.’”

Picciolini’s conviction comes from his own story as a former neonazi in the Hammerskins skinhead group in the late 1980s and early ‘90s. Traveling with his band White American Youth, he became a violent street brawler before leaving the movement in the 1990s and beginning the long process of reconciling with what he had done. Eventually he founded Life After Hate,¹⁰ a group that is intended to help people transition out of racist groups and works with survivors of White supremacist violence and communities of color to hold former White nationalists accountable.¹¹

Picciolini is one of many figures and organizations in a growing field focused on “de-radicalization”: an approach to far-right militancy that works with people who want to get out to confront their past, with varying results. Some have measurable success, while critics allege that others simply legitimize White nationalists without holding them accountable or even fully reforming their views.

During the 2000s, Picciolini primarily worked with kids leaving skinhead crews and the Ku Klux Klan, but now he deals mostly with the more fragmented world of online radicalization. He also hosts a show on MSNBC, featuring White nationalists who say they want to leave the movement. Although he sometimes works with more than 300 people at a time, Picciolini says his program is not a rubber stamp exit plan, but comes with a stack of stipulations and requirements, including setting personal goals and making amends. There’s no short-cuts to the redemption many “formers” seek, he said—just a deliberate process to take responsibility and understand what brought them into the movement in the first place.

One of Picciolini’s colleagues, Shannon Martinez, a former neonazi drawn into the movement after a sexual assault, says most work with “people who are still in” isn’t ideological, but personal. “You have to address the underlying things that create the reason you found resonance with this stuff in the first place,” she said. “That takes time and a lot of really hardcore, ongoing support.”¹²

And it’s not a process that happens quickly, she said, noting the many current “former” White nationalists who rapidly became public figures within months of leaving. At that point, Martinez said, “You don’t even know the sickness you have yet.”¹³

THE COMMANDER

Before PRA reached out to Jeff Schoep, the former “Commander” of the neonazi National Socialist Movement (NSM), Picciolini warned me to be careful. Schoep, he said, was “a grifter and not being fully genuine.”¹⁴

As one of the highest-profile neonazis in U.S. history, in the 1990s, Schoep transformed his skinhead crew into a nationwide political organization, which he then led for 25 years. The NSM were often referred to as “Hollywood Nazis” for their brazen racism, including dressing in a “blackshirt” uniform with swastikas, using racial slurs, and preaching race war. Schoep sought out recruits with military training—he claimed 50 percent of their members were veterans—and NSM members have one of the longest rap sheets of racist violence in the movement.¹⁵ Schoep helped lead the deadly 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, and became one of U.S. White nationalism’s loudest voices. But in 2019, he began presenting himself as a “former White nationalist,” first appearing on Picciolini’s MSNBC show and then working with the Washington, D.C.-based Light Upon Light. Within months, he was speaking at conferences as an expert on White nationalism, and offering “deradicalization” counseling. To Picciolini, it seemed disingenuous.

“Immediately after [he was on my show] … I was pressuring him to do the...
work, to see a therapist. I had job interviews lined up,” said Picciolini. “He kind of refused to do it. He just decided he wanted to be a spokesperson for himself again. And I decided to cut it off because it didn’t feel like he was being genuine.”

The issue may not be whether someone like Schoep sincerely wants out—there are plenty of practical, non-ideological reasons to not want to be publicly affiliated with White nationalism anymore—but whether he was willing to work to make amends, or even cared to.

When we first spoke on the phone, Schoep said, “The longer some of us have been in, the more harm we have done. I think it’s really important that we …do what we can to repair that damage. Anybody can talk about it but you need to walk the walk.”

But it’s unclear what Schoep means by “walking the walk.” He left the organization in 2019, amid a lawsuit stemming from his role in the 2017 Unite the Right rally, where Schoep and associates were alleged to have attacked counter-protesters. After his departure, though, Schoep refused to provide anti-racist organizations with NSM’s membership lists or other information that could help authorities target the group.

