American Patriot: The Social and Political Networks of Banal Fascism in the United States

by

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Dedication

To my mother, Sara, whose brilliance and strength has always inspired me.

To my grandparents, George and Janet, who were a refuge and who I will forever miss.

To my kids, whose creativity and boldness continue to amaze me every day.

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Table of Contents

Dedication ii

Acknowledgements iii

List of Figures ix

Abstract xi

Introduction 1

Chapter Outlines 15

A Note on Terminology 18

Chapter 1 Coded Christian Nationalism: Patriots, Influencers, and The American Christofascist Movement 21

1.1 Introduction 21

1.2 Defining Christian Nationalism and Banal Fascism 26

1.3 A Short History of American Christofascism 36

1.4 The Contemporary Patriot Movement and Christofascist Influencers 50

1.5 Conclusion 67

Chapter 2 They Hate Us for Our Freedom: Warrior Media and the Making of a Fascist Hero 68

2.1 Introduction 68

2.2 The Fascist Superman 73

2.3 Hollywood and American Sniper 83

2.4 Selling a Fascist Icon and the Thin Blue Line 92

2.5 Conclusion 102

Chapter 3 'Relentlessly Patriotic': The Commodification of Banal Fascism 105

3.1 Introduction 105

3.2 Branded Nationalism and Rebranding Fascism 109

3.3 Fascist Brands and Militant Communities 120

3.4 Fascist Women and Brand Influencers 134

3.5 Conclusion 141

Chapter 4 “They’re Coming for Your Kids": The U.S. Mothers’ Movement and Banal Fascism 143

4.1 Introduction 143

4.2 What is Fascist Motherhood? 148

4.3 Rebranding the Family: Anita Bryant and the Anti-LGBTQ+ Movement 156

4.4 The Contemporary Mothers’ Movement and the Anti-LGBTQ+ Campaign 161

4.5 Conclusion 181

Conclusion: Where Are We Now 183

Fascist Christianity 189

Fascist Masculinity 191

Fascist Branding 192

Fascist Motherhood 193

References: 197

List of Figures

Figure 1 Dylan Mulvaney (left) Bri Terisi (Right) 2

Figure 2 Tweet from Matt Walsh, May 24, 2023 4

Figure 3 *A Night at the Garden* (2017) Directed by Marshall Curry..... 37

Figure 4 Screenshot of book burning. Facebook live video. Feb 2, 2022 59

Figure 5 George Floyd Protests, Detroit, June 2, 2020. David Guralnick, The Detroit News. 71

Figure 6 Benito Mussolini (left) Chris Kyle (right)..... 77

Figure 7 Chris Kyle Memorial in Odessa Texas..... 91

Figure 8 Punisher flag at the Capitol insurrection 93

Figure 9 Fascist skulls. The Nazi Totenkopf (left) Thin Blue Line Punisher skull (right)..... 97

Figure 10 Catlettsburg, KY Police. Image by Fernando Alfonso III..... 98

Figure 11 Three Percenter (left) Proud Boys (right)..... 101

Figure 12 Eric Munchel and Lisa Eisenhart Jan 6, 2021. Getty Images 109

Figure 13 Front page of Ben & Jerry's website Feb. 28, 2021..... 117

Figure 14 Colin Kaepernick Nike advertisement, September 2018 118

Figure 15 Black Rifle Coffee advertisements..... 121

Figure 16 Twitter screenshot of Kyle Rittenhouse, Nov. 20, 2020 124

Figure 17 Ads Nine Line Apparel (left) Amazon (right) March 1, 2021 128

Figure 18 Eddie Gallagher's official website, July 10, 2023..... 133

Figure 19 Casey Currey, Instagram, September 2021 140

Figure 20 Fliers for fundraising sent by Anita Bryant's campaign. 160

Figure 21 Tim Pool YouTube video (left). Rev. Franklin Graham Facebook (right) 162

Figure 22 Moms for Liberty Twitter (left) No Left Turn in Education Facebook (right) 168

Figure 23 Moms for Liberty slide Williamson County, Tennessee website..... 169

Figure 24 Lauren Boebert Twitter (left) Marjorie Taylor Green Twitter (right)..... 172

Figure 25 Patriot Front marches in Washington DC, December 2021 Photograph: Win McNamee/Getty Images 188

Abstract

The January 6, 2021, insurrection at the United States Capitol exposed the rising white nationalism and fascism that had long existed in the nation's cultural and political infrastructure. This dissertation explores this rise as a result of *banal fascism*, a concept that describes the way elements of fascism seep into U.S. mainstream culture, becoming normalized and mundane. Among other theorizations, it draws from Michael Billig's *Banal Nationalism* and Umberto Eco's *Ur-Fascism* to analyze the ways that a particular type of American fascism has developed over time through strategic branding and grassroots organizing by Christian nationalist organizers of the 1940s, anti-LGBTQ+ crusaders of the 1970s to the MAGA movement of Donald Trump's presidency. Taken together, this offers a unique perspective on a hidden fascist framework and explores how political and cultural flashpoints can be used by political leaders to mobilize through banal rhetoric and strategies to spread fascist policy and legislation in the U.S. mainstream.

