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**I Pledge Allegiance: Language, Information, and how the American Far-Right Forms its
Identity**

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of Honors Studies in
Political Science

By

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Political Science

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Abstract:

This is a study of far-right identity in the United States post-2016. Particularly interested in the ways in which the modern “alt-right” converged with mainstream Conservative politics following the election of Donald Trump, this study establishes the deep historical basis for far-right rhetoric, tactics, and goals inside the United States. This study found that in the 21st Century, as in the past, right-wing social movements use language to create strong in-group identification and a life-or-death threat construction that prompts violence from their adherents. While far-right information networks have existed for decades, this study explores the ways in which modern networks allow for a greater convergence between disparate movements on the right, creating a more unified information web and understanding of reality. This convergence contributes to extremist ideas gaining larger and more mainstream platforms, granting them a global reach and significant influence in domestic politics. Right-wing information networks’ ability to construct reality for their members suggests that in-network individuals feel a sense of identity and citizenship to their ideological communities that goes beyond a simple adherence to a political platform. Ready belief in conspiracy theories, acceptance of political violence, and rejection of democratic norms all indicate a sense of in-group loyalty and a depth of radicalization endemic to the current American right.

Key Terms: Ideologically motivated violent extremist (IMVE), Great Replacement, QAnon, Great Convergence, network segregation, Great Downgrade, stochastic terrorism, collective consciousness

I. Introduction

In modern America's collective imagination, the far-right re-emerged as a major, public force in American politics sometime between November 2016 and August 2017. In November 2016, Donald Trump won the presidency on an explicitly Islamophobic and anti-immigrant platform. In August 2017, thousands of polo-wearing fascists goose-stepped through Charlottesville, Virginia carrying torches and chanting slogans based on conspiracy theories and racial hatred. But our collective memory is short. The far-right took social media feeds and cable news by storm in 2017 and found an ally in the White House following the 2016 Presidential Election but was the culmination of decades of social movements and information networks. From the organization of right-wing religious networks in the early 20th Century, to Richard Nixon's formal shift towards politics based on social grievances and racial tensions in the early 1970s, to the increased salience of these grievance politics in an explosion of right-wing media in the 1990s, to the militia movement and organized white supremacy, the far-right's introduction to mass political power in the late 2010s had been in the works for decades.

At a time of extreme right-wing partisanship, it is necessary to define just what the far-right is. The term can be almost meaningless right now, describing everyone from sitting Republican politicians, to a relative who spouts QAnon conspiracies at Thanksgiving, to a neo-Nazi engaged in physical acts of terror. So, when this thesis discusses the contemporary far-right and how it constructs its own identity, it is impossible to pin down a single ideological sect. Instead, this thesis is interested in the "Great Convergence"¹ of numerous far-right networks and ideological conditions that came to fruition in the 2010s. This convergence points to overlapping information networks, common linguistic and rhetorical refrains, and a loose political coalition with a shared understanding of reality as a result of this language and these networks.

When identifying politics as "extremist," this thesis is interested in overall tolerance of violence, dehumanization of political enemies and out-group members, and anti-democratic tendencies. This study will ultimately analyze how members of the American far-right of the 2010s and 2020s conceive of their own citizenship in the broader context of American political life. Of particular note to understanding modern far-right citizenship are the Great Replacement

conspiracy theory, the QAnon conspiracy theory, and the events leading to the attempted insurrection of January 6, 2021.

First, it is necessary to understand the theoretical underpinnings of right-wing populism and how fascist movements emerge and sustain themselves. In the 1938 essay “Theories of German Fascism,” Walter Benjamin details the aesthetic and rhetorical manifestations of far-right thought that enable its appeals to populism and proliferation throughout the working class. While “Theories of German Fascism” is contextual to a specific space and time, its findings remain consistent with contemporary literature on the far right and evident in the aesthetics and language of contemporary right-wing extremism.

Benjamin’s analysis begins with the fascist movements of his day’s obsession with the First World War, noting that while far-right authors of his day often invoked the war, their experience fails to reckon with the war’s reality. Instead, the aesthetics of war and domination take precedence over the causes and consequences of violence.² Likewise, any foundational theory of politics gives way to a mindless celebration of violence-as-sport.

The type of “war” identified in “Theories of German Fascism” is not simply a violent political conflict between two countries, but a national struggle, both internal and external, for more primal, violent, and ordered reality of the state. This phenomenon, described as “Cultic War,”³ requires a childlike excitement and a spiritual fervor necessary to provide a *casus belli* for this social struggle and a unified fascist identity.⁴ Cultic War is endless. One of the most important manifestations of this fervor is the “haste to capitalize from the actual present without grasping the past.”⁵ Rhetoric of a lost, idealized past is a cornerstone of fascist movements. How this rhetoric presents itself, spreads through networks, and impacts the people who internalize it are deeply relevant when studying 21st Century far-right extremism.

To the fascist, this cultic war is the highest manifestation of the nation. Germany of the 1930s “continued to celebrate the cult of war when there was no longer any real enemy,”⁶ conditioning a society for the endless war called for by fascism. This cultic war was not argued on the basis of material need, but instead “if we follow the language, into the fabric of our existence that our

whole lives become that much richer or poorer in symbols, images, and sources.”⁷ The aesthetic appeal that united the masses was a form of pseudo-populism staked in fear and grievance, rather than a promise of opportunity. This is coupled with a fantasy of collapse. Benjamin notes how fascists “spread decline, preached decline wherever they went.”⁸ All aesthetics were designed to make the population feel as if they were in a state of war. This deep, permeating fear turned the population of Interwar Germany into an army in search of a war.

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, Benjamin notes that “Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life.”⁹ The machines of the 20th Century made the reproduction of art easier and instantaneous but rendered “the quality of...presence...always depreciated.”¹⁰ Just as reproduction rendered art without an inherent aura of space, time, and humanity, mechanical reproduction of rhetoric and political discourse contributed to a mindless repetition of politics. These politics produced aesthetics without providing any material benefit and relied on rage and fear to fuel the masses. These mechanically reproduced politics are, essentially, a false populism which rallies around mass-produced, sanitized images of war, which idealizes suffering. These politics engage with violence as politics and politics as a sport. This cheapening of politics and obsession with war was fundamental to the German-fascist “half-attitude towards life.”¹¹ Death is rendered constant, yet eternally distant and sanitized. Mechanically reproduced politics is a politics of being surrounded by death, yet never expecting to sacrifice. Practically, this means politics of mechanical reproduction lend themselves to fascists and killers who promise people spectacle and fulfillment through language and symbols of violence, fun violence, exciting violence.

The politics of mechanical reproduction, and its accompanying cheapening of human life and essentialization of symbols and language, is especially prescient in our era of memes and algorithmically curated content which incentivizes rage and sharing. 21st Century content quite literally exists to reproduce itself. The modern American political information landscape is a product of unprecedented reproduction, with a long history of false populism rooted in social grievance and a mass celebration of violence without an expectation for individual sacrifice. Long before social media, this information landscape constructed a notion of ideological identity based on common grievance rather than common interest. For nearly a century, these social

movements found ways to evolve sophisticated networks to deepen ties between members of ideological in-groups. Any analysis of the modern far-right must come from an understanding that it is rooted in a culture war politics that predates Trump and Charlottesville. The 21st Century is unique in the ways modern information networks can amplify conspiracy theories, extremist rhetoric, and false information to an extreme degree; the ideas being amplified, or the core of the networks behind them, are not new.

Far-right aesthetics and language glamorize violence and unify people in pseudo-populist movements felt viscerally, powerfully, and spread throughout the masses as if cheering for a sports team. Thus, fascism creates a shared mythology for which people will sacrifice themselves, and a false populism by which people will oppose mythical opponents to their desired world, rather than opposing the immediate, material conditions oppressing them. This mythologized opponent can manifest itself as racial or religious minorities, intellectuals, democratic systems, LGBTQ+ individuals, and more. 21st Century American political life, which is rife with cheap reproduction and culture war-based grievance politics, is ripe for these conditions. An examination of both the history and current state of right-wing social movements in the United States reveals these conditions have been present here for a long time.

Today's extremism does not mark a breakaway from the grievance politics and movements of the past. But it does mark the amplified degree to which aggrieved people feel under direct attack and how far they will go to redress their grievances. None of the 21st Century far-right is new. Its rhetoric and violence stem from deep historical roots. Language used by the modern far-right draws from past rhetoric. Using internet slang, ironic memes, and buzzwords, far-right extremists use modern information networks to connect with each other and spread extremist ideas. They also use these networks to create a sense of shared identity based on isolation from mainstream society and united by a siege mentality.

II. History: How Far-Right Movements Developed and Organized

This chapter, using case studies, will show how the American far-right evolved in its networks and organizing tactics, while remaining consistent in its ideas and goals over time.

The birth of the modern far right began as a trickle in the broader stream of social movements that proliferated across American society in the late 20th Century. Before examining this particular phenomenon, however, it is necessary to understand more about social movements in general. Michael Lienesch notes in *In the Beginning* that 1970s social theorists observed that the “explosion of groups advocating causes such as environmentalism, feminism, gay and lesbian liberation...existed not to achieve class-based economic ends, but rather to pursue broader cultural and psychological goals such as building a sense of shared identity.”¹² Social movement theory argued that the most important factor in the wave of new movements was not a material one, but instead “how [movements] gave meaning to the personal lives of their members.”¹³

Conversely, other theorists advocate for the political process model that states the bevy of new social movements should “be seen in more political terms...existing within elaborate social and political systems.”¹⁴ Later, identity theorists explored “how the creation of identities in social movements is frequently shaped by the state.”¹⁵ What is clear is that since the 1970s, these schools of thought have synthesized to varying degrees¹⁶ and found that to holistically examine a social movement, social and political factors must be considered. That may seem obvious, but the degree to which social identity forms the basis for movements whose motivations appear material in nature is both necessary to begin to understand militant right-wing extremism and the melding of fringe-and-mainstream right-wing political movements in the 21st Century. The roots of MAGA, QAnon, and neo-Nazi terror must first be understood through the rapid explosion and transformation of political movements in the 20th Century.

A political movement is a complicated entity to study. Composed of thousands or millions of individual bodies, with often loosely-defined ideals, conflicting factions, and disparate motivations, political movements “are held together with words.”¹⁷ Movements are products of rhetoric and “discourse...to include not only the written and spoken word but also symbolic acts

and ritualized practices.”¹⁸ These symbols and rituals form the basis by which people build identities within their ideological movements. These identities, more than any economic or material grievance, contribute to someone’s devotion to a cause and, in the case of extremism, someone’s deepening radicalization. When these identities are combined with an information network containing people with similar identities and ideas that confirm this identity, a distinct worldview and language are created for a movement.¹⁹ Today’s far right is the product of a distinct political identity that trumps race,²⁰ class, and other identities.²¹ The gradual erosion of distinction between the mainstream and militant-extremist right-wing information networks has roots going back decades.

Christian Fundamentalism and the Birth of Alternative Networks

The microcosm of the Christian fundamentalist’ push for anti-evolutionism in the early 20th Century, described by Lienesch in *In the Beginning*, particularly demonstrates the origins of modern American right-wing information networks, cultural signifiers, and identity formation. Anti-evolutionism, a fundamentalist religious movement, relied on *The Fundamentals*, a free paperback book distributed by millionaire oilman Lyman Stewart.²² Why does a conservative religious movement a century ago matter for the study of the modern far-right? Because this movement revolutionized the way both information networks generate political movement in the United States, and how citizens form a distinct identity within a political movement. The American anti-evolutionist movement of the early 20th Century was notable in that its members had “articles of belief, communicating a distinct style of discourse, defining differences between themselves and others.”²³ In other words, the identity is derived from the ideology. “Its advocates were less concerned with creating creeds than with constructing community.”²⁴ This was a blueprint for a political movement with a collective consciousness,²⁵ with members building a sense of self due to their devotion to a cause and adherence to its tenets, rather than supporting a cause because of their preexisting identities.

It was through this totalizing identity where fundamentalism would lay the foundation for contemporary far-right information networks and the concept of a “culture war” itself. While anti-evolutionism was nominally focused on the issue of evolution, its *Fundamentals* served as a

mouthpiece for many more right-wing cultural issues. “In the last four volumes, not a single essay on evolution was to be found...focusing on conventional enemies like Catholics and socialists.”²⁶ Thus, fundamentalists were “Christian,” because that was stated to be the core of their ideological movement, and when their information network pivoted from evolution towards anti-Catholic or anti-socialist arguments, those too became “Christian” positions. Likewise, Christian theologians who believed in evolution could not have been true Christians, as to be Christian was to be fundamentalist and vice versa. Because, if something was part of the *Fundamentals*, it naturally had to be Christian by nature of its existence.

Rhetorically, early-20th Century fundamentalism also found a voice within doomsday prophecies and positioned its ideological opponents as fundamental threats to civilization and God.²⁷ The deeper its adherents fell within its network, the more militant fundamentalism became. The bible was referred to as a “weapon,”²⁸ faith was described as built “not on compromise, but on conflict and conquest.”²⁹ It was understood “The Christian’s Calling in the World is that of the soldier...He must fight for the good of the faith.”³⁰

The origins of the fundamentalist movement were largely enabled and funded by an oil millionaire, Lyman Stewart.³¹ But its adherents, and those who enabled its momentum, were largely just Christian conservatives of poorly-defined commonalities who found a collective consciousness within anti-evolutionist fundamentalism.³² More than a coherent theology, fundamentalism was a social gospel with which people grew more deeply affiliated the more they engaged with its information network. The social development eventually led to legal and political change.³³ American fundamentalism a century ago is a framework that has been repeated in American politics throughout history.