“It wasn’t mine to just give away,” Schoep said, citing alleged non-disclosure agreements that NSM members sign and comparing such disclosures to corporate espionage. “It’s like saying, ‘Well, if you worked for Apple and now you are working with IBM, how come you didn’t take all the schematics and things Apple was working on and hand them over to their competitor?’ You just don’t do that. It’s not ethically sound.”

Schoep also hasn’t worked with any victims of NSM violence, and minimizes the long history of violence associated with the group, including a recent case where an NSM member from Missouri was arrested en route to bomb a hospital during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Instead, when asked, Schoep seems to wax nostalgic about the impressive things he did in his time with the NSM.

“He likes very much to remind everyone that he was the leader of the NSM for 25 years. There is no way that you undo 25 years in a matter of months,” said Martinez.

FORMERS, INC.

But Schoep’s high-profile redemption story has been helped along by Light Upon Light (LUL), which has recently come under fire for what many in the deradicalization community consider to be playing fast and loose with the process. By appealing to a supposed political center with so-called countering violent extremism (CVE) programming, LUL has denounced antifascist activists and even collaborated with right-wing writer and livestreamer Andy Ngo, whose misleading reporting has created dangerous hyperbole around antifascist activism—including by alleging “Antifa violence” where there is none—and whose use of racial, transphobic, and bigoted characterizations of left-wing activists, and singling out of reporters and community organizers, has left them vulnerable to far-right political violence.

Jeff Schoep at a Ctrl+Alt+Delete+Hate event in 2019. (Credit: New America/Flickr.com)
Under far-right ideas and bigotries under a “both sides” narrative of manufactured centristm, and also shows LUL’s disconnect from how the Far Right actually functions.

Starting in 2019, shortly after his conversion, Schoep became a public speaker for LUL, speaking about his experiences in the White nationalist movement, and appearing as an expert on the Far Right at conferences and universities. LUL was also criticized by antifascist activists for working with the Clarion Project, an anti-Muslim organization that has used Islamophobic films such as Obsession: Radical Islam’s War Against the West in April 2020, Heimbach discussed leaving the movement over concerns about members’ violence, yet neglected to actually denounce any of its politics. Just a matter of months prior to the video’s release, Heimbach had helped launch the National Socialist Charitable Coalition to help raise money for James Alex Fields, the Alt Right activist who killed antifascist counter-protester Heather Heyer in Charlottesville in 2017. Just a few months before that, Heimbach had also appeared on an accelerationist neonazi podcast and proclaimed “God bless Dylann Roof,” the White supremacist who murdered nine parishioners at Charleston, South Carolina’s Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, one of the oldest Black churches in the nation. There, and in other podcasts, Heimbach talked about supporting imprisoned White nationalists, which had been his official role as an officer in the NSM. Not to mention that before he left the movement, leaked messages he’d written on a White nationalist forum showed him praising an accelerationist neonazi manual and terror groups like Atomwaffen Division as “good friends of ours.”

Heimbach’s subsequent connection with LUL seemed to confirm critics’ suspicions that the organization was achieving little beyond helping White nationalists rebrand themselves and their politics. In a YouTube comment in April 2020, Heimbach posted a letter clarifying his views, expressing continued support for nationalist causes, using coded language like “anti-Zionist” to express otherwise antisemitic tropes, and saying he opposed the “PC” culture found among other former White nationalists. In an email to PRA, Heimbach confirmed that while he had left White nationalism, his beliefs hadn’t moderated and he saw nothing to be contrite about. His main transformation, he suggested, was becoming a nationalist socialist rather than a national socialist. In a subsequent interview, Heimbach added that he now believes what can best solve the world’s problems is some form of authoritarian Marxism or a type of National Bolshevism—an ideological current that tries to mix ethnic nationalism with a distorted form of Marxism. Now, instead of citing neonazi leaders, he pulls from obscure Soviet or Chinese Communist Party policies to justify his far-right ideas, as well as the nationalism of some Marxist leaders such as Ho Chi Minh, while also arguing that he affirms “proletarian internationalism” and cross-racial solidarity against capitalism and its elites. Much of his apparent ideology still centers on antisemitism—calling Jews “hyper capitalists” and “rootless cosmopolitans” in our interview—even as he attempted to qualify this by suggesting he was only condemning various elites of Jewish descent (a qualification that’s been the hallmark of open antissemites for decades). He also still believes in racial IQ differences, in the unique threat that Jews and Judaism pose to the world (though he phrases it as “Zionists”), that transgender people are “mentally ill,” and that some form of nationalism is acceptable.