This dissertation asks how historic organizing strategies by the far-right have been appropriated and altered to form an increasingly extremist political base in the United States today. Likewise, it argues that decades of organization by Christian nationalists, militant communities, and white supremacist women's movements have led to the current political climate that resulted in an insurrection on the nation's Capital building on January 6, 2021. This dissertation explores the ways that old and new media have been used to spread fascist ideals to a broad audience through social media content, branded goods, and iconography. It examines

multiple social groups that share ideological and political ties with more extreme far-right organizations providing a banal veneer through their branding and rhetoric to integrate into a broad mainstream culture.

Using a combination of media discourse analysis and social media platform analysis each chapter offers an exploration of a key element in the rise and maintenance of fascism in the United States and the ways that it has remained hidden and banal under the guise of Christianity, patriotism, neoliberal capitalism, and white motherhood. This dissertation spans roughly from the 1930s to 2023, primarily focusing on the contemporary era since the Trump administration. Through an examination of cultural goods, political strategies, and white nationalist narratives this dissertation claims fascism has always found an easy home in the United States even as it remains hidden behind the flag and the cross.

Introduction

On April 1, 2023, a trans woman influencer named Dylan Mulvaney posted a video on her Instagram account promoting a Bud Light contest. At the time Mulvaney had over 1.8 million followers on Instagram and 10.8 million on TikTok. Her video, in which she styled herself like Aubrey Hepburn with a black dress and gloves, red lips, and hair drawn back as she holds a can of Bud light, offered a pleasing contrast between a classically feminine aesthetic and a product often representing a hyper-patriotic form of masculinity. The video lasted under a minute and promoted a $15,000 giveaway sponsored by the company (Mulvaney, 2023). The backlash to this post was overwhelming. Mulvaney has stated that she was flooded with anti-trans harassment, threats, and had been followed outside her home. The blowback on the company likewise was intense, with many people taking to social media to publicly join the boycott against the American beer company. With far-right influencers and politicians joining in on the rhetoric, Bud Light's sales began plummeting, stripping them of their title of America's best-selling beer (Moreno, 2023).

Musician Kid Rock, known for a caustic brand of right-wing political stunts, posted a video shooting a pack of Bud Light beer with an assault-style rifle. Other far-right figures uploaded similar videos including model and Instagram influencer Bri Teresi, best known for wearing bikinis, promoting golf and Donald Trump's 2024 Presidential campaign. In her video she wore an American flag bikini top, cutoff jeans, and combat boots as she shot at a makeshift table of Bud Light cans and Tampax boxes that stood in front of a wall of lingerie, ending the

clip by stating, “Go woke, go broke” (Teresi, 2023a). In a podcast interview posted on May 5, 2023, she explains the lingerie saying she previously had a brand deal with the lingerie company Honey Birdette, but after they featured the male model, Jake DuPree in one of their ads she cut ties with them (Joseph, 2023). In the interview she claims that after she left the brand deal, “I had tons of lingerie and as a statement I thought…how cool would it be to shoot up the lingerie…and I added Bud Light to the front…and I added…Tampax Tampons because they were used for an advertisement for a biological male.” The host responds by saying, “It was pretty Rambo meets conservative” (Teresi, 2023b)



Figure 1 Dylan Mulvaney (left) Bri Terisi (Right)

The slogan ‘Go Woke, Go Broke’ went viral, with right-wing media pundits repeating it and even inspiring a House bill by the name of the Go Woke, Go Broke Act which calls for the abolishment of the Advisory Committee on Racial Equity of the Department of the Treasury (H.R.2776 – 118th Congress, 2023-2024). The attacks on Bud Light and on Mulvaney come amidst a wave of anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-trans and non-binary rhetoric and activism, leading to

an historic amount of legislation attacking the rights of these communities. Alongside these targeted attacks and loss of rights have come a right-wing public rejection of brands seen as in support of trans and gender diverse communities. Companies that include LGBTQ+ content like Bud Light that have historically been understood as a 'right-wing' brand are met with particularly strong vitriol. Target and Cracker Barrel have come under scrutiny by the far-right in June's Pride Month for including supportive messages to the LGBTQ+ community or for inclusion of diversity statements as was the case with Chick-fil-A (Aratani, 2023).