Fundamentalism of the early 20th Century remained influential long after the 1920s. The religious right set in motion an entirely novel understanding of citizenship, with distinct values and institutions. As early as the 1930s, “Southern evangelicals began constructing an alternative system of churches and schools, and proclaiming their brand of Christian nationalism as a counterweight to progressive notions of citizenship.”³⁴ Central to this alternative citizenship was “Landmarkism,” a strict Baptist doctrine developed in the 19th Century, which served as the

perfect basis for political evangelism in the 20th.³⁵ It stated that anyone straying from conservative Church doctrine was not a true Baptist, and anything other than strict Baptism lacked religious validity. This bedrock philosophy created a stricter standard of Christian citizenship, which in turn allowed for a movement with a built-in identity and a readiness to expel dissidents.³⁶ These strong in-and-out-group identities, seen in antievolutionist political circles,³⁷ enabled strong social identification with conservative Christian politics, further building upon social movement theory. Reinforcing the notion that support for political fundamentalism went beyond theology, Dochuk notes that, for the majority of its supporters, fundamentalism was primarily about opposing “cultural and political liberalism.”³⁸ Throughout the 1930s, the religious right was staunchly opposed by more liberal theologians and preachers, and at no point did it reflect a consensus on Christian doctrine. Instead, fundamentalism appealed so strongly to the identities of its members because of how it was rooted in grievance, built through citizenship, and justified with religious rhetoric and Christian aesthetics.

Another major development in the history of an American right-wing collective consciousness took place in Siloam Springs, Arkansas. In 1934, John Brown University (JBU) represented a focal point in the Christian Right’s goal of alternative education networks and a distinct pedagogy.³⁹ JBU combined an emphasis on the inclusion of religiosity in all aspects of life, with the University stating “we wish our graduates always to be consecrated to Christ, whether engaged in full-time service of the church or in secular activities,”⁴⁰ with a “head, hand, and heart” pedagogy which placed an emphasis on education through physical labor though on-campus farms and factories.⁴¹ This pedagogy both created a strong in-group community under the fundamentalist movement and very intentionally took conservative religiosity from a theological stance to an all-encompassing social identity.

John Brown University was not alone in the formation of an alternative education network. Bob Jones University and Pepperdine, formed around the same time and largely financed by the same people⁴² were key early pieces of the information network, alternative education sources specifically described by their founders as “training the youth of our nation”⁴³ in conservative ideals. Education was one of the most important information networks to control, as it formed the bedrock for people’s worldview. And like the fundamentalist movement itself, while overtly

religious, the alternative pedagogy and education networks in evangelical schools was also deeply nationalist. JBU, Bob Jones, Pepperdine, and other fundamentalist education projects were about more than teaching the Bible: their curricula reinforced a “pure Americanism,”⁴⁴ an understanding of American citizenship that was restrictive, exclusive, and opposed to more “traditional” tenets of American citizenship like religious pluralism and *jus soli* citizenship.

These schools’ curricula expanded beyond religion and into nationalism. “Real Americanism” was the assumption that the average American shared conservative, fundamentalist principles. Thus, this alternative education network was ultimately by and for “plain folks,” and relied upon populist rhetoric and aesthetic appeal to the common man rejecting secular, liberal education as a dictate from somewhere else. Jesse H. Jones, the Texas-based entrepreneur, politician, and financier of many early evangelical education initiatives stated that “Politicians...take a backseat to pastors and parents in the management of society,”⁴⁵ reflecting this “plain folks” mentality. Ironically, these movements were funded by large, coordinated, and centralized efforts that sought a top-down imposition of conservative social values on the communities they targeted. This tradition is plainly evident in the modern right-wing push to incorporate highly conservative content from the private media organization PragerU into public state curricula. Dennis Prager, the titular CEO of this company, said this content “promote[s] American values,” and is “a free alternative to the dominant left-wing ideology in culture, media, and education.”⁴⁶ Florida, Oklahoma, and New Hampshire have all incorporated PragerU curriculum into their public schools with the exact same rhetoric of pushing back against an imagined outside, left-wing cultural threat taking root in education.⁴⁷ Also parallel to early-20th Century fundamentalism is PragerU’s top-down funding from fracking billionaires⁴⁸ and national effort to influence state-level policy, despite its “plain folks” rhetoric. 20th Century fundamentalism and modern right-wing education campaigns both hinge upon the value of the information network: attempt to take alternative understanding of the world and make it the default, mainstream worldview by superseding traditional, secular networks.

The early “Plain folks” social gospel found its footing among the legacy of charismatic and socially powerful southern preachers in the 1940s and 50s.⁴⁹ Celebrity preachers like Billy Graham took advantage of key post-war factors such as new information technology, a booming

economy, and the fragmentation of the New Deal Coalition to reach unprecedented audiences and mainstream the conservative evangelism of the first half of the century. Plain Folks preachers were, fundamentally, a way to lay a populist aesthetic over a highly conservative political platform.⁵⁰

The crux of the Plain Folks political message was that “real Americans” shared a common set of “Christian Values” distinct from the liberal values viewed as dominant in a post-New Deal society (By extension, naturally, this implied “real Americans” were exclusively Christian). Rhetorically, this accomplished two primary objectives. First, this created a movement which intentionally perceived itself as isolated from mainstream society. Whether “Christian values” were mainstream or not mattered little compared to the importance of creating an in-group camaraderie among like-minded fundamentalists, constructing an out-group society to organize against, and imagining an existential threat to a Christian existence which justified radical action. The political nature of “Christian values” was immediately evident in the Christian right platform containing elements that were conservative but at-face-value irreligious such as “right to work” laws, rabid anticommunism, or opposition to Civil Rights.⁵¹

The Christian right did not even primarily spread through churches, but school boards. “Middle-class women at the center of grassroots campaigns against progressive education fueled the conservative movement.”⁵² “Save the children” rhetoric was some of the most common and effective in creating a powerful evangelical block in right wing American politics. Fear that children were being indoctrinated by atheists, communists, or other undesirables drove support for reactionary local policies and further entrenched a collective sense that “Christian values” were not just up for debate, but actively under siege.⁵³ The struggle over a liberal education was, at its core, a battle for information networks and a defense of a conservative collective consciousness. This late-1950s and early-1960s moral panic about atheist and communist indoctrination was also an early example of how conflict rhetoric plays a role in the modern far-right. Children being “indoctrinated” creates an urgent justification to defend children, and naturally anything is justified in defense of children.⁵⁴ Threat construction was absolutely crucial for the Christian right, as any offensive action taken against secular, public institutions could simultaneously be justified as a necessary act of defense and drive its own members deeper into

the movement as outside opposition was not simply a matter of disagreement, but an existential threat.⁵⁵

The “Silent Majority” and an Immaterial Populism

By 1972, the aesthetic populism theorized in chapter one fully manifested itself in the United States. A huge rally of people sharing in a common movement and a common language that would serve as the basis for decades of political action occurred in Dallas, Texas. Explo ‘72, also known as “Godstock,” saw 150,000 people listen to fiery evangelical sermons and Christian pop music.⁵⁶ Godstock was the ultimate manifestation of what fundamentalism had built since the 1920s. But with a broad-based message that was explicitly against racial prejudice, the evangelical movement on display in 1972 seemed a far cry from the Nazi rallies Benjamin had witnessed three decades prior, the emerging violent white supremacist militia movement, and even the racial grievance-based Southern Strategy transforming American politics of the time. So why does Explo ‘72 matter, if it was such a far cry from more explicitly hateful or violent movements? First, it realized the full creation of an enormous alternative information network and collective consciousness that had begun with the likes of John Brown and Bob Jones earlier in the Century. This was fundamentally the realization of a true social gospel, as Reverend E.V. Hill, a speaker at the rally, summarized ““We are not of one town, one race, or one denomination. But as one body united by a shared Gospel.””⁵⁷ Secondly, this matters for an exploration of modern right-wing citizenship simply because Explo ‘72 was an event “orchestrated by and for conservative Republicans.”⁵⁸ While a distinct network from emerging white supremacist cells, it was still a deeply conservative that both formed a model for and marked an evolution of how many in the American right viewed themselves and their community. Finally, it is so important to understand the emergence of parallel, distinct right-wing religious and racial movements in the late 20th Century for analyzing how these networks would gradually meld together in the 21st.

While the burgeoning Jesus movement was creating a faith-based language of Christian citizenship and conservative cultural signifiers, the Republican Party under Richard Nixon pivoted to a politics of cultural grievances over addressing material or class-based needs of the

(white) working class. In *Stayin Alive: the 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*, Jefferson Cowie notes that the 1972 election “marked a key point not in the simple conservative turn of labor’s politics, but rather in the fragmentation of labor’s political voice.”⁵⁹ Unlike earlier right-wing politics, Nixon’s “New” or “Silent” Majority did not explicitly focus on breaking organized labor movements.⁶⁰ Instead, Nixon believed that “workers were the counterpoise to the Eastern establishment” that he so despised.⁶¹ Nixon thus wanted to remake the New Deal coalition in his image, not break it.⁶² This would require building a working-class coalition based on something other than class. Nixon prioritized “making workers’ economic interests secondary to an appeal to their moral backbone, patriotic rectitude, whiteness, and machismo.”⁶³ These “New Majority” politics were, therefore, deeply rooted in identity-based fault lines, and relied heavily upon what Benjamin identified in Europe as an appeal to a lost past. Stoking working-class fear over “inter-related threats of social decay, racial unrest, and faltering national purpose”⁶⁴ ultimately served to direct white, working class elements of the New Deal coalition away from liberal economic policy and towards social conservatism.

This focus on social decay and rage at a morally degraded society meant Nixon’s Silent Majority relied on religious fervor as a means to construct an identity. For instance, after introducing abortion as a culture war rallying cry, views on abortion tied closely to class.⁶⁵ Christianity was an important part of this new “real American” working class.⁶⁶ Being the right kind of Christian with the correct values was an important dimension to what this new culture war viewed as true American citizenship. Evangelical communities were able to incorporate into the right flank of American politics with abortion as a unique flashpoint. This meant that the extensive organizing networks of the Christian Right could be mobilized for other conservative cultural issues, and religion and social values could overlap more deeply. With the evangelical movement in the mix of the conservative identity signifiers Nixon built his coalition around, it became an impossible task to clearly delineate who belonged to what faction of the political right. There was no measurement of who was in the coalition strictly because of racial resentment, gender grievances, or religion, to what extent, and why. Social movement theory, and populism more broadly, are nebulous and dynamic. Thus, what ultimately matters is how people imagined *themselves* aligning.

This self-alignment created a self-fulfilling prophecy, with people's thought process being "a conservative social issue must be Christian, because I'm Christian and conservative." People's pre-existing biases were given a religious context, and thus a culture war could be framed as a holy war. This escalated the life-or-death rhetoric at the flank of the American right. A Christian, law-and-order, white America thus became a core part of the collective consciousness for millions of Americans as religious rhetoric and Christian conservative figures like Billy Graham⁶⁷ became part of America's right-wing cultural mythos and ultimately central to right-wing identity formation.

Nixon's embrace of the working class "silent majority" ultimately served to produce a mainstream, immaterial American populism. After the rapid social progress of the 1960s, there was a lack of leadership and direction for the organized labor and social movements. "Without the person and the movements, populism tended to be a rather diffuse sentiment."⁶⁸ The Republican Party under Nixon capitalized on this vacuum, had a "cramped version of populism, based on who he was aligned against and not what he was for."⁶⁹ Put simply, this was the blueprint for a politics based on grievance, and a citizenship based on what one was not, rather than what one was. Steeped in culture war, and inextricable from the uneducated white working class's social resistance to issues like "sexual liberation" and "racialized hot-buttons" over the economic forces that drove support for Roosevelt or Johnson.⁷⁰ Ironically, these racialized politics often transcended peoples' prior identities, as Nixon's "strategic appeals laid out to thirty-three separate ethnic voter groups"⁷¹ created an overarching conservative cultural vision that, while appealing to whiteness, still unified disparate American cultural enclaves by rallying around a "glorified...cultural warfare."⁷²

This socially conservative "Silent Majority" was largely held together through rage at "liberal elite,"⁷³ and, like the fundamentalist movement, draped itself in populist aesthetics while funded by billionaires like Ross Perot and organized at the national level.⁷⁴ Central to the Silent Majority's success as a form of populism was rhetoric that the white working class was fighting *against* a powerful, secret, and evil social force.⁷⁵ The Republican Party of 1972 also bargained that it could tap into the post-Civil Rights Movement racial resentment, captured by George Wallace in 1968, that rhetorically linked "blackness and criminality, blackness and poverty,

blackness and cultural degradation.”⁷⁶ A politics that both explicitly defined its adherents in opposition to others, and subsumed preexisting ethnic or cultural identity was ripe for creating a subset of the population who viewed themselves in direct conflict with any outside their ideological sense of citizenship. Whether this brand of populism was rooted in good faith or sought viable solutions for improving living conditions did not matter: the Republican Party sought to “Rev up the troops for cultural battle even if it was about political power.”⁷⁷

The most important part of the “Silent Majority” is that it was successful. After 1972, working class politics became largely about aesthetic cultural signifiers and a struggle against a perceived, hostile cultural-ideological other. American politics transitioned from coalitions united by material or class needs and towards culture war, social movements, and politics based in grievance. The 1972 Republican platform laid the groundwork for a political identity that subsumed people’s other, pre-existing identities. This philosophy is the basis for a modern understanding of ideological faction-as-citizenship and aesthetics signifying who is or is not a “real American.” When identity is ideology, and ideology is culture, people see any political struggle as an existential war. This is ultimately an unending social struggle, an Americanized adaptation of the Cultic War Benjamin observed in the Germany of 1938. This philosophy gained an unstoppable momentum in 2010s America, developing itself into something more militant and authoritarian.