Despite Heimbach openly proclaiming that his beliefs haven’t changed, and maintaining friendly relationships with other White nationalists, including his former Traditionalist Worker Party co-leader Matthew Parrott, LUL not only allowed him to become an organizational ambassador, but to host a six-episode podcast with Morton. In the show, Heimbach reverently uses honorifics for White nationalist leaders (such as “Dr. Pierce” for National Alliance founder William Pierce); defended “national socialism” as an ideology; propped up the myth that there is a genocide against Boer farmers in South Africa; blamed antifascists for not allowing the Far Right an acceptable outlet for their racist rage; and hyped moral panics over claims about “transsexual drag shows for children.”

Far from LUL being misled about Heimbach’s views, they seem to have been his ticket into the group. His connection to Charleston, South Carolina’s Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, one of the oldest Black churches in the nation. There, and in other podcasts, Heimbach talked about supporting imprisoned White nationalists, which had been his official role as an officer in the NSM. Not to mention that before he left the movement, leaked messages he’d written on a White nationalist forum showed him praising an accelerationist neonazi manual and terror groups like Atomwaffen Division as “good friends of ours.”

By appealing to a supposed political center with so-called countering violent extremism (CVE) programming, LUL has denounced antifascist activists and even collaborated with right-wing writer and livestreamer Andy Ngo, whose misleading reporting has created dangerous hyperbole around antifascist activism.
with LUL began in early 2020, after Heimbach wrote Morton a letter, outlining his political trajectory and explaining why he left White nationalism. The letter was never released publicly, but in a copy acquired by PRA, Heimbach writes, “Traditionally in the United States, when someone leaves White Nationalism they go on a long apology tour, about how sorry they are about being a hateful bigot and hurting innocent people, and while your average neoliberal might nod approvingly and clap their hands at this wonderful ‘transformation’, the average person in and out of the White Nationalist movement just rolls their eyes. I am not apologizing and have nothing to apologize for. End of story.” Rather than challenging Heimbach, Morton responded immediately with an offer to connect him with The New York Times for an interview about being a former White nationalist. 41 That sort of pattern has led many researchers and activists to criticize “CVE” Right. “And most of the high-profile examples they produce are clearly fictional.”

Even a former LUL consultant on far-right radicalization, Samantha Kutner, echoed the critique. In the six months she was there, she saw what she described as multiple “red flags” that eventually convinced her to quit, including LUL’s relationship with the Clarion Project; watching the “ways that ‘formers’ were being used with no accountability measures in place”; and being placed in the middle of a “turf war” between competing CVE organizations. Kutner was also particularly concerned by Morton’s collaboration with Andy Ngo, 43 since she’d been one of 13 journalists and activists targeted by an Atomwaffen-style “kill list” video, entitled “Sunset the Media,” after Ngo publicized a list made by Eoin Lenihan accusing the journalists of having connections to “Antifa.” 44 “When I realized the org that I was recruited into had really no interest in doing the work they claimed to do or the work that I wanted to be there for,” said Kutner, “I made the choice to leave.” 45

LUL declined repeated interview requests for this article and did not respond to a detailed list of questions. Ultimately LUL and Heimbach parted ways—prompted, Heimbach claims, by Morton saying that Heimbach was going to “ruin everything” with LUL’s donors after Heimbach wrote in a livestream comment thread that “fascism has a lot of good points.” But as of this writing, Heimbach’s content is still online at LUL’s website. 46

There has to be an attempt to use what information and skills the person has to undo some of the base-building work they did for the White nationalist movement. If they act in defense of their old comrades and organizations, how can the rest of the community actually trust them as anything other than a dangerous unknown?