Chick-fil-A in particular has been a notoriously right-wing institution due to a history of donating to anti-LGBTQ+ organizations as well as the President at the time, Dan Cathy's support of the Christian nationalist organization, the National Christian Charitable Foundation who spearheaded the derailment of the Equality Act during Trump's administration (Kirkland, 2021).[1] In 2019 Chick-fil-A announced that it was going to stop donating to anti-LGBTQ+ orgs and campaigns, but found a loop-hole with Cathy's continued support. What makes the attack on Chick-fil-A significant, a company whose corporation's purpose statement includes, "To glorify God by being a faithful steward of all that is entrusted to us" (Chick-fil-A, n.d.) is that even the most blatantly capitalistic nod to diversity is now seen as suspect. The company came under fire for a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) statement they posted on their website, under the leadership of Erick McReynolds, the Vice President of Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion hired in 2020 to help with the company's image (King, 2023).

As a Black man, McReynolds has become the central target of the far-right backlash as they accused him of turning the company "woke," a term used to demean a wide-range of policies and social and political views that are in opposition to the far right's ideals. As far-right

[1] The Foundation is likewise led by other far-right Christian nationalist leaders including Betsy DeVos and Hobby Lobby (Kirkland, 2021).

media pundits like Matt Walsh have expressed over Twitter, the goal is to make the brand of "Pride" toxic to consumers and companies alike and in doing so deplete the resistance to a growing fascist campaign to enact restrictive and violent legislation.



Figure 2 Tweet from Matt Walsh, May 24, 2023

So how has the United States arrived in an era in which even notoriously right-wing brands are not spared in the attack on racial and gender inclusive content and policies? The answer can be found in tracing the ways that the U.S. has long trafficked in a particular brand of fascism that has remained hidden but still impactful. Fascism in this instance refers to a way of organizing society which promotes systems of oppression and violent exclusionary laws and policies to accumulate and retain power for an eventual authoritarian dictatorship. In its banal form fascism retains these goals while using cultural codes to remain readily consumable by a national public. The United States operates under a failing neoliberal capitalist system, and as Lisa Duggan (2003) has pointed out it relies on identity and cultural politics that interact with race, class, sexuality, and gender (pg. XII). She likewise argues that neoliberalism is a secular faith. Its priests were elected by no one and are accountable only to the global elites whose interests are

promoted by its policies" (XII). This remains true, but as has become increasingly evident this system is breaking down under the weight of a growing fascist movement slowly creeped into prominence through neoliberal branding and political strategy.

As expressed in the captured image of Bri Terisi's video, there are core attributes that the far right has cultivated that when taken together can express a form of coded fascism. The American flag represents a militant form of nationalism that not only excludes non-Americans but also those not loyal to the fascist ideals they have adopted. Likewise, the combat boots she wears and the gun she uses provide the element of militarism that is inherent in every fascist movement. Her choice to frame this as an aggressive rejection of trans identities and non-binary inclusion is both apparent what she targets in the video and in the ways that she positions herself as emblematic of a fascist form of American femininity. Terisi's choice of clothing combined with her targets of aggression position her as the embodiment of a stereotypical form of nationalist femininity while providing a visual rejection of trans identity. Taken together this is a form of political spectacle that offers a militant, racial, and gendered myth of the patriotic being, that fascist values are then grafted onto.

Fascism is growing globally, and within the United States there has been a marked increase in fascism as a decentralized movement. The Southern Poverty Law Center's yearly report on hate groups and extremism claims that while there's been a decrease in the amount of organized hate and anti-government groups since 2018, rather than signaling a decrease in extremism overall, it indicates a growth in the mainstreaming of their ideologies to a broader audience (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2022). The mechanisms for this growth are based not on overt displays of fascist power, but in the ways that fascist tenets have been embedded in American culture and society through right-wing strategy and through a natural outgrowth of

historic white supremacist hierarchies. This dissertation, *American Patriot: The Social and Political Networks of Banal Fascism in the United States* asks how historic fascist ideals and political strategies have been appropriated and altered to form an increasingly extremist political base in the United States today.

This dissertation places decades of organizing by Christian nationalists, militant communities, and white supremacist women's movements as integral in the maintenance and rise of fascism and which have led to the current political climate that resulted in, among other things, the insurrection on the nation's Capital building on January 6, 2021. Likewise, this dissertation explores the ways that old and new media have been used to spread fascist ideals to a broad audience through social media content, branded goods, and iconography. It examines multiple social groups that share ideological and political ties with more extreme far-right organizations but provide a banal veneer through their branding and rhetoric to impact a wide audience.