The Militia Movement and White Power

Finally, the explosion of socio-political movements of the 1970s would manifest a movement of even deeper grievance, stronger hatred, and greater violence: White Power. As theorists began to reshape their view on why people affiliated themselves with movements, and as activists began cosigning issues from environmentalism to feminism to queer liberation, a subset of soldiers returned home from Vietnam to a different country than the one they had left. Veterans like Louis Beam, the Texas Ku Klan Leader “sought to continue the war they had fought in Vietnam in the United States and beyond.”⁷⁸ These right-wing radicals would transform violent extremism in the United States from vigilante action undertaken in support of state structures like Jim Crow to a movement that declared war on the US federal government⁷⁹ and placed itself in opposition

to forces it viewed as dominant: democracy, pluralism, and liberalism. Appeals to violence and revolution found resonance with Vietnam veterans and active soldiers, as the far-right would “trade white robes for military gear.”⁸⁰ This military aesthetic became totalizing for the militia movement. Even extremists who did not serve, such as Bob Mathews,⁸¹ the founder of the neo-Nazi group “the Order” wore camouflage fatigues, adopted military structures for their organizations, and framed their struggle as an endless war.⁸²

Under the framework of social movement theory, men who were interested in military aesthetics, including active-duty service members, could find themselves easily sucked into a white supremacist information network as increasing numbers of their friends and comrades became affiliated. Conversely, men growing up in more socially conservative environments who were raised to nominally oppose movements like Civil Rights could initially show interest in White Supremacy and quickly be militarized.

The militia movement continued to gain momentum and its rhetoric grew increasingly violent throughout the 1980s. The book series *The Turner Diaries* portrayed a violent fantasy of white supremacists overthrowing a Jewish-controlled federal government and ethnically cleansing the world.⁸³ *The Turner Diaries* served as a vital information network which built a collective consciousness for the militia movement that was simultaneously revolutionary, ultra-violent, and explicitly racist. Due to the extreme underground nature of many White Supremacist militia organizations, the Militia Movement also led the way in communications, emphasizing anonymity and “cell-style” communications from the mid-1980s.⁸⁴ These anonymous communications between fringe right-wing extremists would be a critical proving ground for how extremists communicate today as a precursor to a largely anonymous online culture behind virtually every far-right terror attack of the last decade, from Christchurch to Pittsburgh to Buffalo.

Central to the white nationalist and militia movements was not their novelty, but how similarly they functioned to other right-wing social movements. Motivated by the same grievances, “embattled white power activists saw the Vietnam War as emblematic of all that had gone wrong”⁸⁵ in a post-Civil Rights United States. While more militant in its aesthetic and extreme in

its means, the Militia Movement functioned under the same defining logic of other identitarian social movements from anti-evolutionism to its contemporary in Nixon's social conservatism. Like other identity-based socio-political movements, the militia movement thrived on rhetoric of being at war. The White race was under constant threat, white women and children were beset by hordes of inferior nonwhites, and a hostile federal government was secretly controlled by Jews. In this environment, hateful conspiracy theories could fester and perpetuate themselves in an information space that was, by nature of its existence, completely isolated from the mainstream.

The Partisan 90s

The American right further developed culture war politics throughout the 1990s. "Social conservatism...increased its hold on American politics"⁸⁶ by exploiting fault lines around issues like same-sex marriage. The Republican Party itself used new communication methods like C-SPAN to attack political opponents.⁸⁷ Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich sought to advance hyper-partisan culture war politics, explaining his strategy as "when you give them confrontations, you get attention."⁸⁸ In 1994, Republican strategist Frank Luntz developed a memo titled "Language: A Key Mechanism of Control"⁸⁹ that instructed right-wing politicians and media figures to characterize Democrats as "threats" and "traitors"⁹⁰ to the United States. This elevated threat construction was a key part in building a siege mentality among the American right-wing.

In the 1990s, media networks were another key part of the increased partisanship of US politics.⁹¹ The new Fox News network and explosion of conservative talk radio further exploited the social fault lines utilized by Gingrich's GOP. Conservative media pushed formerly-extreme talking points to millions of Americans and pushed conflict rhetoric to millions of Americans. After the GOP won the 1994 midterm elections through culture war politics, Gingrich stated that Fox News host Rush Limbaugh was "responsible for what happened here as much as anyone."⁹² Notably, people who listened to over ten hours of talk radio a week voted Republican by a 3-to-1 margin.⁹³ The hyper-partisanship of the 1990s had increased the salience of extreme grievance politics to the point of electoral viability.

The early partisanship of the 1990s further contributed to the far-right's siege mentality.⁹⁴ Botched federal raids in Waco, Texas and Ruby Ridge, Idaho left civilians dead and reinforced the far-right's belief of being at war with the federal government.⁹⁵ Amid a burgeoning militia movement, white nationalist Timothy McVeigh bombed the Alfred P. Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people, including 19 children. The shock and horror following Oklahoma City sapped the militia movement of its momentum and drove its more vocal members underground. President Bill Clinton was able to successfully tie American's horror at what happened in Oklahoma City to "Republicans in Congress, who were increasingly being seen as extremists"⁹⁶ ahead of the 1996 Presidential election.

Post-Oklahoma City, Concluding Thoughts

The Oklahoma City Bombing and Clinton's 1996 victory created a brief lapse in the polarization of right-wing politics. With Gingrich promising to now find "common ground"⁹⁷ with Clinton, the far-right moved out of the national spotlight as the 20th Century ended. Although more Americans spent the early 2000s more concerned about the threat of Islamic extremism, the far-right never truly went away. The rhetoric and ideas that drove the far-right throughout the 20th Century found a home in the new information networks of the 21st. New information networks allowed extremists to find each other, spread ideas, and organize as the far-right surged back to national prominence in the latter half of the 2010s.

III. Language: Shop-Talk for the Genocidally Violent

This chapter demonstrates how the rhetoric of the modern far right seems novel but is virtually identical to far-right rhetoric of the past. It then shows how the life-or-death stakes communicated by far-right rhetoric inspires extremists to violently lash out.

In July 2023, many Americans received their first introduction to the strange, esoteric, and meme-ified language of the online far-right. A Ron DeSantis presidential campaign staffer retweeted an in-house campaign video⁹⁸ featuring baffling symbols and aesthetic messages. Here was the video: a Doomer Wojak⁹⁹ despairs at news articles implying Donald Trump was not far enough right. A fashwave¹⁰⁰ remix of Kate Bush's "Running up that Hill" plays. Ron DeSantis emerges in front of a Sonnenrad¹⁰¹ and marching soldiers, promising to usher in an online brand of American fascism.

If these words leave you baffled, you are not alone. These terms all speak to a specific subculture: the language and understanding of the world developed by the modern, extremely-online far-right. Once reserved for dark corners of the internet inhabited by extremists, their use by the campaign of a sitting governor and presidential candidate speaks to how rapidly these ideas have found mainstream appeal and their lasting, if under-realized, impact on the current American political landscape.

Current far-right rhetoric of racial and religious hatred, steeped in perpetual cultural grievance, calls back to the historical rhetoric described in Chapter two. There is nothing new under the sun. The language used in the 2010s and 2020s is almost identical to that in previous eras. And as in previous eras, the language has its intended effect on the audience it finds.

The Alt-Right: New Take on Old Language

Behind the memes and "interplay of jokes and sincerity"¹⁰² that characterize the 21st Century alt-right are much, much older ideas. The contemporary "alt-right"¹⁰³ simply repackages rhetoric that has surfaced throughout history. For example, the "Great Replacement" conspiracy theory

features heavily in right-wing rhetoric and terrorist manifestos. It alleges nonwhite migrants are forcefully replacing Europeans at the behest of a typically-Jewish elite.¹⁰⁴ This theory was introduced to the current online discourse in 2011 as the book “Le Grande Remplacement” by French white supremacist Renaud Camus. It entered the mainstream by the end of the decade, featured on popular conservative cable news programs.¹⁰⁵ The term “Great Replacement” is new, but the conspiracy behind it “in fact has deep American roots, dating back to at least the Reconstruction Era”¹⁰⁶ in terms of fearmongering about nonwhite immigration. In the 1980s and 90s, American neo-Nazis used replacement theory to drive recruitment, with the Aryan Nations group stating, “Aliens are pouring over as a flood into each of our ancestral lands, threatening dispossession of the heritage, culture, and very life blood of our posterity.”¹⁰⁷ The antisemitism behind this theory is also nothing new. In 1938, Charles Coughlin, an antisemitic radio preacher, proclaimed “A secret government of three hundred men rules the Jewish people,”¹⁰⁸ and this cabal sought to destroy the West by importing communism and degeneracy. “Fourteen Words,” a rhetorical tool popular among the 21st Century far-right, also originates from the neo-Nazi group “The Order” in the early 1980s.¹⁰⁹ The words are: “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children,”¹¹⁰ which again stems from the fundamental old idea white people are facing a genocidal replacement.

Likewise, “save the children” rhetoric is an old idea consistent across right-wing social movements. As far back as the 1910s,¹¹¹ conservative Christian movements have argued for greater control of education as a holy war for the souls of their children. In the early 1950s, conservative parents were terrified of liberal educators indoctrinating children into communism. They feared “subversives would undermine the nation by controlling their children. Any parents who relinquished their authority to state educators...paved the way for the destruction of Western civilization.”¹¹² Today, claims that LGBTQ+ individuals are “grooming” children lead to harassment campaigns and bomb threats against schools and libraries.¹¹³ Fear that left-wing teachers are “indoctrinating” children is the focal point of state and local political campaigns.

The perpetual cultural grievance at the heart of the modern political right mirrors Nixon’s idea of “glorified cultural warfare”¹¹⁴ described in chapter two. These politics created an identity defined in the negative: people were united by what they were not. These politics contribute to the

extreme sense of life-or-death stakes that cause people to violently lash out. These politics lead their adherents to believe they are under siege from their government and fellow citizens. In the late 2010s and 2020s, this siege mentality manifests itself as increasingly violent conspiracy theories, terrorist attacks, and insurrection.

By about 2015, the new far-right, commonly referred to as the alt-right, began to step out of obscure web forums and onto the national political stage. Common themes emerged in the language used to refer to themselves. This language, while claiming to be novel, reflected and continued decades of right-wing grievance politics. Rather than being anything revolutionary or new, the alt-right was just the latest iteration of the American far-right tradition, and one that, because of Donald Trump and social media, entered the mainstream far more rapidly.

At the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville Virginia, rhetoric espoused in August 2017 would have been at home in 1933. “Blood and soil” and “Jews will not replace us”¹¹⁵ were classic rallying cries of racism, antisemitism, and nationalism without any veneer of online irony. This rally could not have happened without online communities that allowed extremists to find each other and share ideas. Sites like the Daily Stormer and 4Chan’s /pol message board were beacons for inflammatory, hateful memes and pro-genocide posts.¹¹⁶ The rhetoric of the extremists who organized Charlottesville was further emboldened by a President sympathetic to their cause. After Trump’s election, Daily Stormer founder Andrew Anglin called for a “summer of hate” in which “a Black Sun will pass over America,”¹¹⁷ (referencing the Nazi Sonnenrad symbol) while white nationalist Richard Spencer exclaimed “Hail Trump, Hail Victory,”¹¹⁸ an Anglicized ‘Sieg Heil,’ at a speech in Washington, D.C. Trump responded to the Charlottesville rally, in which a counter-protester was murdered by an alt-right extremist,¹¹⁹ by saying there were “fine people”¹²⁰ on both sides. Trump refused to condemn the alt-right, signaling to men like Anglin and Spencer they had a true ally in the White House. The alt-right’s language specifically called back to Nazism, fomented hatred, and received support from the most powerful political office in the country. The alt-right’s three-piece Banana Republic suits and preppy haircuts obscure the fact that their movement offers the same ideas past far-right movements.

The alt-right ultimately relies on a similar grievance politics as Nixon's Southern Strategy. In a May 2016 editorial for right-wing newspaper Breitbart, popular alt-right "influencer" Milo Yiannopoulos describes his movement. The language he uses illuminates what motivates him, and how similar these motivations are to established conservative politics. He says so himself: "preference for homogeneity over diversity, for stability over change, and for hierarchy and order over radical egalitarianism"¹²¹ is at the core of conservatism, the alt-right simply increases the degree of militancy by which it pursues these goals. Yiannopoulos's column specifically invokes rhetoric of a perpetual decline and societal weakness which can only be rectified by "restoring" masculinity.¹²² This fear over a decline and emasculation is omnipresent in right-wing politics, as is being "frightened by the prospect of demographic displacement represented by immigration."¹²³

Decline rhetoric is vital to the alt-right. It not only connects it to earlier right-wing social movements who allude to social decline as a reason they must take power, it shows why members of the alt-right are so afraid. Groups used to social power, namely white, Christian men, perceive themselves to be losing their proportional social power. This loss of power is known as the "Great downgrade."¹²⁴ The alt-right may blame immigration, feminism, civil rights, or a great Jewish conspiracy for this downgrade. Regardless of the reasons for this loss of power, it transcends economic status and is exacerbated by social fragmentation and partisan rhetoric. Fears of a Great Downgrade also contribute to the same siege mentality present in older right-wing movements. Fears of a societal decline are nothing new, and led to the success of the Southern Strategy in 1972 in a post-civil rights America. When Yiannopoulos states "culture is inseparable from race"¹²⁵ while opposing "cultural intermixing,"¹²⁶ it is clear his alt-right is motivated by the same grievances. This life-or-death fear of replacement and decline is part of a familiar brand of grievance politics. This familiarity coupled with the effectiveness of this fearmongering leads people who are already conservative to buy into increasingly extreme rhetoric quickly.

Because information networks are essential to understanding modern far-right identity, it is essential to understand the language and rhetoric that underpin those networks. As the

contemporary far-right emerged and conglomerated around the Charlottesville rally, it relied upon rhetoric both distinct to its era and derivative of earlier right-wing movements.

The far-right of today “did not involve a clearly defined ideology or an affiliation with particular groups but instead were shaped by a propaganda campaign that engulfed the full spectrum of right-wing politics,”¹²⁷ allowing the political movement around Donald Trump’s presidency to pull support from broad sections of American society unified by grievances, bigotry, religion, conspiracies, and fear under one political roof. Put even more simply, the contemporary far-right has such a broad base of appeal because it uses language that appeals to a wide variety of cranks and conspiracists.

For a segment of the far-right, language is a tool with which to toe a line between the mainstream and extreme. This camp is militant, but not terrorists. They are “race-realists” but not “racists.” This group is largely known as the “alt-light,”¹²⁸ and is increasingly integrated with mainstream right-wing electoral politics.¹²⁹ This is all based on a “duplicious rhetorical game: rejecting white nationalism...while espousing some of its central tenets.”¹³⁰ Embodied by the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, online trolls, and far-right politicians; a perpetual game of “I’m not touching you” where the goal is to maintain the minimum amount of deniability from fascism. One popular phrase among alt-light groups, like the Proud Boys, is that they are not white supremacists, but simply “proud of Western Culture.”¹³¹ The unifying language threads a needle that sounds reasonable, especially if the listener is already socialized into conservative politics. This language originates from the decades-old right-wing culture war. An identity is derived from a desire to return to an imagined past and grievances with perceived social changes. The Proud Boys’ “Western Chauvinism” is nothing more than a fear of the same variety Nixon exploited, that the West is becoming more diverse and less masculine, and the traditional power of white men is slipping away, how “the whole secret of politics is knowing who hates who.”¹³²

What has changed is the degree to which overt white supremacy and anti-democratic sentiment dominate even the center of contemporary right-wing politics. Social media reproduced this rhetoric throughout the 2010s. By the time of the 2016 Presidential election, overtly racist, fascistic language no longer seemed outlandish. When the 2016 presidential platform focused on “Mexican migrant and Muslim criminality”¹³³ as a call for greater surveillance and targeted

policing, rhetoric that explicitly began in white nationalist communities¹³⁴ found its way to a winning national political platform. This marked the final step in Republican party politics—not militia groups, not fringe third parties—becoming “an extremist, antidemocratic force that imperils the U.S. constitutional order.”¹³⁵ Throughout the Trump presidency, salience of conspiracy rhetoric and violent extremism¹³⁶ increased as more Americans self-categorized themselves as being part of this vague, new far-right. Election lies, perceived threats against a way of life, and any of the other popular conspiracies point to a deeply worrying trend with right-wing language: the ability to create reality. Prominent figures on the right have found that they can produce a message, repeat it often and forcefully enough, and a majority of the American right, consistently, believes it. Any information that confirms existing social grievances and personal prejudices, in turn, shapes a new reality.

This combination of extreme, conspiratorial viewpoints into one mainstream movement is called a “recombination.”¹³⁷ It would be impossible to delineate every single subculture, as they are so nebulous and disorganized. The post-convergence far-right made strange bedfellows ranging from organized far-right militia members, QAnon conspiracy groups, anti-medicine “wellness” movement, “incels,” Christian fundamentalists, and more. Finding the commonality of these camps requires learning the rhetorical underpinnings they rely on. Most fundamentally, what allows people from these disparate groups to fall under the banner of the “far-right?” Then, how do they communicate? These changes have rendered modern right-extremist movements unpredictable and at times incoherent.

This incoherence is a byproduct of the ways extremism changes as it enters mainstream political discourse. Thus “Transformation results from top-down efforts to repackage ideologies to broaden the appeal of ideas.”¹³⁸ This also results from bottom-up, grassroots radicalization that comes from online networks and does not require the training, resources, or access that being in a traditional extremist organization would. An approach of “Fewer manifestos, more memes”¹³⁹ leads to everyone creating their own patchwork ideologies and understandings of the world, creating a broad-based political sect without a chain of command, instead existing without a clear ideological framework beyond simply “far-right.” The advent of individual, personalized

belief systems made possible by the internet is different from traditional, organization-based radicalization. It requires new modes of communication and self-identification.

To the extent there is unity, a small number of prominent far-right media and political figures who are particularly influential in shaping far-right reality perceptions.¹⁴⁰ These figures do not seek to unify the ideological platform of disparate right-wing movements, but instead grant them a general voice as an anti-establishment, disruptive social force. Practically, this means these far-right linkage institutions are highly effective at propagating conspiracy theories. But how does an initially-fringe, extreme right-wing conspiracy theory use rhetoric to make a tangible impact on mainstream American politics?

QAnon: “Where We Go One, We Go All”

A study published by the West Point Combating Terrorism Center on the QAnon conspiracy movement demonstrates just how this particular far-right conspiracy movement made such an impact. It observed that the QAnon movement was a “bizarre assemblage of far-right conspiracy theories [holding] that U.S. President Donald Trump is waging a secret war against an international cabal of satanic pedophiles.”¹⁴¹ QAnon began on 4Chan in 2017, when an anonymous poster, referring to himself as “Q,” claimed to have inside knowledge of Trump’s secret war against this cabal.¹⁴² QAnon was distinctly religious and apocalyptic in its rhetoric, claiming the United States would be plunged into “The Storm,” as an end-times war was fought against this satanic Cabal, after which Trump would bring about a “Great Awakening” that would usher in a new golden age.¹⁴³ Language is how QAnon found resonance with other far-right movements. It gained power and dominance in the existing far-right consciousness with rhetoric about an apocalyptic desire to destroy current order and usher in a golden age,¹⁴⁴ its assertion that a secret cabal of elites controls society, and a sense of urgency to save endangered children. For conservatives already acculturated to some of those notions, QAnon made sense.

The logic of QAnon is a “rejection of the mainstream explanation for their own [in-group] and the demonization of the other.”¹⁴⁵ This reasoning is not just a rejection of accepted reality like other conspiracies. It is the specific construction of a worldview that puts QAnon adherents in

conflict with other members of society. This leads to increasing isolation among the members of subcultures that emerge from this worldview. They develop esoteric jargon, unique language, and a distinct “language of rights” provided to members of the subculture. This identity-based language constitutes a form of online social citizenship, and is not peripheral to the movement, but central. The way that the far-right constructs its own identity allows it to subsequently shape its own reality.

Like other subcultures of the modern far-right, QAnon is highly idiosyncratic. “One week, it’s the false rumor that 5G cell towers spread disease, another week it’s Wayfair.com trafficking children inside unusually expensive furniture.”¹⁴⁶ QAnon’s origins on 4Chan message boards also contributes to the ambiguity of its overall worldview. “The line between manipulator and manipulated isn’t a hard one; it’s not uncommon for people to ironically make posts supporting any kind of bizarre or reprehensible position simply because they find it fun to be outrageous.”¹⁴⁷ This lack of a clear origin for each new QAnon conspiracy creates a situation in which those who encounter its language outside of its original context lack a degree of understanding, which in turn enables even broader interpretations.

As QAnon’s rhetoric grew increasingly extreme, it produced more violent real-world consequences. This built an insular community of conspiracy adherents who affirmed their own most radical impulses. QAnon also hyper-focuses on symbols: early 4Chan posts said “Their [enemy’s] love of symbols will be their downfall.”¹⁴⁸ This inspires believers to hyper-analyze the aesthetics of anyone they already dislike or distrust because of their preexisting social, political, or cultural biases. “Doubt is extremely difficult to get rid of once it starts”¹⁴⁹ so once a seed is planted, people will drive themselves deeper, identifying more patterns and coming to increasingly extreme conclusions. As life-or-death rhetoric becomes more extreme, “the stakes are so high that any action is justified. If you truly believe an online store or a pizza parlor is engaging in child trafficking and the authorities are complicit, extreme behavior is justified.”¹⁵⁰ This cycle has played out time-and-again. Conspiracy theories with similar rhetorical patterns capture the imagination of online individuals, who in turn act upon these conspiracy theories as what the West Point *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel* characterizes as ideologically

motivated violent extremists, or IMVEs.¹⁵¹ The duration of this study will also classify these individuals as IMVEs.

As a precursor to QAnon proper, the “Pizzagate” conspiracy theory alleged that the Comet Ping Pong Restaurant in Washington, D.C. was secretly operating a child sex trafficking ring. An IMVE radicalized by this theory entered Comet Ping Pong with an AR-15 assault rifle and .38 revolver on December 4, 2016.¹⁵² Notably, the focal point of the conspiracy was a child sex trafficking ring operated by the Washington D.C. Democratic political elite. Rhetoric heavily invoking child abuse, and the complete and religious demonization of an already distrusted (by the IMVE) liberal political establishment, and origins in Chan culture made Pizzagate the most direct precursor to QAnon.

On June 15, 2018, another QAnon-inspired IMVE drove an armored truck onto the Mike O’Callaghan-Pat Tillman Memorial Bridge near the Hoover Dam with “two assault-style rifles and two handguns, 900 rounds of ammunition, and a flashbang device.”¹⁵³ The IMVE called for a release of the “OIG Report,” referencing a Department of Justice probe of Hillary Clinton’s emails. “QAnon followers expected that the document would contain revelations about nefarious government actors.” This IMVE called on then-president Donald Trump, almost as a divine figure, to destroy a corrupt, pedophilic cabal in control of the federal government. In his call to Trump, this IMVE also used the QAnon refrain “where we go one, we go all.”¹⁵⁴

On March 13, 2019, an IMVE shot mafia boss Frank Cali in New York. This was no ordinary mob hit. This particular IMVE had been obsessed with QAnon conspiracies since 2016 and had made social media posts about the same child abuse scandal centering on prominent democrats. The IMVE told investigators his motivation for the killing was an online conspiracy linking Cali to the same imagined child trafficking ring. The IMVE wrote a “Q” on his hand during a court hearing, and personally appealed to Trump to save him from prosecution.¹⁵⁵

On March 31, 2020 an IMVE derailed a train in Southern California to draw attention to a vaguely-defined government conspiracy centered around the hospital ship USNS Mercy, which was stationed nearby. This IMVE alluded to a conspiracy centered around COVID-19 and a

government takeover. His comments to authorities had mirrored recent QAnon posts which read “[t]hey [the Cabal] want you [the American people] divided” The IMVE called for a “great awakening,” a religiously inspired phrase referring to Trump purging the government of this satanic cabal.¹⁵⁶

On April 29, 2020, an IMVE was arrested near a pier in New York City with multiple stabbing weapons. The IMVE was particularly focused on a child-trafficking conspiracy theory surrounding the hospital ship USNS Comfort. In addition to the common refrain of exposing a US government-backed child trafficking ring, the IMVE compared herself to a figure mentioned in the Book of Revelations, and again alluded to needing to destroy a satanic cabal. The IMVE did not begin posting on social media until April 2020, where she expressed a belief that Donald Trump was speaking directly to her.¹⁵⁷

In California, another IMVE took his two children to Mexico and murdered them in August 2021 because of his deep belief in the QAnon conspiracy. The religious doomsday rhetoric of QAnon convinced him his wife was demonic and passed “serpent DNA” to his children.¹⁵⁸ In September 2022, a Michigan-based IMVE murdered his wife, daughter, and family dog over QAnon-inspired fear of a coming apocalypse.¹⁵⁹ Each of these murders, committed by men seemingly-totally detached from reality, were products of escalating life-and-death conspiracy rhetoric that played upon not just political grievances, but language of religious fervor to radicalize their respective IMVEs.

All of these IMVEs, acting on conclusions drawn from the QAnon conspiracy theory, expressed common rhetorical themes and refrains. Identifiable catchphrases like “where we go one, we go all” serve as in-group identifiers and calls to action for copycat acts of violent extremism. The rhetoric works by ceaselessly repeating unsubstantiated claims and easily disprovable falsehoods until they are all people hear. “What [conspiracy theorists] perceive as life and death”¹⁶⁰ justifies any action and creates a moral framework for QAnon-inspired IMVEs to operate under. An intrinsic, embedded religiosity, evident in repeated reference to Biblical prophecies, accusations of satanism against political opponents, and references to a mass spiritual awakening both provides further fuel for radicalization and is inherited from decades of religious and evangelical

rhetoric in right-wing politics. In February 2020, the first QAnon church, Omega Kingdom Ministries,¹⁶¹ was founded as a further development in the use of religious language and rhetoric. Rather than a novel development, it was another example of American evangelical Protestantism serving as a lens to interpret politics, and for right-wing politics being an interpretive lens for bible. Ultimately, the “Joy of communicating, urgency of fighting perceived injustice,”¹⁶² and power of gamification and aesthetics made QAnon the perfect fringe movement to capture the imagination of the modern far-right.

Most importantly, QAnon’s esoteric conspiracy language entered the mainstream. Under the belief that the 2020 election had been stolen from Donald Trump, an enormous outpouring of American rightists stormed the capitol in an attempt to halt the verification of election results. Such a massive show of ideological force perfectly that showed how successful the mainstreaming of once-fringe conspiracy theories was. While people attending January 6th came from a variety of online and political subcultures, with a variety of grievances, and could claim to be protesting for ostensibly different reasons, it did not matter. These were Republican voters, not just scattered internet trolls. These people all existed within the same information space, built upon a shared language, and this reality was now a political force to be reckoned with.

Following the failed January 6th insurrection, “QAnon remains in hiding from his misled fanbase and a furious nation.”¹⁶³ But QAnon’s alternate reality built on life-or-death rhetoric had been unleashed in full. In December 2020, 75% of Republican voters still believed there was merit to some or all of the claims “millions of fraudulent ballots were cast, voting machines were manipulated, and thousands of votes were recorded for dead people.”¹⁶⁴ Subsequently, Republicans featured election denial in 291 out of 470 total national races in 2022.¹⁶⁵ That was 62% of all 2022 Republican campaigns. This prevalence shows the persistence of QAnon’s rhetorical themes. Such conspiracy rhetoric contributes to a right-wing that espouses new conspiracies at a rate impossible to keep up with. Old conspiracy theories, like the election being stolen or vaccines being dangerous, are accepted as basic fact. QAnon’s origins on fringe, possibly ironic web forums were long past. Its mode of thinking was here to stay for mainstream voters and national political candidates.

QAnon found quick resonance with other far-right movements because of language. Its rhetoric about an “apocalyptic desire to destroy current order and usher in a golden age,” its assertion that there is a secret cabal of elites controlling society, and its use of children as its ultimate crutch, that its victory is necessary” for the children,” allowed it to seamlessly enter the existing far-right collective consciousness. QAnon also found its footing at the perfect time, since mainstream conservative politics were already becoming increasingly extreme and polarized during QAnon’s rise.

The Great Replacement: from the Daily Stormer to the Nightly News

Violent messages spread via a large platform can serve as marching orders for a number of violent extremists. This phenomenon is known as stochastic terrorism. Stochastic terrorism is essential to understanding the consequences of far-right language. This section will examine how “Great Replacement” rhetoric promotes a sense of duty and urgency to act in someone immersed in such rhetoric.

The Great Replacement conspiracy theory is one of the most consistently featured rhetorical tools in stochastic terror manifestos. Many Americans were formally introduced to the theory in 2017 as masked white supremacists chanted “Jews will not replace us” in Charlottesville. By the end of the 2010s, the Great Replacement became a commonly repeated theme on more “mainstream” right-wing information sources like Fox News,¹⁶⁶ as it simultaneously featured in terrorist manifestos in Charleston, Buffalo, El Paso, Pittsburgh, and more.¹⁶⁷ The theory states that a secret group of, typically Jewish, elites are sending ethnic minorities into white countries with the goal of fully replacing native white populations, also known as “white genocide.”¹⁶⁸ Replacement Theory’s rhetoric echoes the most extreme conspiracy elements of QAnon, while drawing from a rich tradition of far-right anti-immigrant rhetoric. Replacement Theory employs many motivating factors: a sense of victimhood at the hands of an elite, white supremacy, xenophobia, antisemitism, and ultimately a return to an imagined golden age.

The Great Replacement has inspired individual IMVEs to violently lash out. For example, before murdering 51 Muslim worshippers in 2019, an IMVE in Christchurch, New Zealand wrote in his

manifesto, titled “The Great Replacement”: “All through immigration. This is ethnic replacement. This is cultural replacement. This is racial replacement. This is WHITE GENOCIDE.”¹⁶⁹ Additionally, before a 2022 attack that killed ten Black Americans in Buffalo, New York, the IMVE wrote: “Mass immigration and the higher fertility rates of the immigrants themselves are causing this increase in population. We are experiencing an invasion on a level never seen before in history.”¹⁷⁰ The Buffalo manifesto also copied Christchurch’s refrain: “All through immigration. This is ethnic replacement. This is cultural replacement. This is racial replacement. This is WHITE GENOCIDE.” Similarly, neo-Nazi IMVEs attacking synagogues in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 2018 and Poway, California in 2019 explicitly believed they were at war with Jewish people, that “every Jew currently alive currently seeks the destruction of [the white] race,”¹⁷¹ specifically through an imagined Jewish effort to replace white people.

Although the motivating factor behind these attacks, an imagined “White Genocide” conspiracy, has been a mainstay in online white supremacist discourse on the typical far-right platforms since 2011’s “Le Grande Remplacement,” the underlying ideas are far older. Elements of Replacement Theory, including a Jewish elite directing other ethnic minorities, are present in white supremacist literature of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. A popular British pamphlet from 1892 warned whites would “wake to find ourselves elbowed and hustled, and perhaps even thrust aside by peoples whom we looked down upon.”¹⁷² A 1916 American book titled “The Passing of the Great Race”¹⁷³ offered similar premonitions of a white genocide. The Great Replacement’s ideological reach is long, and its human cost is high.

A version of this once-fringe conspiracy theory is now mainstream in the United States. On Fox, the most-watched cable news network, host Tucker Carlson espoused a sanitized version of the theory. Instead of a “Jewish cabal” and an explicitly-stated “White Genocide,” Carlson referred to a conspiracy “driven by political partisanship.”¹⁷⁴ On Carlson’s show, the Democratic Party was replacing white voters with minorities.¹⁷⁵ This sanitized mainstreaming is not just reflected in where Great Replacement rhetoric is coming from, but that Americans genuinely believe it. A poll conducted by the Associated Press NORC Center for Public Affairs found that 32% of Americans believe “a group of people is trying to replace native-born Americans with

immigrants for electoral gains.”¹⁷⁶ This same study found that Americans who engage with other conspiracy theories are more than twice as likely to believe in the Great Replacement.¹⁷⁷

Even the more sanitized, mainstream Great Replacement rhetoric has led to extreme violence. Another IMVE wrote before murdering 23 people in an El Paso, Texas Walmart in 2019: “The Democrat party will own America and they know it...They intend to use open borders, free healthcare for illegals, citizenship and more to enact a political coup by importing and then legalizing millions of new voters.”¹⁷⁸ Because the mainstream Great Replacement theory invokes the same life-or-death stakes as the original antisemitic version, it still inspires extremist violence against minority communities. The refrain that large groups of migrants are “invaders,” seen employed en masse during the 2018,¹⁷⁹ 2020, and 2022¹⁸⁰ elections, further reinforces a right-wing understanding of being under attack.

The “sanitization” of the Great Replacement theory is overstated when the “extreme” and “mainstream” arguments both lead to the same murderous results. The Great Replacement imagines a conservative, white America virtually under siege. Rather than some new and unexpected rhetorical development, is the ultimate manifestation of Nixon’s “politics of who hates who.” The Great Replacement’s rhetoric of defending a white, Christian nation supersedes any other material policy goals and galvanizes believers towards far-right political mobilization.

The Great Replacement and QAnon demonstrate a common language with other right-wing social movements. This common language is how conspiracy rhetoric is able to find disproportionate acceptance among those who engage with other conspiracy theories.¹⁸¹ The shared language of resisting a malignant force harkens back to the idea of “cultic war,” which functions to create an in-group with other extremists. This camaraderie is why being “in” on the conspiracy is its own reward.¹⁸² Because these theories originate from and exist in similar online communities, this furthers the sense of community among adherents. Each replacement theory shooter’s manifesto also strongly mirrors the last shooter, references the same online memes and subcultures, and concludes with a call to action.

Violence inspired from repeated rhetoric is called memetic violence.¹⁸³ Memetic violence's instigators specifically intend to go viral, the way an internet meme would. In the United States, a white supremacist terrorist attack against Black churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina perfectly demonstrated the goals of memetic violence. In his manifesto, the Charleston IMVE repeatedly referred to white and Black people as locked in a state of perpetual conflict, where Black people were inferior to whites.¹⁸⁴ Charleston echoed a similar siege mentality to other attacks, calling for a race war to ensure white survival. The Charleston IMVE was explicit that he hoped his attack would inspire copycats. This captures the essence of what memetic violence seeks to accomplish.

Stochastic terrorism in the alt-right era uses memetic violence to propagate itself. References to an extremely-online right-wing subculture are linguistic signals that the terrorist is an insider from the "right kind" of online community. Memes like "remove kebab"¹⁸⁵ and "happy merchant"¹⁸⁶ and symbols like the Sonnenrad are self-identifiers reinforcing a sense of community while demonizing out-groups. As the community grows, so does its violence. The more off-putting or obscure a meme or manifesto, the better. What seems strange to a layperson communicates a more direct message to the in-group. It is shop-talk for the genocidally violent.

Concluding Thoughts

Language shapes the collective consciousness of the modern American right. Their cultural grievance language gains life-or-death stakes as their rhetoric mirrors previous eras' war rhetoric. President Trump, Tucker Carlson, and other right-wing leadership and media use specific language to build an in-group identity; that language's text and subtext leads the American right to imagine itself as a distinct set of citizens under perpetual siege. That belief, in turn, leads to violent outbursts when believers imagine they must prevent "White Genocide," harm to children, or a shadow coup. The rhetoric of violence leads to actual violence, while the information networks that spread the language help the movement find adherents.

IV. Information Networks: How Rhetoric Finds an Audience

This chapter argues that the far-right builds a collective consciousness using information networks. It unites its members with a shared language to build and reinforce a distinct understanding of reality. This chapter then chronicles how that collective consciousness migrates from isolated online networks into mainstream discourse.

We understand our world through networks. Our understanding of reality comes from social media, TV, and people we talk to in real life. The far-right exists in its own networks and thus people in those networks develop a particular understanding of the world. If rhetoric is the foundation of extremism, then information networks are the frame by which extremism spreads.

The Great Replacement, QAnon, and other far-right conspiracy theories exist within this broader web of right-wing networks and unified worldview. Tracking down and listing every conspiracy theory, every niche culture war issue, and every buzzword in these spaces would be pointless. A new one would emerge tomorrow; an existing one would fizzle out and die as its adherents shifted to a new topic. And nothing would change. Extremists would still carry out bomb threats and shootings, extremism would continue to enter mainstream political discourse, and culture war grievance politics would persist.

One reason for the intractability of far-right extremism is the way far-right information networks incentivize acts of violence to go viral.

Viral Murder

Chapter three established stochastic terrorists are spurred to take violent action by extremist rhetoric with life-or-death stakes. However, it takes strong networks to spread these ideas to would-be IMVEs. It is not sufficient for the language of genocide, victimization, and defensive war to provide the justification for these attacks. This rhetoric must have a means to grow legs and find resonance with would-be terrorists. Far-right terror attacks in the modern era, which share language with online culture, often share a common refrain of defending a white,

heterosexual, Christian order from a “Great Replacement.” On the dark corners of 4Chan and 8Chan, where explicitly violent and pro-genocide rhetoric is “more pronounced,”¹⁸⁷ the idea of Accelerationism has spread alongside Replacement Theory.¹⁸⁸ Accelerationism specifically states society must be broken down so a new order can arise from the ashes. This, by definition, calls for violence and the sowing of chaos. This, in turn, creates a call to action for extremists.

When acts of terror themselves are orchestrated with virality in mind, the violence becomes its own network. This phenomenon, known as memetic violence, is how extremism replicates itself. Memetic violence is violence that, much like an internet meme, is designed to be replicated. It spreads as acts of violence receive publicity and spur other extremists to action. Casey Kelley, a professor researching far-right memetic violence at the University of Nebraska, describes far-right terrorist attacks carried out in the context of modern online networks as “public murder”: “an extremist rhetorical enactment of political sovereignty that renders its targets into fungible chattel so as to nourish the life and community of a privileged citizenry.”¹⁸⁹

What this looks like, in practice, is an act of mass murder broadcast to the murderer’s community. That same community, in turn, celebrates the murder, classifying the victims as necessary collateral damage in the struggle against social grievances. In the Christchurch, New Zealand terrorist attacks, the most direct case of public murder, the IMVE uploaded his manifesto to 8Chan before live streaming his mass murder to hundreds of cheering online extremists. In the cases of attacks in Poway, Pittsburgh, Charleston, Buffalo, and El Paso, IMVEs posted public manifestos rooted in racist, antisemitic, anti-LGBTQ, misogynistic rhetoric that justified mass killings on the basis of a loss of white social capital. Importantly, each of these attacks encouraged future violence, referencing prior manifestos that inspired them and ending with a call to action for future IMVEs. In this way, the acts of violence themselves become a key rhetorical device.

Visibility matters: like with any meme, the more eyes that see what is produced, the more someone will share the message.

Platforms Spread the Message

Larger, more visible platforms make right-wing extremism worse. As far-right rhetoric gained a larger national platform between 2016 and 2017, reported hate crimes increased by 17% from 6,121 to 7,175.¹⁹⁰ Between 2020 and 2021, amid hyper-polarization surrounding the 2020 election, Black Lives Matter protests, and the COVID-19 pandemic, reported hate crimes increased 35% from 8,052 to 10,840.¹⁹¹ Importantly, these numbers alone are not conclusive evidence of frequency or commonality: hate crime statistics are problematic because of discrepancies in reporting between states and imperfect recording methods that are only as effective as what people report or what law enforcement chooses to record.¹⁹² But it is clear that modern information networks have created a larger platform and reach for extremist ideas. A Tufts University study on Trump's rhetoric concluded in 2018 that there were "consistent statistically significant treatment effects for the quotation about Mexicans on the offensiveness of comments offered about each group...individuals exposed to the Trump quote about Mexicans were about 2 points more likely to write something offensive about Blacks, 5 points more likely to write something offensive about Mexicans, and four points more likely to write something offensive about Millennials."¹⁹³ The larger a platform for hateful rhetoric, the more influential the hate is.