Responsibilities for a Pathway Back

Giving over organizational information, particularly information that can be used to confront and dismantle White nationalist organizations, is often considered the baseline of amends-making by antifascist activists, who both play an extensive role in confronting White nationalist movements and are frequent targets of threats or violence for their defensive work. There has to be an attempt to use what information and skills the person has to undo some of the base-building work they did for the White nationalist movement. If they act in defense of their old comrades and organizations, how can the rest of the community actually trust them as anything other than a dangerous unknown?

“People who leave these movements do have an obligation...to commit to using their knowledge to better inform the interventions that could prevent other people from going down that path. And not just in a way that platforms their own personality and their own experiences,” says Miller-Idriss.

When Schoep talks about his White nationalist past, he tends to brag about the skills he learned leading the NSM, such as his infiltration of law enforcement and antifascist groups. But that sort of boasting makes it particularly hard for his former targets to believe his claims of redemption.

In 2018, for example, Schoep worked with a Black NSM supporter to infiltrate the antifascist group One People’s Project, with the intention of doxing antifascist organizers. 47 That’s not the kind of harm that is easy to undo, yet in our interview, Schoep seemed more proud than remorseful.

“[Former White nationalists] have to be upfront about what they and [their] hopefully former colleagues did, especially those of the caliber of Schoep. While I appreciate the need to move on, even those I have helped to get out that just [want] to live their lives have provided info that was helpful,” said One People’s Project Daryl Lamont Jenkins. “They know that there was some pain they have caused that they will need to atone for if they want to be accepted. And the more pain they caused the more they have to deal with.” 48

Heimbach and Schoep are two of the over 20 defendants who were suc-
Many antifascist activists argue that, while much of the de-radicalization model focuses on trying to dismantle White nationalism one soul at a time, this goal shouldn’t come at the cost of community safety and is ultimately no substitute for a structural transformation of society that eradicates White supremacy and White nationalism at its root.

To assign equal blame for political violence between the Far Right and antifascists, they must also understand information, said antifascist writer Spencer Sunshine, they must also understand that some issues, such as antifascism or Jewish cultural issues, should be off limits. Instead, Schoep has started to weigh in on what kinds of antifascist tactics he thinks should be practiced, and casting the Left for engaging in what he calls their own form of “extremism.” On Twitter, he’s evoked far-right conspiracy theories in decrying “Marxist” antiracist activists, and that leftist terrorists are a turnoff to those he is trying to urge to leave White nationalism.

“Even if I thought Schoep was being real, how he is approaching things is downright insulting,” said Jenkins. “He doesn’t get to lecture anyone about anything, period.”

Now Schoep is trying to counsel other people out of the movement, presumably using the same soft-hand approach that he took to leaving, without requiring tough ideological work, serious conversions, or real accountability.

“Somebody like Jeff Schoep, he spent 30 years in it...he doesn’t really know anything else. He’s continuing that shit he had there, and just kind of monetized it now,” said Picciolini. “I think he really does not want to be a Nazi anymore, but I think he’s trying to figure out how to make it being a former Nazi to celebrity.”

Lastly, many antifascist activists argue that, while much of the de-radicalization model focuses on trying to dismantle White nationalism one soul at a time, this goal shouldn’t come at the cost of community safety and is ultimately no substitute for a structural transformation of society that eradicates White supremacy and White nationalism at its root.

If you’re willing to engage in a years-long emotional connection of extraordinary strength [that it takes to deradicalize White nationalists] ...fine,” said Talia Lavin, an author and organizer who tracks the Far Right. But “that’s not scalable. What is scalable is saying these sentiments are unacceptable. You cannot show up in my town. You cannot show up in my university.”