Using a combination of media discourse analysis and social media platform analysis each chapter offers an exploration of a key element in the rise and maintenance of fascism in the United States and the ways that it has remained hidden and banal under the guise of Christianity, patriotism, neoliberal capitalism, and white motherhood. This dissertation spans roughly from the 1930s to 2023 but primarily focuses on the contemporary era since the Trump administration. Through an examination of cultural goods, political strategies, and white nationalist narratives this dissertation claims fascism has always found an easy home in the United States even as it remains hidden behind the flag and the cross.

Defining Banal Fascism

Research on U.S. fascism should not approach it as a top-down movement but should instead consider the ways that fascism is embedded within the mundane elements of the national being, a phenomenon I've termed *banal fascism*. This concept is drawn from Michael Billig's (1995) concept of *banal nationalism*, which describes the ways nationalism has become embedded in everyday American society, to the point that it goes unnoticed by many. In the banal form, nationalist and fascist ideologies are reproduced in public spaces by being coded through consumable products and online discourse. Billig argues that banal nationalism is not overt displays of hyper-patriotism or national fervor, but it exists in the small ways that American exceptionalism is reproduced by individuals and corporations. Similarly, banal fascism is intertwined in the everydayness of American society. It is spread through consumer products, Hollywood films such as the *Rambo* franchise and *American Sniper*, and memes on social media. Banal fascism is not proto fascism, it can and does exist alongside codified fascist movements. However, in the United States the line between the banal and the overt is steadily growing hazier as social movements coalesce into actual strategy and ideation.

Fascism is not a singular ideology but a set of values that are malleable per place and time. It is also mobilized through constant crises and political spectacles and thus requires a constantly evolving enemy to identify itself against. As a movement fascism offers participants a fantasy of the nation and the individual through a rearticulation of the past, present, and future. Hannah Arendt (1994) famously argued that the banality of evil does not lessen the severity of the horror of it, but it describes the mundanity of those who willingly participate in it. It is not 'radical' even as it is extreme. This is true of the banalization of fascism in nations like the United States which blur the extreme with the mainstream and do so through structured myths

and narratives told through spaces of civic engagement like social media. Arendt claimed, “fascists are never content to merely lie; they must transform their lie into a new reality, and they must persuade people to believe in the unreality they’ve created. And if you get people to do that, you can convince them to do anything” (pg. 13). Likewise, banal fascism provides an avenue for fascism to be branded as patriotic or nationalist, and in the contemporary era social media plays a significant role in how these narratives and commodities are spread and consumed.

Fascist leaders articulate their narratives by presenting their version of events as the only trustworthy source of information, pitting any media source outside their control as a web of lies. Adolf Hitler claimed that “a struggle between the truth and the lie has been taking place. As always, this struggle will end victoriously for the truth” (1941). Benito Mussolini likewise states, “You must believe me because I have the habit - it is the system of my life - of always and everywhere saying the truth” (1924). Donald Trump was notorious for pitting his word against that of the media stating things like, "They want to go after me because I have, they think, a big mouth. I don't have a big mouth, you know what I have, I have a mouth that tells the truth" (2019). However, banal fascism articulates fascist narratives in less overt terms. Without a centralized form of fascist power, the banal fascist narrative is coded with patriotism and other nationalistic values, which are then used to construct the fascist myth.

Fascism seeks to remake the nation in its image, (Passmore, 2002 p. 31). This image is made up of an imagined past that privileges a fictional collective body as supreme. Fascism is not inherently an articulation of pros, but rather an assemblage of cons. It is only *for something* in that it is *opposed to* its opposite. Umberto Eco argues that fascism “has no quintessence” but has fourteen ‘eternal’ or *Ur* attributes that are malleable over time and space (1995). Robert Paxton says much the same by arguing that fascism doesn’t insist upon a philosophical platform

but is instead mobilized by popular feelings of racial and gender supremacy, (2004, p. 16). Like Eco, Paxton sees fascism as an amalgam of separate but networked right-wing ideologies that bond together through shared enemies. He articulates this by saying, "Fascism in action looks much more like a network of relationships than a fixed essence" (Paxton, p. 207). Both past and present articulations of fascisms have been marked by an obsession with supposed community decline, victimhood, militancy, and conspiratorial thinking. In the era of social media and influencer culture, this network of relationships has morphed into the realm of commodity brands.

Fascism is violent power put into practice and banal fascism works towards those same goals but without the benefit or the constraints of a centralized power source. In the banal form that power is diffuse even if it draws from the privileged affordances of white and male supremacy. Eco's Ur-Fascism, or *Eternal Fascism,* describes 14 core attributes that, when enough are combined, can provide a useful designation for fascist movements. They include, 1. Traditionalism, 2. Rejection of modernism, 3. Action for action's sake 4. *Disagreement is treason* 5. Fear of difference 6. Appeal to a frustrated middle class 7. Obsession with a plot, 8. *Victim/Victor dichotomy* 9. Life is permanent warfare 10. Contempt for the weak 11. *Cult of heroism* 12. Machismo 13. Selective populism 14. Newspeak.[2] To explore how this might look in an American context and in its banal form we only must look to media pundit and former Fox News host Tucker Carlson and his representation of the Stop the Steal movement that led to the insurrection at the Capitol.

Prior to Fox News firing Carlson on April 24, 2023, he hosted the most watched show in cable television, with an average of 3.3 million viewers (Johnson, 2021). His show, *Tucker*

[2] When these terms are italicized it indicates the phrase I've provided to stand in for the Eco's description of the trait.

Carlson Tonight regularly trafficked in fascist values including the antisemitic Great Replacement Theory, a far-right conspiracy that suggests there exists a global cabal of Jewish people dictating global politics to replace 'white' populations. Carlson has likewise pushed racist and conspiratorial talking points, suggested that women are primitive and seek to control men, and regularly defended white supremacy (Otten & Thakker, 2023).

An excellent example of how Carlson is able to combine many of the eternal fascist tenets into his content came in the form of a three-part series called *The Patriot Purge* which retold the story of the insurrection on the United States Capitol. Produced by Tucker Carlson and Scooter Downey, who also produced *Hoxed* (2019) an apologist documentary for the conspiracy theorist behind Pizzagate and far-right figure Mike Cernovich. First airing on November 1, 2021, on Fox Nation, Fox News' subscription streaming service, the series is framed as an insider's look on January 6th, which offers the 'truth' behind what led up to the day and what the day meant for the country.

The first episode begins with the ominous statement, "the domestic war on terror is here" showing a wobbly camera shot through a chain-link fence of the United States Capitol building with military helicopters taking off. The speaker then goes on to say "[they] are coming after half of the country." It then shifts to footage of the insurrectionists inside the Capitol building, focused on men proudly holding flags, interspersed with video of Ashli Babbit being shot as she attempts to break through a barrier.[3] This footage is interspersed with images of Guantanamo Bay detention center and Abu Ghraib prison.[4] A new speaker claims, "America is not a place

[3] Ashli Babbitt was an Air Force veteran who stormed the Capitol on January 6, 2020 and was subsequently shot by Capitol police as she attempted to break through a door with other insurrectionists. Here death has been used by the far-right as proof that their political base is being victimized by Democrats and the Federal government.

[4] Guantanamo Bay, also referred to as Gitmo, is a U.S. military prison in Cuba that has been used to detain indefinitely and torture individuals suspected of having information or ties to terrorist organizations. Abu Ghraib

where you hold people for months in solitary without charges. This is what Guantanamo was set up for, for al-Qaeda terrorists, not U.S. citizens" followed by a claim that America has now entered the "War on Terror 2.0." This juxtaposition between the so-called War on Terror, a two-decade long war, begun by former President George W. Bush, which caused the death of millions of people, and the arrest of U.S. citizens for attacking the Capitol is tactical.

The introduction of this episode ends with a speaker claiming, "January 6 was a honey pot. They're going to use this event for every bit of political persecution they can milk out of it." The video then shifts to overlapping images and clips of President Bush's speeches, screams, gun fire, and bloody images of the war, sped up to evoke chaos and strong emotions from the viewer. After the audio and visual strain for the prior content, Tucker Carlson's voice comes and his image in soft light and muted tones, is offered as a relief from the prior content. He claims, "In the years after 9/11 the media and the national security state used exaggerated threats and outright deception to associate certain ideas with certain events. This was the first War on Terror. Now, it's happening again." He immediately follows this startling claim by arguing that the Federal government is going after white citizens, Trump voters, and anyone who does not comply with their political ideals. White men and women, especially those aligned under Trump, have become the targets of an Imperial force bent on their utter destruction, and therefore must also prepare for and engage in this war. Carlson goes on to say, "January 6 is being used as a pretext to strip millions of Americans, disfavored Americans, or their core constitutional rights. And to defame them as domestic terrorists.

prison in Iraq was taken over by U.S. forces during the Iraq War and used to hold political prisoners. It became notorious after photographs showing U.S. soldiers torturing and sexually assaulting Iraqi prisoners were leaked to the media.

The rest of the episode is an amalgam of disinformation about anti-fascist organizing staging the violence at the Capitol that day, and claims that the event was intentionally misrepresented by the media, when in fact it was a patriotic coming together of real Americans who were only fighting for their country against a stolen election. This offers two conflicting narratives but that both work towards the same goal. To claim that the event was justified and good, and that any criminal activities were likely not committed by Trump's supporters but by intruders who had come to disrupt the movement. It positions participants as both victors fighting for a just cause, and as victims of the state and outsiders. It likewise interposes images and videos of people of color in pro-Trump rallies to break down the argument that white nationalism or white supremacy informs any of these actions.

It is a strategy FOX News has long used against its detractors, but the layering of these messages is particularly powerful. It claims that not only are participants being falsely accused of racism or white nationalism, but that they should also see themselves as the victims of a racist and xenophobic campaign, much like Muslim and Arab Americans had faced post 9/11. In doing so white participants are able to subsume an 'othered' identity, becoming a minority and therefore capable of leveraging public outrage against any form of critique.[5] This documentary relies on the conspiracy theories promoted by the Stop the Steal movement, an mobilized conspiracy movement that led to the attempted overthrow of President Biden, and argues that everything that came after the failure of January 6th is proof that the current government cannot be trusted.

[5] Viral terms used to push back on white supremacy such as 'Karen' for white women who leverage their whiteness to harm others have also been used as examples of bigotry against white people. Far-right figures like Carlson used this to claim that others are being 'racist' against white people, and therefore racism is not an actual reality for those who have historically faced it. This of course is purely tactical as racism is a hierarchy that supports white supremacy and privilege, and can never be directed "upwards."

The inclusion of the critique of the War on Terror, including the admission that President Bush and others had lied to generate support for the Iraq War is shocking considering how FOX has historically supported the Republican narrative around these wars. This shift is significant because it shows the sharp distinction between the Bush era Republican party and populist movement that arose under the Trump administration. Likewise, by marrying together truth and fiction Carlson is utilizing *newspeak* one of the tenets of eternal fascism. Newspeak is intentionally ambiguous language or narrative used to push political propaganda and support fascist myths. This video exemplifies many of Eco's (1995) Ur fascist traits including a rejection of progressive ideals (modernism) which they see as a proof of the depravity of the liberal left. This is also clearly articulated in the rampant anti-trans movement of recent years, which claims 'wokeness' is destroying American ideals, the traditional family structure, and is inspired by satanic lies. Likewise, both the insurrection and Carlson's defense of it showcases *action for action's sake* which is informed by a distrust of intellectualism (often framed as liberal elites or anti-education rhetoric) and that views emblems of fascist action, such as the gun, as nearly holy. In the video there were multiple clips of the protestors claiming that Republicans who didn't stand behind the Stop the Steal movement would be replaced by 'Patriots' which was then backed up by Carlson's narration.

This is a clear example of the tenet *disagreement is treason* which rejects any critique of the movement's narratives. As these narratives are often based on lies or a twisted version of the truth, disagreement poses a distinct threat that must be shut down. Likewise, Carlson has made a career of tapping into a *fear of difference* and an *appeal to a frustrated middle class* and the Stop the Steal movement engaged in both of those as well while perfectly centering a concise *obsession with a plot* in the form of a stolen election. Carlson's addition to that plot is that there

is an organized attack on whiteness in the United States. This is all framed as a coming war, feeding into both the *Victim/Victor dichotomy* and the *life is permanent warfare*. The documentary ends by providing an opportunity for viewers to see themselves as potential heroes, feeding into the *cult of heroism* that this *selective populist* base has subscribed to.

Carlson could be labeled a fascist. Whether or not he truly believes the views he espouses is less important than the fact that he provides a platform for them to an audience of millions. However, his content remains 'banal' because of how it is coded as patriotic, conservative, or an expression of American ideals. Banal here does not designate a lesser form of fascism, but a rewriting of it for a particular audience in lieu of a central source of affirmative power. As discussed, this is different from proto because it does not require a linear scope, nor does it articulate an unformed ideation. In Lisa Wade's (2011) sociological consideration of the imagery of American banal nationalism she argues that the banal form is not 'nationalism-lite,' but is foundational to the continuance and impact of more violent forms of nationalism. Billig, likewise, argues that the banal form can be "mobilized" for greater impact and harm, leading to what he calls "frenzied nationalism." In the same sense, banal fascism is not 'fascism-light' but is the speaks to the ways that fascism can seep, unnoticed (by the majority) into the fabric of the nation and create a foundation in which more frenzied - or structured - forms of fascism can arise. However, it is not pre-fascism in that it does not require a linear time frame, and even in its banal form can create significant harm.

Paxton (1998) notes that, "fascism is, after all, an authentic mass popular enthusiasm and not merely a clever manipulation of populist emotions by the reactionary Right or by capitalism in crisis" and defines fascism as, "a system of political authority and social order intended to reinforce the unity, energy, and purity of communities in which liberal democracy stands

accused of producing division and decline" (pg. 21). Fascism requires a warrior-class, imagined to be the epitome of purity by the movement, and the tools through which the nation will be eventually purified through a mythic rebirth, bringing the nation back to its ethnically and ideologically pure form. Fascism as a concept, is a set of standards, malleable and mutable for time and place. However, as a set of ideologies and in the form of a movement it eventually gains traction, through the addition of authoritarianism and organized militancy, which require direct action and tend to encourage group mobilization.

French philosopher Pierre-Andre Taguieff famously argued that fascism will not, "do us the favor of returning in such a way that we can recognize easily" (Taguieff, 1994). Trump's MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement in many ways looks completely different from Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy, but it shares enough traits to be recognized as a fascist movement. How it remains banal today is that there exists a deep misunderstanding in how American nationalism, White evangelicalism, militancy, and white Christian motherhood have been used to code fascist ideals, rhetoric, and strategies as patriotism and civic engagement. This dissertation addresses this gap in scholarly literature by providing an analysis of this American phenomenon.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter One titled "Coded Christian Nationalism: Patriots, Influencers, and The American Christofascist Movement" explores the ways that Christian nationalism has supported the fascist project in the United States from the 1930s to today. It focuses primarily on the political center of the Christian nationalist power in the United States, the white Evangelical movement. The chapter traces four ages of christofascist influencers including the first age which

included figures like Father Coughlin who utilized a powerfully influential radio network to spread a pro-fascist movement in the 1930s-1940s and connected to other major christofascist influencers of the time to impact presidential elections and local politics. The second age is represented by political influencers of the 60s-80s like Jerry Falwell and Pat Buchanan, while the third includes prominent radio personalities of the 90s and 00s such as Rush Limbaugh or Alex Jones in the third, and the more contemporary political figures like Tucker Carlson or Rep. Marjorie Taylor Green exemplifying the final.

The chapter explores the early media networks that were used by influencers of those eras to spread fascist narratives, and the social media affordances of the contemporary years, as well as the ways that patriotism and evangelical Christianity were weaponized to offer their audiences a banal veneer. The chapter begins with a close examination of a popular militant Christian song *Battle Hymn of the Republic* as an opportunity to examine the ways that militarization and white Christianity in the United States have historically been blurred together to create pseudo-religious ultranationalism that easily slips into fascist ideation when presented with a collective enemy. "Coded Christian Nationalism" also explores in the contemporary era the ways that a rabid form of patriotism has been weaponized and used to create political networks, connected by influencers and media pundits.

Chapter Two titled, "They Hate Us for Our Freedom: Warrior Media and the Making of a Fascist Hero" is an exploration of fascist warrior myths that have been repackaged as patriotism and exemplars for a particular style of white masculinity. In doing so it theorizes the concept of the *fascist Superman,* proposed by J. A. Mangan (1999), which argues that the body acts as a metaphor for society, especially a society that views the body as emblematic of the supremacist nation. It examines one memoir turned film that has had impact in more recent years and has led

to a ripple effect that has impacted the larger United States society and beyond. The *American Sniper* film (2014), based on a best-selling sniper memoir by U.S. Navy Seal Chris Kyle is the source of a unique phenomenon in which a Marvel comic book emblem from the comic *The Punisher* has become a fascist symbol used by police forces, militias, white nationalist groups, and the MAGA movement.

The chapter traces how Hollywood has supported the military industrial complex and created a nationalist narrative of the American soldier that has been easily appropriated into a fascist framework. It then examines the Vietnam war era as a source of significant change in how soldiers were both understood by the American public and how they were depicted on film. For the fascist society, the body of the male warrior is an articulation of the perfected race and emblematic of state power, and Chris Kyle, as a prolific killer and patriotic icon has become emblematic of these ideals, and after his death the Punisher skull acts as an icon to represent both he and the fascist values he supported.

In Chapter Three "'Relentlessly Patriotic': The Commodification of Banal Fascism" the commodification of fascist brands is explored through a close examination of two companies, Black Rifle Coffee Company and Nine Line Apparel. Both companies have branded themselves as military focused alternatives for mainstream brands (Starbucks and Nike respectively) and have trafficked in reactionary politics to push fascist political ideals to their audiences. The chapter considers how social media and other online platforms are weaponized in this project and the ways that female social media influencers have supported a rigidly masculine form of white nationalism and banal fascism. This chapter argues that the January 6, 2021, insurrection should be understood as a form of fascist spectacle that provided a mobilization of fascist ideations under the guise of a populist uprising and has remained a vital site for networking disparate

groups and individuals. It likewise argues that branded goods have tapped into that populist base to spread fascist values through their branded goods and online media content. The brands use of the military figure is core to how this form of fascism remains banal for their audiences, as they utilized patriotism and military service as covers for the larger goal of commodifying a political movement.