By 2015, the Trump presidential campaign was just one part of a range of robust, wide-ranging, and international information networks hosting extremist ideas. Trump's victory, the Charlottesville rally, and the broader hyper-partisanship of right-wing politics reflect a critical mass of people who find far-right beliefs either agreeable or acceptable. As written in the El Paso shooting manifesto: "My opinions on automation, immigration, and the rest predate Trump and his campaign for president."¹⁹⁴

This critical mass could be achieved because new information networks were able to streamline disparate sources of information and isolated ideas into a single cohesive understanding of the world, then disseminate this understanding further than previously possible. The overlap of extreme and mainstream right-wing information networks was a "Great Convergence."¹⁹⁵ Before this convergence, people could belong to different movements: the religious right, the White Power movement, an antigovernment militia, etc. Afterwards, these viewpoints could blend

together by sharing the same online communities and thus receiving the same information.¹⁹⁶ What is unique in these networks is not the ideas about replacement or racism: these are old. The El Paso IMVE railed against immigration. The Charleston IMVE was motivated by anti-blackness, and none of the subscribers to the Great Replacement theory invented antisemitism. What is new, though, is the reach of the message and, as a consequence, the increased number of people seemingly willing to engage in extreme violence to protect their position in society.

These converged networks share a common understanding of being at war with a villainized political opposition.¹⁹⁷ Variations of replacement theory are found in virtually all far-right terror manifestos, and this indicates a deep fear about losing a perceived position in society. Popular rhetoric of immigrants “invading” the United States, hyper-racialized images of inner cities as war zones, and repeated calls for criminalizing political opponents increased the salience of ideas previously reserved for the margins of politics. The increased prevalence of fringe ideas is reflected in the views of the electorate: according to a Public Religion Research Institute and Brookings Institute study published in October 2023, one-third of Republican voters believe violence “may” be an answer to America’s political problems, compared to 13% of Democrats.¹⁹⁸ This same survey found voters are twice as likely to support political violence if they believe society has changed for the worse since 1950. Finally, nearly one-third (29%) of Republican voters and 23% of the entire electorate at least somewhat believes in at least part of the QAnon conspiracy theory “that centers of power are controlled by Satan-worshipping pedophiles atop a child sex-trafficking operation.”¹⁹⁹

Donald Trump’s early 2016 campaign offers a case study on how right-wing extremism networked into a presidential platform. Trump had been “loosely enmeshed in the world of white nationalist paranoia and conspiracy theories as evidenced by the leading role he played in the “birther movement,”” against President Obama’s citizenship²⁰⁰ perfectly positioning him to pick up the mantle for white nationalist politics. Trump signaled support to avowed white nationalists by echoing far-right immigration stances. He also shared racist misinformation, such as a graphic stating that 81% of homicide victims were white people murdered by black people.²⁰¹ As a result of this signaling, neo-Nazi Andrew Anglin, founder of the popular neo-Nazi website Daily

Stormer, said “White men such as you and I go out and vote for the first time in our lives for the one man who actually represents our interests.”²⁰²

The steady escalation of right-wing grievance politics, combined with the Internet and a major presidential campaign platform, created the perfect conditions in which ideas from obscure white nationalist subcultures could enter the mainstream. These ideas were not new (see *supra* chapter 2). A politics of grievance and social fragmentation had been the Republican Party’s primary strategy since Richard Nixon’s 1972 platform. These grievances were further developed by the explosion of right-wing news media in the 1990s.²⁰³ Those right-wing networks were often grievance based but lacked a singular worldview conducive to the kind of identity formation observed in the late 2010s and early 2020s. By 2015, the mainstreaming of right-wing ideas just marked a difference in degree—the wider proliferation of the call for violence to address immigration, demographic change, pluralism, political opposition, and similar problems.²⁰⁴

The “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia marked a major turning point in the “Great Convergence” of right-wing networks. The rally showed how disparate social movements within the broader far-right could use online networks to mobilize. This rally, organized by a collection of far-right social media personalities and militia groups largely through online networks like the Daily Stormer,²⁰⁵ sought to bring all facets of the American right-wing together in a massive display of solidarity. The Charlottesville rally marked a new level in far-right idea salience and mainstream acceptance, as it “united” different subsets of the right: white nationalist, religious fundamentalist, antisemitic political elements got a national platform to promote the “Great Replacement” and a vision for an autocratic United States. The effectiveness of these networks allowed white nationalism to re-emerge front and center in American political life. The Trump Administration declined to condemn the right-wing protestors, declaring instead that the rally had “very fine people on both sides.”²⁰⁶ This refusal to condemn extremists, many of whom had been chanting the president’s name and wearing the president’s merchandise, signaled that the largest platform in the country would be a distributor in this information network. After a campaign that had spread and amplified extremist messages, it was clear that the most powerful man in the Republican Party would make this the party’s lasting message.

As the far-right paved inroads with mainstream political networks, it also made progress in American living rooms. Fox News had, by itself, been an instrumental part of amplifying and increasing hyper-partisan rhetoric since the 1990s.(Kruse) The addition of new networks like One America News and Newsmax coagulated in the mid-2010s to create a full right-wing information web, one that replaced all other information and informed its viewers what was understood as reality.²⁰⁷ Tucker Carlson’s show on Fox was a particularly important part of this radicalization web. Carlson specialized in sanitizing white nationalist talking points for a mainstream audience. As Carlson’s show became a mouthpiece for the American far-right, it went beyond promoting the status quo of the Republican Party line, pushing ideas that were previously reserved for extremist circles. For instance, Carlson alluded to the Great Replacement multiple times, and promoted white nationalist talking points like “diversity is not a strength,”²⁰⁸ and “The great replacement? Yeah, it’s not a conspiracy theory. It’s their electoral strategy,”²⁰⁹ This convergence of fringe and mainstream information networks did not come out of nowhere. It was simply another step in a decades-long process.

The nature of online information networks also means the “American” far-right cannot be neatly confined within U.S. borders.

Global Networks

Because of the nature of online information networks, the current “American” far-right reaches far beyond U.S. borders. The 21st Century far-right is a global movement that uses American far-right ideas and ideological traditions. The Christchurch, New Zealand attacker used rhetoric spread on American social media and cable television and explicitly referenced American politics throughout his manifesto. Even his choice of a weapon, an AR-15 assault rifle, was chosen “for the affect[sic] it would have on social discourse, the extra media coverage they would provide, and the affect[sic] it could have on the politics of the United States and thereby the political situation of the world.”²¹⁰ At a shooting in a gay bar in Bratislava, Slovenia, the IMVE’s manifesto contained more identical rhetoric to other far-right attacks.²¹¹ He was motivated by what he saw as a declining, degenerate West that was too accepting of LGBTQ+ people, he believed in a Jewish-backed Great Replacement, and his manifesto contained the same hateful, sardonic memes seen in attacks across the world. Perhaps most strangely, India’s

far-right Hindu Nationalist party has begun alleging their opponents are controlled by a “George Soros” cabal, invoking antisemitic conspiracy theories spread via social media with an entirely Western origin, despite having virtually no historical basis for ingrained antisemitism.²¹²

The Great Replacement became globally popular through sheer repetition from all levels of the right-wing information web. It spread on social media and major news networks alike, and eventually to public memetic violence. It appears in nearly every far-right terror manifesto. The Great Replacement is not a documented or commonly-accepted phenomenon. No white Americans are actually dying in a coordinated genocide. Instead, through sheer repetition and inundation of life-or-death conflict language, the Great Replacement, a “white genocide” has simply become the understood reality for millions of people, even those outside of the United States.

Isolation and Finding New Networks

After discussing the far-right’s global reach, I will examine how these ideas take root at the individual level. Social isolation and the breakdown of more traditional communal institutions creates loneliness and an information vacuum. Online networks can replace networks that used to be more personal, organic, and smaller. The Greater isolation that came from the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to a proliferation and adoption of conspiracies among the political right.²¹³ When organic communities dissolved, some people found new homes in extremist networks. For example, the female QAnon-inspired IMVE who believed herself to be a figure from the Book of Revelations and grew obsessed with the USNS Comfort did not start posting until April 2020. She had, notably, experienced isolation and unemployment due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as personal trauma, before going down an extremist conspiracy rabbit hole.²¹⁴ The 21st Century information environment allows conspiracies to reach vulnerable people like her.

Social isolation tends to push like-minded people together in online spaces.²¹⁵ Historically, people found community in religious institutions, local clubs, or community centers. These both limited the scope of most peoples’ information networks and provided interactions with people who shared identities, but not necessarily ideologies. By contrast, modern online communal networks funnel people into ideologically common groups of enormous size. The nature of

online participation incentivizes sharing information that generates outrage. Political subcultures also create communities entirely unified around ideology and shared grievances. These realities lead to online political subcultures that churn out and encourage radicalization.

Institutional failure can contribute to the social conditions that create extremists.²¹⁶ For some people, susceptibility to extremist ideas is driven by a need for connection. For vulnerable, isolated individuals, online networks offer “an immediacy and scale and relevance to online communities that can be more potent and rewarding than a neighborhood bake sale.”²¹⁷ Where community identifiers and ties with other people recede, a deep, permeating fear often arises. This fear, known as the “Great Downgrade,”²¹⁸ specifically focuses on the perception that powerful groups (particularly white people) are losing social influence. When people with similar grievances find each other through shared networks, they reinforce this perception amongst themselves. The more afraid people are, the more they will accept violence, authoritarianism, and widespread extremism.²¹⁹ Additionally, social fear and a siege mentality make people’s minds ripe for conspiracy thinking. Each new conspiracy theory introduced into the broader far-right network is impossible to track, but people already entrenched in the network will accept almost any in-network conspiracy because of this fear and distrust of outsiders. In-network acceptance of extremist conspiracy theories far predates the internet. Political scientists of 1930s Germany observed a populism without anticapitalism, motivated in the search for a mythologized evil elite and a “common man” united by something other than class. Then as now, clear falsehoods became accepted as truth through ceaseless repetition at every level of information intake.²²⁰ “Alternative Facts,” as we now know them, are accepted as reality by so many because information networks are the major ways humans build reality.

And these information networks are weaponized to overwhelm those not already immersed in the far-right. As far-right ideas became increasingly accepted in conservative political spaces, “misinformation came from all levels of Republican politics.”²²¹ The repetition and dissemination of misinformation competes with and overwhelms fact checkers and verifiable information. This information competition creates informational white noise, or what the far-right political strategist behind Trump’s 2016 campaign, Steve Bannon, called “flooding the zone with shit.”²²² Many voters simply check out of politics altogether, unable to determine what is

true. “Flooding the zone with shit” creates an alternative right-wing media space that keeps its listeners in a bubble and primed to reject any outside information.

In this way, alternative information networks further entrench the people within them. This is known as Network Segregation,²²³ which is when all information someone receives exists within the same network. Network segregation creates a militant resistance to out-of-network ideas. The far-right already imagines itself under constant siege, so adherents are willing to accept any opposing information as an attack. Then, as a result of an individual’s radicalization, they often find themselves ostracized by friends and family.²²⁴ Thus, the right-wing information network is a uniquely compounding force for further radicalization: it inhibits reality-testing, creates more dependency on the online network, and proves far-right beliefs are indeed under attack from mainstream society.

The networked spread of existential, life-or-death conspiracy theories and violent rhetoric indicate a deeply worrying trend: the ability to create reality and to encourage people to act accordingly. This reality construction directly leads to a distinct identity formation, with a unique far-right understanding of American citizenship. As right-wing information networks have increasingly polarized, the American far-right political project has begun to realize a fully distinct citizenship, something nearly revolutionary, because it conceives of a fully distinct basic reality. As the far-right’s adherents receive a constant message that they are under attack and in danger, their movement becomes a counterrevolution in search of a revolution to stop.

QAnon, the Social Media Conspiracy Movement:

Nowhere in the broad web of modern right-wing extremism is this sense of being under attack, coupled with the complete transformation of both reality and identity, seen more than in the QAnon movement, with its online origins, threat construction, and physical consequences.

QAnon is unique among conspiracy movements in that it has only functioned as an online social information network. It began with a 2017 4Chan post from an anonymous government leaker known as “Q” that claimed Hillary Clinton would be arrested, and the government was secretly controlled by a “deep state” cabal of satanic pedophiles whom Donald Trump was fighting.²²⁵

This was the latest in a line of anonymous posters on 4chan, known as “anons,” purporting to represent different federal agencies spreading false conspiracies. The 2016 Pizzagate conspiracy theory is identified as the ideological precursor to QAnon because of the way in which it was spread through these “anon” channels. Additionally, Pizzagate relied upon subsequently recurring far-right themes about secret “elite” corruption and pedophilia. These conspiracies initially spread on more obscure online spaces: 4chan’s far-right political forum /pol and the message board 8chan. QAnon had a small following from 2017 until 2020, when YouTuber Tracy Diaz started promoting it.²²⁶ After QAnon’s YouTube debut, the theory gained popularity on mainstream social media like Facebook.

As QAnon grew, two things happened to accelerate its spread. First, people newly-exposed to QAnon’s ideas fell for conspiracies produced on 4Chan initially meant to be ironic or satirical.²²⁷ Language that would signal to a knowledgeable user a post was satirical was meaningless when encountered by a less knowledgeable audience. The line between genuine belief and satire thus became indistinguishable as QAnon gained traction. The second is that “Encouraged by the gamified dynamics of social networks,”²²⁸ conspiracy posters faced incentives to produce increasingly outrageous content. As these increasingly outrageous claims grew into all-encompassing doomsday prophecies, they were repeated in numerous online communities ranging from private Facebook groups to influential YouTube channels like Diaz’s. The decentralized nature of the conspiracy movement allowed followers to add their own conspiracies, which were—as is characteristic of such networks—uncritically accepted and then became part of the broader conspiracy network. One person may have subscribed to QAnon because a conspiracy about a dead celebrity²²⁹ led them down a rabbit hole of anti-government extremism, while another may have been motivated by anti-vaccination or religious fundamentalist sentiments. All these ideas find acceptance within the QAnon movement because segregated networks encourage increasingly radical content.²³⁰ As with similar networks, ceaseless repetition of multiple conspiracy theories means those receiving information down the pipeline were already primed to believe new ones.