MOVING ON

“Going into and going out of it was slow and gradual...I can’t tell you at what point I started believing this stuff,” said Mak Kapetanovic, who picked up White nationalist beliefs as a teenager while browsing message boards like 4Chan.

Today, Picciolini says that he has to deal with a huge number of young people like Kapetanovic who were radicalized in online spaces frequented by the Alt Right.

Kapetanovic had come across this milieu when looking to debate people on the Internet and instead stumbled on racist pseudoscientific talking points—about racial intelligence difference or Holocaust denialism—that he didn’t understand enough to refute. Gradually, he came to see that these racist allegations are a house of cards: put under even a little scrutiny, the White nationalist manipulation of data and lies crumble. He could no longer stand by the ideas he had adopted, and who he had become.

“When I saw the same rhetoric that I had said or believed... used to justify killing 50 people, I fucking cried,” said Kapetanovic, who watched with horror as the “White genocide” conspiracy theories he had bought into were cited as justification for mass shootings at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, that killed 51 people and injured another 40.

Kapetanovic is from a family of Muslim refugees himself, who escaped from the Bosnian genocide in the 1990s. He thought he needed to speak up about what he had experienced joining and leaving the White nationalist movement, so he sent Picciolini an email to offering to volunteer in an effort to help people understand what White nationalists were thinking so that they could be countered more effectively.

“I felt like I had a responsibility to do something about it. And I thought that my story specifically could help people
understand how this happens and hopefully either deter or help people be more informed,” said Kapetanovic.63

What many people leaving White nationalism must confront is that many people will never accept them back. The responsibility is on them to try and address the damage they have done, not on those who bore the brunt of that harm. And while it’s important for people like Kapetanovic to have access to a pathway out, and people like Picciolini have shown what compassion and redemption can accomplish, it’s more important to keep people safe and do what is possible to decimate fascist movements.

“It’s hard to explain, because it is kind believe, particularly when organizations like LUL provide them the prefix of “former” without sufficient rigor or expectations of internal and external work. “Formers are experts in their own biography. That’s it...They’re not experts about the far-right extremist environment. They’re not experts about radicalization,” says Daniel Koehler, the founding director of the German Institute on Radicalization and De-Radicalization Studies. Koehler, whose work with German neo-nazis is considered foundational to evidence-based deradicalization programs, says that formers have to make serious attempts at restitution and should not be money-making celebrities, and pro-

There is a challenge here that goes beyond simply asking for denunciation and ideological conversion: the White nationalist movement has committed crimes against the community, and they’re not guaranteed forgiveness.

of uncharted territory. What does somebody do to win redemption?” asks Picciolini. “Right now, people want to forgive people who are interested in leaving those movements. But we have to be careful because we have to hold those people to account, and there are different levels of what they have done.”

Racists accumulate a debt, not just to the people they harmed directly, but also to the wider world they have made more cruel and dangerous. Paying down that debt isn’t—and shouldn’t be—easy. And none of this can begin to happen without an act of penance that brings real-world consequences: They have to bring down their former comrades.

“Whatever information that you have, give it,” said Katie McHugh, who has continued to share information with reporters and nonprofits to help expose White nationalists. The sincerity of her actions is up for debate, just like it is for every White nationalist who claims to be “out of the movement.” As McHugh said, “You don’t have to believe my words, just believe my actions.”64

But many of the actions of allegedly former White nationalists are hard to
A Twisted Love Story


“We Have to Push The Envelope”

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The Art of Activism:
An Interview with Cover Artist Art Studio Agrafka

About the art:
The Illustration “Missing Home” was created after the war started in Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022. More than 50% of Ukrainian children according to UNICEF have become refugees since that day. Millions moved from their houses abroad or to other regions of Ukraine seeking shelter from Russia committing genocide of Ukrainian people. So we all, children and adults, must remember how strongly we love our home, our family, how strongly connected we are with each other, how we suffered, how we cried, how we fought and how we won, how we were hurt and how we healed. We have to work with our memory, to remember who we are.

About the artists: