

Quest Club

**The Social, Political, and Cultural History of
America's White Underclass**

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Opening Remarks:

There are many ways to approach this topic. I opted to ponder the social, political and cultural history of white nationalism, which is often assumed by many to have roots in the white underclass. I suspect this topic was submitted in response to books like Hillbilly Elegy and recent events such as the “Unite the Right” rally at Charlottesville, Virginia. This is challenging and timely topic, and impossible to cover without some bias and generalization. My core research included recently published books, a series of articles in the Atlantic on white nationalism in 2017, recent Pew surveys, and other periodicals covering current events. Many of these sources make connections between white identity politics and the 2016 election of President Donald Trump. I want to be very clear. I do not wish to imply that all Republicans or people who voted for President Trump are white supremacists. I also do not wish to imply that all members of the white underclass are Republicans, Trump-voters or white supremacists. For this paper, I follow a fairly narrow line of inquiry about the evolution of white nationalist movements and their impact on American culture today. I hope what I have uncovered is as useful for you as it is for me.

Special Thanks:

Dan Ross

Todd Pelfrey

As many of you know, most nonprofit leaders stay away from discussions about politics, religion, and class. Dan and Todd were kind enough to read (and re-read) this paper, challenge my thinking, and ensure the topic was approached with integrity.

Cue the banjos. Four city-dwelling businessmen encounter disaster in a weekend canoeing trip in wilds of northern Georgia. The red-neck nightmare movie *Deliverance*, with its famous banjo duel between a secure-in-life city-slicker and a presumably inbred, mute, hillbilly savant boy, has captured the imagination of popular culture about the white underclass since 1972. Isabel Machado of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi explains that *Deliverance* explores the stereotypes of white southerners and the deconstruction of white identity and privilege through a series of allegories. Like the infamous “Squeal Like a Pig” scene, the white underclass is depraved, brutal, lawless, and emasculated. Like the inbred, banjo-playing boy, the white underclass is a result of poor breeding genetically and culturally – an inferior and backward race of people. Like the rural wilds of northern Georgia, the white underclass cannot be tamed, but should be hidden and disconnected from mainstream society. The film depicts Appalachian Southerners as “other” and asks viewers to consider if white Americans are in a state of ethnic survivalism.

Alas, the film is a work of art, an exoticization of poor white trash, but not reality. In 2016, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* by J.D. Vance became an overnight bestseller and was widely acclaimed as one of the most important books to understand the election of President Donald Trump in 2016. Mr. Vance offers a more realistic and compassionate analysis of the white underclass, explaining that systemic economic instability and the social isolationism of Appalachian culture has perpetuated a state of learned helplessness and despair. This culture does not trust the motives of the big media, big government, or big business. Members of hillbilly culture depend on an insular web of family ties for survival, and yet many lack a stable nuclear family.

According to a study published in the British Medical Journal, life expectancy for whites in rural America is decreasing due to unhealthy and risky behaviors, such as poor diets with high calorie intake, widespread drug abuse, firearm ownership, living in cities designed for cars instead of pedestrians, and weak social welfare (Woolf, 2018). “Deaths of despair” such as suicide and alcohol abuse disproportionately affect rural white Americans (Woolf, 2018).

Mr. Vance is in equal parts proud of his hillbilly culture and frustrated with it. He has emerged as a spokesman for the white underclass, its struggles, and its political views. In his 2016 interview with the *American Conservative*, Mr. Vance explained,

“The two political parties have offered essentially nothing to these people for a few decades. From the Left, they get some smug condescension, an exasperation that the white working class votes against their economic interests because of social issues.... Maybe they get a few handouts, but many don’t want handouts to begin with.

From the Right, they’ve gotten the basic Republican policy platform of tax cuts, free trade, deregulation, and paeans to the noble businessman and economic growth. Whatever the merits of better tax policy and growth (and I believe there are many), the simple fact is that these policies have done little to address a very real social crisis. More importantly, these policies are culturally tone deaf: nobody from southern Ohio wants to hear about the nobility of the factory owner who just fired their brother.

Trump’s candidacy is music to their ears. He criticizes the factories shipping jobs overseas. His apocalyptic tone matches their lived experiences on the ground. He seems to love to annoy the elites, which is something a lot of people wish they could do but can’t because they lack a platform.”