QAnon demonstrated a snowball effect because it is so deeply informed and shaped by its content producers. The previous chapter discussed how QAnon uses the worldbuilding language of a game. QAnon also uses networking tactics that allow online game communities to grow.

Online community members lead each other further down rabbit holes, creating an infinite number of pipelines. Just like a forum where gamers may help each other defeat a difficult level, in QAnon “There’s a general sense of, ‘This should be solvable/findable/etc.’ that you see in lots of reddit communities...that reality and truth must be captured/in evidence somewhere.”²³¹

QAnon uses networks similar to an Alternate Reality game (ARG). In an ARG, players receive a series of clues that typically lead to various real-world locations as a mystery or puzzle is solved. ARGs encourage players to open different doors, go down different rabbit holes, and offer rewards based on a feeling of doing research. QAnon’s sprawling conspiracies and social structure mirror this gameplay, and this phenomenon also means that its language is effective because it functions as a form of worldbuilding. The human brain exists to find patterns. It cannot help itself. “Apophenia” is what happens when a clue or pattern is identified in one’s own mind when actual evidence does not exist in real life.²³² Apophenia is quite common in ARGs or other puzzle games, and it falls to the game developer to limit the extent to which players experience this. With the language of far-right conspiracies, “Apophenia is the point.”²³³ QAnon-related conspiracies are a way to make sense of a chaotic reality. This networked construction of a conspiracy movement is designed to “Entice players through clever rabbit holes.”²³⁴ As users go down these rabbit holes, they become increasingly radicalized.

But, as with other online conspiracy movements, QAnon’s consequences manifest offline. The dangerous effects of a full QAnon network mobilized to action could be observed on a small scale at the Grass Valley Charter School in 2019.²³⁵ On April 27, 2019, former FBI Director James Comey tweeted under the hashtag #FiveJobsIveHad, simply participating in a trend of listing his previous jobs. For QAnon believers on Twitter, however, this tweet was hyper-analyzed as an encoded message: it was a clue in solving QAnon’s game. As depicted in the image below, posted by Twitter user @TopInfoBlogs, letters in the original hashtag were picked out to spell “Five Jihads,” and the first letter of each line came together to form the acronym “GVCSF.”²³⁶ Networks of QAnon followers on both Twitter and Facebook determined this referred to Grass Valley Charter School in California. The school would be hosting a jubilee on May 11, 2019, which QAnon followers determined would be the site of a “false flag attack,” in which a government-staged terrorist attack would occur.



This new conspiracy theory spread through QAnon's online networks. QAnon adherents made numerous credible threats to arrive at the event fully armed and looking for a fight. Law enforcement officials concluded there was "zero threat" of the theoretical false flag attack occurring, but an actual danger of armed QAnon followers causing trouble. The school canceled the planned jubilee.²³⁷

The case of Grass Valley Charter demonstrates how QAnon's information networks function. QAnon believers convinced themselves an attack would happen, with new theories proposed and disseminated by loosely-connected users on popular social media platforms. Since this conspiracy theory operated within an already-established rhetorical world of a grand struggle against QAnon's conception of a demonic, pedophilic elite, followers were able to digest and disseminate and act on new conspiracies that utilized this same linguistic framework.

Thus, Grass Valley Charter shows how loosely-connected internet users, who operate in the same information space, can convince themselves of a threat in a way that spurs them to real-world action. On a much larger scale, and in a case that shows how deeply-ingrained far-right conspiracy networks have become in mainstream politics, the January 6, 2021 insurrection followed the same playbook.

January 6: How to Network an Insurrection

The attempted insurrection of January 6, 2021, was the ultimate result of a conspiracy theory that had been carefully manufactured and spread by right-wing information networks. Before the

2020 election had ended, prominent right-wing voices were already calling the results into doubt. Then-incumbent Donald Trump made “800 inaccurate claims about the election”²³⁸ between November 3, 2020, and the final day of his presidency. On November 4, 2020, as ballots were still being counted, the former president tweeted ““Last night I was leading, often solidly, in many key States, in almost all instances Democrat run & controlled. Then, one by one, they started to magically disappear as surprise ballot dumps were counted. VERY STRANGE, and the ‘pollsters’ got it completely & historically wrong!”²³⁹ Prominent right-wing media figures like Charlie Kirk²⁴⁰ and Tucker Carlson²⁴¹ echoed the president’s claims. Right-wing information networks began immediately to cast doubt on the election results. President Trump’s election conspiracies resonated within existing right-wing networks because people immersed in the right-wing information space were already primed to believe anything.

QAnon’s online networks also played a major role in ultimately organizing the January 6 insurrection. Before the 2020 election, QAnon communities grew increasingly convinced that the corrupt, demonic “deep state” was mobilizing to overturn a Trump election win. These Qanon-affiliated conspiracy theories included fraudulent mail-in ballots, “CIA vote-harvesting programs,” and the voting machine company Dominion purposefully taking votes from Trump.²⁴² These conspiracy networks grew both in number of adherents and in number of conspiracies. On election day, this panic led to several isolated incidents of far-right extremists showing up to “guard” polling sites,²⁴³ ultimately serving to intimidate voters. This political action was a direct result of the online networks that built the QAnon community and showed QAnon adherents’ sense of duty based on their belief in the conspiracy theory. QAnon networks ultimately saw their members show up to stop the January 6 vote certification because QAnon had conditioned people to view the insurrection as Trump’s chance for a final victory over the “deep state.”

The networks that organized January 6 extended beyond individual extremists and included people at every level of right-wing politics. While publicly spreading conspiracy theories, the Trump Administration worked with Republican state legislators, governors, and attorneys general to send what multiple prosecutors allege as fake electors²⁴⁴ to nullify the electoral college. The Trump Administration also filed over 60 lawsuits with the help of state attorneys

general designed to overturn the election.²⁴⁵ At a pro-Trump rally on December 12, 2020, in which four people were stabbed and 23 arrested,²⁴⁶ Proud boys, Oath Keepers, and other militia groups helped organize in lock-step with rhetoric originating from the White House, with “stop the steal” as the mechanically-repeated rallying cry drilled over and over into the heads of a conspiracy-minded right wing. The line between militant and political had become increasingly eroded.

In the lead-up to the January 6 insurrection, QAnon’s online networks carried consistent communication about a counterrevolutionary action against an imagined coup by QAnon’s maligned “cabal.” Right-wing patriots needed to act within their duties as citizens to stop it. On December 18, 2020, Trump tweeted “Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild (sic)!”²⁴⁷ Political organization around January 6 was specifically focused on the idea that the vote certification, largely a formality conducted by Congress before an inauguration, could be stopped by force. Top-down messaging, accompanied by behind-the-scenes involvement of Republican officials and grassroots organizing among militia groups and online extremist communities, showed anti-democratic extremism was entrenched and powerful. The ease with which this lie had spread suggested a wider adoption of extremism and an information network at all levels of the conservative body politic.

Concluding Thoughts

Thus, years of the American right repeating various decentralized and idiosyncratic conspiracy theories culminated in a failed insurrection in 2021. The insurrectionists on January 6 were acting out of a sense of identity based on defending their way of life from constant attack. Extreme life-or-death rhetoric spread through segregated information networks worked to isolate the far-right from other members of society and further entrench this worldview. January 6 showed how QAnon-based conspiracy theories were mainstreamed, how support for right-wing authoritarianism had dramatically increased, and that a sizable portion of the American electorate had an alternate conception of its own citizenship. The Republican embrace of these politics has roots in past social movements but emerged as a distinct understanding of reality because of the new potential of online networks. Online networks facilitated different extremists’ ability to find each other, reinforce their worldview, and exclude any outside information. January 6

insurrectionists were right-wing citizens acting out what they believed were their duties as citizens. It marked a major completion of building an alternate reality for millions of Americans.

V. Identity Formation: A Culmination of Efforts

This final chapter will argue that, as a result of the factors discussed in previous chapters, members of the far-right ultimately conceive of their own identity and citizenship as fundamentally distinct from people outside their networks.

Rhetoric is the foundation that extremism is justified on. Information networks are how rhetoric spreads. A common understanding of reality developed through a shared information space leads to identity formation. Network segregation prevents out-of-network ideas from permeating an information network, which further entrenches the members' sense of identity. Between members of the same society, differing opinions become fully distinct social identities when information segregation leads to completely different frameworks to approach the world. Ultimately, differing frameworks lead to an alternate understanding of reality. The American far-right's automatic acceptance of conspiracy theories, and the severity of its conflict rhetoric, suggest the formation of a deeper identity than a simple political platform.

Paul Pelosi: An Instant Conspiracy

A far-right IMVE's attack on Paul Pelosi, husband of former Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, is a case study in far-right rhetoric and information networks creating a full identity. An IMVE broke into Pelosi's home on October 28, 2022, attempting to kidnap the Speaker, who was not home. Instead, he attacked Mr. Pelosi with a hammer before being subdued by police. This attack occurred amid mass election denialism during the 2022 midterm elections. Various election conspiracy theories targeted Speaker Pelosi.²⁴⁸ While an attack on the husband of the woman third in line to the Presidency was dramatic, the response to the attack demonstrated how the far-right and mainstream right had converged to form a distinct, unified right-wing identity. Rather than condemnation from government officials and media institutions, mainstream right wing political figures created immediate conspiracy theories and communicated that violence against a political opponent was acceptable. These theories revealed their proponents' prior familiarity with conspiracy rhetoric, and seemed to assume their intended audience shared that familiarity. The information networks spreading these conspiracy theories began not with fringe

online groups, but with cable news, pundits, and even elected officials. All levels of the establishment accepted a position that was, by any metric, extremist. It excused political violence, ignored a basically observable reality, and dehumanized a political opponent. These conspiracies were immediately accepted as basic reality because of the ceaseless repetition of conspiracy theories during the Trump administration.

The attack itself was nothing special in the grand context of right-wing belief. Paul Pelosi's attacker stated "I'm not trying to, like, get away with it. I know exactly what I did" and he was "sorry I didn't get more of them."²⁴⁹ This IMVE was motivated by life-or-death rhetoric from the right-wing information networks disseminating election, COVID, and other conspiracy theories. He said he was defending himself from "people killing freedom."²⁵⁰ This case also demonstrates the international nature of these networks, as the IMVE was Canadian.²⁵¹

This attack was a predictable result of right-wing networks' demonization and dehumanization of political opponents.²⁵² Right-wing rhetoric had cast left-wing opposition as demonic, pedophilic, pure evil. The IMVE—who was not even American—was inspired by the right-wing conspiracy theory that Democratic officials "had spied on Donald J. Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and then committed a 'record-breaking crime spree' through the four years of the Trump administration"²⁵³ culminating with the theft of the 2020 election. He had stated, "Day in and day out, the person who was on the TV lying every day was Pelosi."²⁵⁴ This IMVE also compared himself to American founding fathers: "'They fought the British, they fought the tyranny. They didn't just (expletive) surrender to it. And when I left my house, I went to go fight tyranny, I did not leave to go surrender,'"²⁵⁵ indicating a sense of duty and resistance against an existential threat. The IMVE "posted antisemitic screeds and endorsed the QAnon conspiracy theory,"²⁵⁶ indicating that he was part of the broader far-right information web. He viewed his act of violence as part of an ideological struggle for the soul of humanity.

What happened next revealed completion of the information web, an all-encompassing reality construction affirmed by every information source. Despite the clear and unsurprising motive, conspiracy theories about the attack began immediately. The most popular of these conspiracy theories was that Pelosi had been attacked by a male lover, not a political extremist. According to

CNN's twitter aggregator, "at least 19,000 tweets [mentioned] the words "Pelosi" and "gay" since the day of the attack, garnering a total of more than 700,000 likes."²⁵⁷ Prominent media figures immediately joined in the conspiracy theory, such as former Breitbart editor Raheem Kassam, Donald Trump, jr., Sebastian Gorka, and Dinesh D'Souza.²⁵⁸ Even Elon Musk "linked to an article...claiming [the IMVE] was a male prostitute and Pelosi had been in a drunken dispute with him."²⁵⁹ The conspiracy aired on Fox News less than 24 hours after the attack occurred, being broadcast to millions of American living rooms.²⁶⁰

Elected officials also promoted the conspiracy, casting doubt on the attack's political motivation. "The misinformation came from all levels of Republican politics":²⁶¹ Texas Senator Ted Cruz tweeted that "none of us will ever know" what really happened at the Pelosis' home.²⁶² One Republican congressman said the IMVE was simply a "nudist hippie male prostitute."²⁶³ Donald Trump suggested the attack was staged.²⁶⁴ These claims demonstrated a shift in alternative right-wing identity: all levels of right-wing society, across linkage institutions, instantly created a new reality. Information segregation ensured that no outside evidence could break the information web. This rendered the "gay lover" conspiracy not a conspiracy theory at all, but a basically accepted fact of reality in those networks.