Like Mr. Vance, few if any members of Quest are currently members of the white underclass, however many of us have family ties to rural America and Appalachia. I have had several conversations with individuals in this room who have read *Hillbilly Elegy* and share a similar family history.

Here’s mine. My grandfather, Robert Ledger, was born in Lewellen, Kentucky, a coalmining town north of the Cumberland Gap. As a five-year-old, he ran moonshine from his family’s still to the store, where his father sold company scrip on the black market. At the age of ten, he was sent to live with his aunt, uncle and cousins at a tobacco farm in southern Indiana after his parents died – his mother of heart disease and his father of alcoholism. He studied in a one room school house. Too young to fight in World War II in which is “cousin-brothers” served as snipers (due to being handy with a shotgun), my grandfather became the first and only of his generation to attend college. With a degree in mathematics from Indiana University, my grandfather taught high school math, astronomy and computer science in Indianapolis. All four of my grandfather’s children, and nearly all of his grandchildren have or will attend college, many attaining graduate degrees.

I share this personal story because like many educated, urban, white Americans, my family has roots in the white underclass. Other than family lore, I do not have personal experience. Until writing this paper, I had not given much consideration to the fact that many white Americans are disenfranchised and feel disconnected from the mainstream. The recent election of Donald Trump and the acceptance and encouragement by a portion of the electorate for his nationalistic stance encapsulated in the phrase “Make America Great Again” is dismaying to many Americans. Events like the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia have placed white identity politics and the Alt-Right movement into the national spotlight of mainstream media as marchers, armed to the teeth and wearing Nazi regalia, claim to fight against what they perceive as “white genocide.” Events like these cause serious introspection for what it means to be a white American.

What has led to this level of extremism among some white Americans? What is the Alt-Right, and why does this movement appear to stem from the white underclass? Are white nationalists hillbillies with torches as portrayed by the media?

One of America’s enduring myths is equal opportunity, particularly among European decedents. High school American history class teaches us to revere the ideals of principled leaders molded in bronze and limestone in Washington, DC. Our forefathers heroically departed from the feudalist and aristocratic countries of Europe, sailed across the ocean blue to a land of prosperity and democracy, a land where all men are created equal, a land where the social constructs of a rigid class system no longer apply; a land where all can pull-themselves up from their bootstraps in a great meritocracy, discovering the American dream along the way.

Today, 17.5 million whites live in poverty, which is 9% of all white Americans, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation. Poor whites are most concentrated in the rural areas of the South and Midwest. Eighteen percent of white people in West Virginia are poor, along with 14% in Louisiana, 13% in Kentucky, 12% in Missouri, Alabama and Arkansas, 11% in Tennessee, Mississippi and North Carolina, and 10% in Indiana and Ohio.

Throughout American history – we have adopted colorful terminology to describe the white underclass as “other”:

- Hillbilly
- White Trash

- Swamp Yankees
- Rednecks
- Crackers
- Squatters
- Sandhillers
- Clay eaters
- Hoe wielders

The following, more “proper” terminology also carries the airs of educated folks (like me and you) who study this “other” group in a more sophisticated manner:

- White working class
- White underclass
- Working poor
- Underserved
- Undereducated

The cultural, social, and political isolation of the white underclass from the mainstream is in part a result of our Colonial history. In her book *White Trash*, Nancy Isenberg explores the obsession of early European Americans with class, rank and privilege. Early elites were part of the Puritanical order, land-owners and the clergy, and they primarily settled in the coastal cities and farming communities of the upper east coast. Isenberg writes, “Land was the principal source of wealth, and those without any had little chance to escape servitude. It was the stigma of landlessness that would leave its mark on white trash from this day forward.” Non-elites included indentured servants and settlers of other faiths who were permitted to settle deeper in the wilderness – often in mountainous and infertile acreage – in part to create a physical barrier between the land-owning elites and Native Americans.

In the early 1700s, the residents of the Great Dismal Swamp of western Virginia and North Carolina were identified by early sociologist William Byrd, II as the residents of “Lubberland,” drawing from a popular English folktale of the time featuring one “Lawrence Lazy” born of the county of Sloth near the town of Neverwork (Isenberg, p. 53). Byrd

discovered that just across the border was a land where government authority was compromised, a place where people were resistant to religion and labor. Byrd described the life of Mr. Cornelius Keith, a man with a skilled trade, possessing good land with a wife and six children who lived in a home without a roof. At night the family slept in the fodder stack, as Mr. Keith preferred to protect the feed for his animals rather than the safety of his family. Byrd concluded that Mr. Keith and the residents of the swamp suffered the “distempers of laziness,” where people not only looked like but began to act like wild boars (Isenberg, p. 54). According to Isenberg,

“The poor of colonial America were not just waste people, not simply folk to be compared to their Old World counterparts. By reproducing their own kind, they were, to contemporaneous observers, in the process of creating a...new breed of human. A host of travelers in Carolina in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries believed that class structure was tied to geography and rooted in the soil. Explorers, amateur scientists, and early ethnologists like William Byrd all assumed – and unabashedly professed – that inferior or mismanaged lands bred inferior, ungovernable people” (p. 56).

The American tradition of physically and socially isolating the poor is as pervasive today as it was in the colonial era, and it can create greater intolerance within isolated social groups and regions. In *Bowling Alone*, social scientist Robert Putnam demonstrates that when community members gather together as volunteers, philanthropists, and engaged citizens, they build social networks in which they can share ideas, participate in civil dialogue, and learn about people with diverse abilities, backgrounds, beliefs and family situations. According to Putnam, the most tolerant communities in America have the greatest civic involvement and cultural diversity. Conversely, the communities whose residents are isolated and socially homogenous are least tolerant places in America. Furthermore, social capital is most easily bonded in opposition to something or someone else.

White nationalists are bonded together by a sense of disengagement from mainstream society. This sectarian community has cultivated a series of myths and conspiracy theories centered around the question, “Who makes the best Americans?” In their view, the best Americans are ‘100% American’ – decedents of the Protestant Anglo-Saxons who founded and colonized the United States. They believe that culture is a product of race, and that white heritage

is intellectually and morally superior to all other groups. People who are considered to have a questionable or impure ethnic background are poor, lazy, dependent on government welfare, and resistant to hard work. Traditional Protestant marriage within the white community is the means by which strong families put down roots, achieve upward mobility, and sustain the white race.

Furthermore, white nationalists believe that ethnically white people are increasingly oppressed politically, socially and culturally. They believe that because of urbanization and immigration, whites are becoming more vulnerable to the exploitation of labor, marginalization, and powerlessness at the hands of “others” who do not share a European, Protestant ancestry.

No group better exemplifies white nationalism than the Ku Klux Klan. The Reconstruction Klan was founded in 1867 as a social club in Pulaski, Tennessee by former Confederate soldiers in opposition to the post-Civil War Reconstruction Act. Confederate general Nathan Bedford Forrest was chosen as the first grand wizard, presiding over a hierarchy of grand dragons.

With heavy influence from the more radical members of the post-Civil War Republican Party, the Reconstruction Act was passed by Congress over a presidential veto by a Southern Democrat, our 17th President, Andrew Johnson. A native North Carolinian who settled in Tennessee, President Johnson favored a more lenient policy to restore the seceded states to the Union without giving protection to former slaves.

Under the Reconstruction Act, the South was divided into five military districts, and each state legislature was forced to approve the Fourteenth Amendment granting equal protection of the law to former slaves. The Klan, along with the Knights of the White Camelia and the White Brotherhood, engaged in an underground campaign of violence against Republican leaders and voters to restore white supremacy in the South. The Klan targeted black legislators, schools and churches as well as white Republicans known as “carpetbaggers” and “scalawags.” Klan attacks took place in every southern state, often at night, by members wearing masks and robes.

Although characterized as a movement of poor southern whites by the Democratic party of the time, Klan membership crossed class lines and included ministers, law enforcement officials, landowners, and lawyers who were opposed to Reconstructionist policies. In response to the failure of southern leaders to speak out against the Klan’s actions, Congress passed three Enforcement Acts including the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871, which designated crimes committed by individuals to deprive citizens of the right to hold office, serve on juries, and enjoy equal

protection of the law as federal offenses. The Act expanded the federal authority of our 18th President, Northern Republican Ulysses S. Grant, to arrest individuals without charge and send federal forces to suppress Klan violence. By 1876, in response to the Enforcement Acts, every southern state was under solidly Democratic control and federal support for Reconstruction-era policies declined. Klan membership and activity also waned.

By the early 20th Century, America's demographics had shifted wildly. From 1890 to 1914, 16 million people immigrated to the United States. A majority immigrants were Catholics from Germany, Ireland, Italy and Poland. About 10 percent were Jewish. African Americans were migrating to the industrialist north. Cities were growing rapidly. America entered World War I in 1917, bringing hysteria against the global political upheaval of the time: Bolsheviks, Socialists, Anarchists, and Communists.

In 1915, D. W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation* became the first film ever shown at the White House. The film was the adaptation of Thomas Dixon's 1905 novel, *The Clansman* in which heroic members of the Ku Klux Klan defend white women from rape by slaves and carpetbaggers. Our 28th President, Woodrow Wilson, a Southern Democrat from Virginia and outspoken white supremacist who supported nativist policies such as the Espionage Act of 1917, praised the film. Wilson said, "It is like writing history with lightning, and my only regret is that it is all so true." Griffith used President Wilson's support to successfully defend his film against NAACP charges that it was racially inflammatory (Loewen, 2007).

The film inspired William Joseph Simmons, a failed Methodist Episcopal minister and salesman, to reform the Ku Klux Klan, which he described as "A Classy Order of the Highest Class, No 'Rough Necks,' 'Rowdies,' nor 'Yellow Streaks' ... REAL MEN whose oaths are inviolate are needed" (Gordon, p. 12). Simmons appointed himself as the first imperial wizard, and saw his calling to save a nation in peril by reestablishing the cultural dominance of white people. The renewed Klan was modeled after the Freemasons as a fraternal social club with rites and rituals. Under this model, the Klan failed to grow beyond a few hundred Klansmen. By 1920, Simmons sought support from the PR team of Elizabeth Tyler and Edward Young Clarke and their company, the Southern Publicity Association. Clarke and Tyler signed a contract with Simmons in which they would earn 80 percent of any revenue brought in by new recruits. They placed advertisements, planned picnics, provided free membership to ministers, and offered newspaper editors private interviews with Simmons.

In her book, *The Second Coming of the KKK*, Gordon explains,

“(Clarke and Tyler) turned Simmons into a polished speaker. Engendering and exploiting fear, he would warn that ‘degenerative’ forces were destroying the American way of life. These were not only black people, but also Jews, Catholics and immigrants, the big-city dwellers who were tempting Americans with immoral pleasures – sex, alcohol and music, notably jazz. Only a fusion of racial purity and evangelical Christian morality could save the country. But the old Klan’s ‘white’ supremacy over blacks was no longer up to the task; only the supremacy of Anglo-Saxon Protestants, aka ‘100% Americans,’ could save the country.” (p. 14-15).

In 1920, four million Americans openly identified as white supremacists. In January 1921, Clarke and Tyler boasted that they had recruited 850,000 new members to the Ku Klux Klan. Simmons became a liability to the cause; his public drunkenness and gambling on horse races and prize fights provided an opportunity for two regional Klan leaders – Hiram Evans from Texas, and D.C. Stephenson from Indiana – to ascend to leadership. Evans, Stephenson, Clarke and Tyler bought Simmons out for a sum of \$140,000 and gave him the honorary title of “emperor.” Evans and Stephenson repositioned the Klan as a mainstream political party with influence in local, state and national politics. They organized newspapers, political campaigns, and parades. Klan membership was not to be hidden, but instead discussed openly with pride and admiration. The Klan was increasingly described (by its members) as a benign fraternal order and nativist organization. Sixteen Klansmen became senators, 11 became governors, and 75 became congressmen from 1915 to 1930.

According to Gordon, elites were the primary enemy of the 1920s Klan. She writes, “In branding Klansmen as backward, uneducated, isolated from culture, provincial... gullible, shabby of mind, social deviants, and representative of the lower classes, critics were expressing a snobbish disdain often repeated in urban elite responses to populism.” (p. 20). In actuality, 50 percent of active Klan members were urbanites, and 32 percent lived in large cities. Chicago had at least fifty thousand Klansmen, Indianapolis had thirty-eight thousand, and Philadelphia had thirty-five thousand (Gordon, 21).

The curious disconnect of the white nationalism’s presumed profile as a movement of the white underclass and the reality of the movement’s connection to urban areas, deep pockets, and

people in power was amplified during the Cold War. The John Birch Society (JBS), was established in Indianapolis, Indiana in 1958 by Robert W. Welch, Jr., a retired candy manufacturer. The ultraconservative organization was named after John Birch, an American Baptist missionary and military intelligence officer who was shot and killed by communist forces in China in 1945. Founding members included Harry Lynde Bradley of Allen Bradley and Fred C. Koch of Koch Industries. Birchers believed that a sinister cabal of journalists, internationalists and politicians sought to establish a New World Order managed by a single socialist government. JBS membership was secretive. Pamphlets, door-to-door sales tactics, bookstores, and newspaper advertisements funded by the well-heeled Birchers grew the influence of the JBS.

Among the list of JBS founders, Fred Koch stands out. In her book *Dark Money*, author Jane Mayer reports that Koch was traumatized when Stalin purged several of his Soviet business acquaintances in the late 1950s. In his 1960 publication, *A Business Man Looks at Communism*, Koch claimed that Communists had infiltrated both the Democratic and Republican Parties. He believed that churches, schools, universities, labor unions, the Internal Revenue Service, the State Department, the World Bank, and even modern art were tools of socialist and communist control.

Koch believed that desegregation was a secret plot to attract rural blacks to cities where the Communist regime would launch a race war. Birchers used their political and financial influence to attempt an impeachment of Chief Justice Warren after the Supreme Court voted to desegregate public schools in the case *Brown v. Board of Education*. Birchers accused President Eisenhower of being a secret Communist sympathizer and Martin Luther King Jr. of attending Communist training schools. On the day of President Kennedy's assassination, the JBS had paid for a full-page ad in the *Dallas Morning News* accusing him of treasonously promoting the "spirit of Moscow."

At its height in the 1960s, the JBS had an estimated 100,000 followers, and it is still active today. The JBS co-sponsored the 2010 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) and continues to actively support the dismantling of the Federal Reserve System. They believe that communism is alive and flourishing under new names like the Muslim Brotherhood. They believed that Adam Lanza's motive for gunning down 26 children and teachers at Sandy Hook Elementary in Connecticut in 2012 was fueled by self-hatred and rage caused by the systemic abuse of white men in America.

To recap, the social, political and cultural progression of white nationalism paved the way for today's Alt-Right. Most Americans do not peruse websites frequented by white supremacists, and as a result, few Americans have a working knowledge of the Alt-Right. A Pew Survey performed in December 2016 found that 54 percent of Americans had never even heard of the Alt-Right.

I've done the following research for you, fellow Questers. (And I'm probably on a watch list now.) Think of the following section as an educated white urbanist's handbook to the Alt-Right. Here it goes.

- The Alt-Right is defined by the Southern Poverty Law Center as “a set of far-right ideologies, groups and individuals whose core belief is that ‘white identity’ is under attack by multicultural forces using ‘political correctness’ and ‘social justice’ to undermine white people and ‘their’ civilization. Characterized by heavy use of social media and online memes, Alt-Righters eschew ‘establishment’ conservatism, skew young, and embrace white ethno-nationalism as a fundamental value.”
- Alternativeright.com and altright.com were websites founded in 2010 by Richard Bertrand Spencer after he was fired from *The American Conservative* for his extreme ideas. The term “Alt-Right” was coined by Spencer, who described the website as a “big tent” for the ideology of those who advocate for a return to traditional values centered on “white identity,” the preservation of “Western civilization,” and a break away from mainstream conservatism. Spencer left the blog in 2013 in order to focus on Radix Journal, an online journal published by the *National Policy Institute*.
- Today, Spencer is an American white supremacist and current president of the *National Policy Institute*, a white supremacist think tank organization that describes itself as “an independent organization dedicated to the heritage, identity, and future of people of European descent in the United States and around the world.” Spencer advocates for peaceful ethnic cleansing to halt the destruction of European culture. He advocates for women in traditional roles and opposes same sex marriage. Following the election of President Trump, Spencer received media attention for a *National Policy Institute*

conference during which supporters gave the Nazi salute in response to his cry, “Hail Trump, hail our people, hail victory!” Spencer was a featured speaker at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville. Far from being a member of the white underclass, Spencer was born in Boston, MA. His father was an ophthalmologist and his mother was an heiress to cotton farms in Louisiana. Spencer was a Ph.D. candidate at Duke but left to, in his words, “pursue a life of thought crime.”

- Breitbart News Network is a far-right American news, opinion and commentary website founded by Andrew Breitbart as a news aggregator in 2005. Andrew Breitbart, who was Jewish, conceived of the network during a stay in Israel with the aim of starting a site that would be unapologetically pro-Israel. Andrew Breitbart died in 2012. In 2011, billionaire conservative activist Robert Mercer endowed Breitbart.com with \$11 million. Today, Breitbart News publishes conspiracy theories, politically motivated and misleading stories, and racist content. Under the management of Steve Bannon, former executive chairman and former Chief Strategist to President Trump, the website strategically aligned with the American Alt-Right movement. Breitbart News was seen as influential in Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign.
- Milo Yiannopoulos (pronounced Mi-low Yee-ann-opolous) is a British white supremacist and former tech editor on Breitbart. Of Google’s top-trending people searches in the U.S. in 2017, Yiannopoulos was ranked ninth. Yiannopoulos is known as cultural libertarian who advocates for the destruction of political correctness and censorship. He believes that the Alt-Right is primarily about youthful provocation and subversion. Yiannopoulos is a man of contradictions. He is anti-Semitic and pro-Israel, a practicing Roman Catholic with a Jewish grandmother. He is openly gay and married to a black Muslim man, but he has anti-LGBTQ views. Yiannopoulos is most known for his “Dangerous Faggot Tour,” a speaking tour during which he visited college campuses throughout the United States and was met by protests. Yiannopoulos attempted to publish his book, “Dangerous” with Simon & Schuster, who later dropped it. Yiannopoulos self-published it on Amazon and it became a best seller in July 2017.

- The Daily Stormer is an American neo-Nazi and white supremacist news and commentary website founded in 2013. The website takes its name from the Nazi Party's newspaper *Der Sturmer* published during the Second World War. In August 2017, the Daily Stormer was rejected by several domain registrars and moved to the dark web after insulting the victim of the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. The Daily Stormer attracted media coverage in 2015 when Dylann Roof shot nine African Americans in a church in Charleston, South Carolina. The website disavowed violence but endorsed many of Roof's views. The Daily Stormer officially endorsed Donald Trump for president in 2015 and supported Trump's moratorium on admitting Muslims into the United States. The Daily Stormer has a "Troll Army" involved in targeting politicians and leaders around the world through social media.
- Daily Stormer Founder Andrew Anglin was profiled on the cover of *The Atlantic* in December 2017. As a high school student, Anglin was an outspoken liberal and vegan who wore dreadlocks and JNCO pants. After reading work by Noam Chomsky, Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, and Ted Kaczynski, Anglin became a fascist conspiracy theorist and neo-Nazi. He began blogging and posting essays on various websites, attacking Jews, Muslims and women. During the 2016 presidential election, Anglin and his followers referred to then-candidate Trump as "Glorious Leader" and "Humble Philosopher" and "The Ultimate Savior" and led a trolling campaign. Anglin took credit for the election of President Trump with a post titled, "We Won" in which he wrote, "Our Glorious Leader has ascended to God Emperor. Make no mistake about it: we did this. If it were not for us, it wouldn't have been possible."
- "Cuckservative," the combination of the words "cuckold" and "conservative," is a term used by the Alt-Right to describe a Republican politician who is seen as a traitor to his people by supporting economic globalism and socially liberal policies.

How can it be that any portion of our country is susceptible to such dangerous thinking, despite living during an era of greater connectivity, access to information, and a social emphasis on tolerance and inclusion? How do lunatics like Spencer, Bannon, Yianopoulos, and Anglin

receive extraordinary levels of public attention despite the psychosis of their beliefs and a total lack of credibility in their conspiracy theories?

In his December 2017 story in *The Atlantic* titled, “How America Went Haywire”, Kurt Anderson theorizes that our polarized political climate and the rise of the internet has allowed Americans to depart from reality. He writes,

“The American experiment, the original embedment of the great Enlightenment idea of intellectual freedom...has metastasized out of control. From the start, our ultra-individualism was attached to epic dreams, sometimes epic fantasies – every American one of God’s chosen people building a custom-made utopia, all of us free to reinvent ourselves by imagination and will... Those more exciting parts of the Enlightenment idea have swamped the sober, rational, empirical parts. Little by little for centuries, then faster and faster during the past half century, we Americans have given ourselves over to all kinds of magical thinking, anything-goes relativism, and believe in... small and large fantasies that console or thrill or terrify us. And most of us haven’t realized how far-reaching our strange new normal has become” (Anderson).

Certainly, white identity politics are only part of a complex web of social, cultural and political ideologies on both the right and the left. Writing for the *Washington Post*, Duke University professor Ashley Jardina explains, “...the whites marching on Charlottesville were only a small segment of a much larger population for whom the politics of white identity resonates. The vast majority of white Americans who feel threatened by the country’s growing racial and ethnic diversity are not members of the KKK or neo-Nazis. They are much greater in number, and far more mainstream, than the white supremacists who protested in Virginia.”

Jardina’s study in October and November 2016 and found that there are many “white identifiers” who do not sympathize with the Alt-Right or the Klan, but do feel a strong attachment to being white.

- 40% of survey respondents said being white was very or extremely important to their identity;
- 54% said that whites have a great deal to be proud of; and
- 43% responded that whites have a lot or a great deal in common with one another.

Jardina found that that white identity was one of the strongest predictors of support for candidate Donald Trump. White identifiers were more likely to rank illegal immigration as the most important issue facing the nation today, relative to the budget deficit, health care, the economy, unemployment, outsourcing of jobs, abortion, same-sex marriage, education, gun control, the environment or terrorism. White identifiers would like many of the same benefits of identity politics that they believe other groups enjoy. For example, white identity is strongly associated with support for the designation of a White History Month.

A Pew Survey in October 2017 provides further exploration of political relativism by identifying two different ideologies on the right: Core Conservatives and Country First Conservatives. Both approve of President Trump but are divided on immigration and “openness.”

- Core Conservatives consist of 13% of general public and 31% of all Republicans. The majority of Core Conservatives are white, non-Hispanic men. Core Conservatives tend to be financially comfortable, and support smaller government, lower corporate tax rates and fairness in the economic system. Core Conservatives support involvement in the global economy because they believe it provides the U.S. with opportunities for growth.
- In contrast, Country First Conservatives are a much smaller segment of GOP. This group shares some qualities of the white underclass. They are older, less educated, and less affluent than other Republican-leaning groups. Most prefer to live in rural communities where houses are larger and farther apart. Country First Conservatives are unhappy with the nation’s course, deeply critical of immigrants and wary of U.S. global involvement.

In conclusion, I’ve attempted to provide you with a brief political, cultural and social history of white nationalism. While its history is integrated with the story of the white underclass, white nationalism is not a movement of exclusively poor white Southerners as so often depicted by popular culture and the media. The extremist views of white nationalists are not shared by all white people, all conservatives, or all Republicans, and many white Americans

highly value multiculturalism, globalism, diversity and social inclusion. However, the influence of white nationalism by and upon the white underclass contributes to our current political environment. Do the incendiary words of President Trump and those who surround him put Americans at risk of becoming desensitized to intolerance? Are we capable of recognizing when history repeats? In the *Second Coming of the KKK*, author Gordon describes six “ancestors” of the 1920s Klan:

1. Inspiration from the earlier Reconstruction era Ku Klux Klan;
2. Nativism and anti-immigration movements;
3. Temperance movements fueled by feminist impulses and anger at the violence and deprivation that women suffered from male drunkenness and sexual debauchery;
4. Popularity of male-only fraternal societies like the Masons and Odd Fellows;
5. The rise of evangelical Protestantism and fundamentalism; and
6. Populism among rural communities and small towns that expressed the economic grievances of blue collar workers against big bankers and industrialists.

Given the headlines and President Trump’s Twitter feeds of 2016 and 2017 – portrayals of the news media as “Fake,” Mexicans as rapists, Muslims as terrorists, African countries as “shitholes”, locker-room talk about groping women, and “blame on both sides” for the tragedy at Charlottesville – does Gordon’s description of six “ancestors” of the Klan seem eerily familiar to our contemporary political narrative?

I can only leave you with a quote from Martin Luther King, Jr.’s speech upon accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964: “I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.”

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