The lies about Paul Pelosi's attack were not some grassroots conspiracy that took time to grow legs as it emerged from the depths of /pol. It was developed almost instantaneously and spread by the most powerful and influential members of the media and political class. This conspiracy showed a right-wing collective consciousness distinct from what mainstream society observed reality to be. The acceptance of the Pelosi conspiracy was the instinctive "click, run" response²⁶⁵ (Cialdini) that comes out of deep socialization. The far-right's identity came from years of learning how society functions and accepting this as reality. Only other members of the far-right could be trusted sources of information, and whatever information they gave must be true. Thus, the far-right demonstrates a sense of ideological citizenship united by shared grievances, information networks, and a sense of defense against constant assault from political opposition. That sense of psychological war with people outside of this network is why it may seem difficult to have debates or find common ground. Beyond a different understanding of reality, policy

disagreements, or material needs, the far-right does not consider those outside its network to be fellow citizens.

Digital Citizenship

Because modern far-right citizenship begins and flourishes with online networks, it must be understood as something both ideological and digital. Particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, digital citizenship regimes have developed as a stateless mode of citizenship by which people identify.²⁶⁶ This digital citizenship is not confined to national borders or legally enshrined, so it requires new means of self-identification and in-group identification.

While online communities certainly existed long before the pandemic, the late 2010s and early 2020s have seen people's online lives become more central to their identities, and online relationships as more important to their daily lives. Just as a degree of urgency and scale of life-or-death rhetoric has made the difference between electoral grievance politics and regime change extremism, the degree of attachment is the main factor in determining if an online relationship is "digital citizenship" or simply someone engaging with an online community.²⁶⁷

Since there is no legal definition of digital citizenship and people's online identities are nebulous and, often, anonymous, digital citizenship cannot be perfectly defined in a vacuum. Just as someone could have digital citizenship on a video game subreddit, a fashion blog, or a PTA Facebook group, the depth of interaction and degree to which someone finds deep community within an online community factor into digital citizenship. Previous chapters have discussed how these networks' game structure perfectly encapsulates how many communities reinforce themselves and drive their members deeper into a sense of shared citizenship. It becomes necessary to look at a digital regime's network segregation and collective consciousness. By this standard, far-right digital citizenship is especially potent as it exists in a symbiotic relationship with right-wing politics and offline media, it is specifically designed for as much information segregation as possible, and it calls upon people's pre-existing notions of citizenship and real-world grievances to generate, time and again, real world political action.

In the sense that digital citizenships exist alongside the practices of the nation-state,²⁶⁸ ideologically-united digital citizenships naturally affect and reflect have an effect in, and are a reflection of real-world physical politics. In this regard, far-right digital regimes operate similarly to the social movements that preceded them. Even as far back as the fundamentalist movement of the early 20th Century, Christian conservative networks sought to create a “community of discourse”²⁶⁹ that both organized political action and created a sense of in-group identification. Central to these communities of discourse was the concept of boundaries,²⁷⁰ which identified “who we are and who we are not,”²⁷¹ and developed a collective consciousness of themselves as part of a larger conservative movement.²⁷² Likewise, digital citizenship constructed around ideological lines and shared social grievances is what allows for a right-wing collective consciousness that is so susceptible to conspiracy rhetoric and a conflict mentality. But it is absolutely nothing new: the digital mode of citizenship that erases state boundaries, thrives in anonymity, and reproduces its most shocking content simply allows for a greater reproduction of the modes of authoritarian right-wing politics identified in the Frankfurt school: an immaterial populism mobilized by aesthetics and the mechanical reproduction of extremist messages.²⁷³

January 6: “If it kills me, it kills me”

This sense of duty and citizenship can ultimately explain the attempted insurrection January 6, 2021, and why establishment politicians and law enforcement were unprepared for what occurred. Just as “conspiracy theory” may become a misnomer when a theory becomes an understood reality repeated at all levels of an information ecosystem, for the extremists on January 6th there was no insurrection in the sense that they genuinely believed the election had been stolen. The insurrectionists believed they were stopping a shadow coup, and were motivated by a duty to and understanding of their citizenship. Micah Loewinger, a reporter with National Public Radio’s “On the Media,” embedded with insurrectionists and listened to their conversations on an unencrypted walkie-talkie app called Zello. Loewinger’s reporting was instrumental to federal prosecutors in charging insurrectionists, but it is also illuminating into how these people conceived of their own citizenship and relationships to each other and the country.

“It's us or tyranny. It's us or failure. It's us or a post-American world. And are you all in? Over.”²⁷⁴ This message delivered over Zello by one of the IMVEs on January 6 represents the insurrectionists' justifications. As the insurrectionists noted in their communications, January 6 was the “nuclear option” if the same political establishment at the heart of every right-wing conspiracy theory tried to “illegally” remove Donald Trump.²⁷⁵ The insurrection was the culmination of a politics that placed right-wing Americans under constant, existential assault from various cultural grievances. Or as one IMVE put it, “You've got good versus evil right now going on in our country.”²⁷⁶ At a militia leadership meeting following the 2020 election, one member asked, 'Do you think we're in a civil war?' and other members “nodded their heads and said yes,”²⁷⁷ indicating just how severe the conflict rhetoric had become. The language shifted from disputing an election or disliking the President-elect to civil war. There was a general sense, repeated at all levels of right-wing media and political life, that there was an active conflict with political opponents that could turn violent at any moment. A 2022 YouGov survey indicated that 43% of Americans,²⁷⁸ and 55% of respondents who identified as “strong” Republicans (compared to 40% of “strong Democrats, 39% of “not very strong” Democrats, 40% of independents, and 45% of “not very strong” Republicans) thought an eventual American civil war was likely or possible.²⁷⁹ While much of the baseline rhetoric was nothing new, the sense that it was “now or never” stemmed from the sense that extremists had an “ally in the White House”²⁸⁰ who emboldened and united them.

This sense of identity-based citizenship is also why the Great Replacement finds so much resonance in modern right-wing spaces. The popular conception of a “real American,” a white, Christian, conservative American, is at the core of how right-wing culture warriors conceive of their own citizenship. Even if an individual is not specifically white as many prominent right-wing figures are certainly not,²⁸¹ true, deep citizenship is still predicated on ticking the correct culture war boxes. This citizenship is based on ideology, aesthetics, and community. It cannot be legally verified, but creates a deep citizenship that must instead be communally-verified by like-minded compatriots. This citizenship is inherently threatened by a multiethnic, religiously pluralistic, and dispassionately legalistic version of American citizenship. This is nothing revelatory in and of itself. In recent history, this battle between competing visions of citizenship was just a flashpoint for culture war politics, and extension of the everyday divides that elections

broke down between. But increasing conflict rhetoric, observed in the motivations behind the January 6th insurrectionists, expands and reframes existing social cleavages. Thus, these fights over who is a “real American” become a zero-sum, life-or-death, existential battle. People’s solutions to these cleavages become increasingly violent, as people are exposed to higher levels of extremist rhetoric and share networks where they are told by people, from all levels of society, to be afraid.

This shared siege mentality creates a camaraderie that in turn builds a citizenship based in community and ideology. January 6th showed that this alternative conception of citizenship was simply far more developed and organized than experts anticipated. It had also taken root across wide swathes of the American right, no longer existing as a fringe position. This broad support indicates that the Republican Party itself is at least partly a vessel containing elements seeking full regime change, contained in near-complete information segregation that promotes a reality where radical action is necessary. For the insurrectionists on January 6th, Republican voters informed by Republican politicians and Republican information channels, the insurrection was their duty as citizens. As one put it, “If it kills me, it kills me.”²⁸²

Law enforcement officials misunderstood how the far-right had begun to conceive of themselves as alternative citizens opposed to broader American society. There was a failure of imagination to understand how deep, well organized, and truly extreme a significant portion of the political right had become. A popular view among intelligence agencies was “oh, yeah, that's just chatter; that doesn't mean anything.”²⁸³ Even agencies who knew about the online organizing repeatedly stated nothing would happen outside of constitutionally-protected speech. Some political leaders aware of the threat dismissed it.²⁸⁴ Militant extremist groups like the Oath Keepers were mobilizing “in plain sight,”²⁸⁵ because not enough people could grasp the sense of urgency and counterrevolutionary fervor gripping the right.

Before the dust had settled at the Capital, the far-right was already calling January 6th a false flag, even by the people who organized it. Despite the weeks of rhetoric and planning leading up to it, and the top-to-bottom involvement of prominent right-wing figures, Loewinger notes that he “was already hearing about a conspiracy theory that January 6 was an inside job”²⁸⁶ as the crowds began to dissipate. The Oath Keepers claimed the insurrection may have been a false flag

attack,²⁸⁷ despite being some of the primary organizers of the riot. Eventually the same apparatus of social media influencers, cable news pundits, and politicians all began to parrot “versions of the claim suggest [the insurrectionists] were FBI operatives or members of the anti-fascist movement.”²⁸⁸ This points to how low trust the entire political right is, and how reflexive conspiracy-making has become to far-right politics. As this movement is fundamentally a politics of what one is not and a politics of a rejection of out-of-network understandings of reality, even when these politics come to fruition, citizens of the movement may refuse to believe the results.

The largest right-wing militia organization present at the January 6 insurrection, the Oath Keepers, is an information network that formed into an identity group using all of the techniques discussed here. The Oath Keepers were composed of extremists with military or law enforcement backgrounds, set to fulfill what they saw as their oath to the Constitution, by force if necessary. Their founder, who is currently serving a federal prison sentence because of his role in the January 6 insurrection, founded the Oath Keepers after believing conspiracy theories about ex-President Barack Obama.²⁸⁹ The founder referred to himself and his fellow extremists as 'guardians' of the Constitution, frequently compared himself to the Founding Fathers, and specifically organized against fears of a mass gun confiscation and a “Marxist” invasion. The constant conspiracy rhetoric, culture war flashpoints, and social grievances reveal Oath Keepers members acting out the most extreme form of an old kind of politics. Constant fears of a malignant force disrupting a true, American way of life are omnipresent in historical right-wing rhetoric. What differs is the immediate violence, scale, and desire for more revolutionary change present in groups like the Oath Keepers’ actions. The frequent references to the founding of the country and rhetoric of fighting a defensive war speaks to a sense of duty felt by these extremists. Essentially, their belief is that the Culture War ought to be won by force, not that there is a new Culture War.

This change, expressed in extremist rhetoric and organized through modern information networks, ultimately comes about because of how the modern far-right conceives of its own citizenship. There can be no more electoralism, as people within the in-group are distinct from their fellow Americans. They see themselves at war with their fellow Americans. They are the

only true Americans. There is a constant rhetoric of war, and this colors every organized movement the far-right pursues. These aesthetics, too, are not new. The far-right militarized itself after the Vietnam War, and the militia movement that petered out in the 1990s never truly went away. Thus, any political victory of conservatism is seen as a war victory against their own citizenship, every grievance is a struggle for survival against a hostile entity.

Ideological citizenship is the only common denominator for the people who comprise the contemporary far-right. Despite appeals to blue collar rhetoric and a white working class, the majority of right-wing support is still mostly upper or upper-middle class.²⁹⁰ In 2020, Trump won the upper income bracket outright, but support for movements like the Oath Keepers, QAnon, and others still crosses income brackets and class identity. Despite the prevalence of white nationalism, online white nationalist and extremist communities are shockingly racially diverse.²⁹¹ Online information networks offer anonymity and easy information reproduction, producing multiple prominent far-right figures who are non-white. Even a specific political program seems to be missing, as a number of pet issues and disparate conspiracies make up the “Great Convergence” that has characterized the far-right since 2016.

Concluding Thoughts

Instead, the far-right’s identity appears to be entirely based on shared sociocultural grievances. And what are grievances? Losing access to how the political right views its citizenship. It is a loss of social capital, the Great Downgrade, ultimately a reaction to the perceived degradation of their national citizenship. Ideological citizenship is defined in the negative and rooted in opposition to people and groups seen as threatening the far-right’s ideal order. Other people or groups having access to full citizenship drives these grievances and a sense of militant urgency deeper into the collective consciousness.

VI. Conclusion

Thus, today's far-right reflects past right-wing politics and past extremist movements. Because of the internet, extremist grievances have been amplified and members of right-wing online communities self-reinforce the degree to which they feel under direct, constant attack from outside forces. That amplified sense of peril, in turn, motivates more extreme action to redress their grievances. But importantly, none of this is new. The modern rhetoric and its consequent violence discussed herein are largely the same as those from the past. Because modern information networks have allowed different social movements to converge, the 21st century far-right understands reality through a shared information space. This understood reality becomes increasingly radical as the structure of online networks reinforces the most extreme voices.

Espoused by people across class and identity lines, far-right extremism is driven by social anxieties and conspiracy theories that ceaselessly repeat themselves. As the extremist rhetoric compounds, information network segregation worsens and people in far-right political communities are driven closer together. This compounding leads to real-world consequences: terror threats, mass shootings, and an attempted insurrection are just some of the manifestations of a political subculture that views itself increasingly in conflict with the rest of its country and views the stakes of this conflict as increasingly life-or-death. The more groups of people live in segregated information spaces, the more susceptible they are to any conspiracy theories which confirm their disdain for outside networks. This series of compounding and radicalizing factors ultimately are what create a distinct sense of identity-based, in-group citizenship.

Modern information networks make this radicalization worse. They let extremists meet, affirm ideas, and allow different social movements to converge. Influential people within these information networks are able to work extremist ideas into the mainstream. The culmination of these efforts is violent, paramilitary action that springs up unexpectedly. Extremists who feel increasingly under attack because of the information they receive feel a greater need to lash out violently. This feeling of conflict ultimately leads the modern far-right to share a sense of community and a strong sense of ideological identity with each other. It is, unfortunately but inevitably, only a matter of time before a far-right IMVE commits another act of violence. Far-

right information networks are still strong and continue to radicalize people without any effective countermeasures. Increased polarization during the 2024 presidential election threatens to create even more violent extremists. By spreading extremist rhetoric at an unprecedented rate, the 21st Century American far-right has created an army in search of a war.

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