Finally, Chapter Four considers how women have supported the project of banal fascism. This chapter considers early scholarship on fascist mother's movements beginning with World War II era mother's organizing in opposition to entering WWII, and in support of Nazi Germany and Fascist Spain. It then considers the women's anti-LGBTQ+ organizing masquerading as parental rights, that was led by Anita Bryant in the 1960s and 1970s. This chapter argues that these women were early political influencers and have forged the strategies and often language used by the contemporary era's mother's movements. Finally, this chapter analyzes two prominent groups in the fascist movement, Moms for Liberty and No Left Turn, and considers the ways they mobilized a political base to push fascist legislation and policy through at the local and state levels. Likewise, the chapter considers how they have weaponized their identities as white women and mothers to provide a banal veneer for the larger fascist movement.

A Note on Terminology

Much of this dissertation focuses on subjects that see themselves not as fascist but simply as conservative among other interrelated identities. This issue requires two points of clarification; 1. What is the difference *and* overlap between American conservatism and American fascism? 2. Which personal labels are valuable, and which require deeper analysis? Whereas the label of "Republican" does not denote a steady philosophy or ideology, acting as a

malleable label for a party designation, conservative does hold a more stable meaning. Conservative ideology is situated in traditionalism, respect for authority, resistance to progress or social change, and retains a commitment to the status quo.

Conservative ideology likewise values centralized power and limited representation. As Psychologists Artur Nilsson and John T Jost have found in the comprehensive study on the relationship between authoritarianism and conservative ideology, there is a strong overlap between the two. They have likewise argued that globally authoritarians have gravitated toward conservative political ideologies, showing a two-way relationship between them (Nilsson & Jost, 2020). Lisa Duggan argues that over the decades the label of conservative has shifted with the political culture, allowing President Ronald Regan the designation while denying it to President Bill Clinton, even as many of their core policies looked remarkably similar. She argues however that a better term is neoliberalism and claims,

> Opposition to material inequality is maligned as "class warfare," while race, gender or sexual inequalities are dismissed as merely cultural, private, or trivia. This rhetorical separation of the economic from the political and cultural arenas disguises the upwardly redistributing goals of neoliberalism -- its concerted efforts to concentrate power and resources in the hands of tiny elites (XIV)

Under this system conservative ideology hides ideologies of exclusion through the myth of upward mobility, often cloaking how the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality make this an impossible system for many, and leave these identities open to attack as opportunities for fascist policy and legislation become viable.

Adorno et al. (1950) identified nine features of the 'authoritarian syndrome,' which included, authoritarian aggression, authoritarian submission, support for conventional values,

mental rigidity and stereotypical thinking, an obsession of power, cynicism, sexual inhibition, anti-intellectualism, and the tendency to present their opposition in negative and false ways. These are all traits readily found in fascist societies and movements, which is understandable given codified fascism often results in an authoritarian leader, or in a gravitation towards authoritarian personalities dispersed throughout the society. This is all to say that while the label of conservative is not directly interchangeable with the label fascist, the conservative predisposition towards authoritarianism lends itself to an easy overlap. In terms of banal fascism this means that conservative policies and politics, especially under a neoliberal system, provide an easy framework of fascism to remain hidden and to graft itself further into the national structures of power.

To respond to the second point, this dissertation takes individuals and groups at their word when they declare themselves as fascist. There is very little reason to argue otherwise in such a case. However, every person that is depicted in this dissertation is not necessarily so easily labeled, and with a few exceptions, that is not the goal of these chapters. The labeling of individuals is much less of a concern than the examination of how they have provided avenues for fascism into American society, either intentionally or not. Many view themselves as conservatives, Republicans, patriots, or Christians, but the label is only valuable in how it shows the banality of their ideations, and the networks those designations have provided for the growth and proliferation of fascism writ large.

Chapter 1 Coded Christian Nationalism: Patriots, Influencers, and The American Christofascist Movement

"There is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as the Cold War itself." Pat Buchanan, August 17, 1992

1.1 Introduction

The 2020 U.S. presidential election was ratified on January 6, amidst a violent right-wing insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, resulting in at least seven deaths, hundreds of injuries, as well as mass trauma (Staff Report, 2021). An estimated 2,000-2,500 people entered the Capitol that day (Lucas, 2022), and as of early 2022, there have been 828 arrests with an ongoing congressional inquiry (Hall, et. al., 2023). What led to this event was complicated, chaotic, and yet strategic. Preceding the election there was a calculated push by right-wing influencers to disseminate disinformation about the Democratic party, claiming that if then-President Donald Trump lost the election, it would be the result of illicit political manipulations. On November 4, 2020, the day after the election, Trump began falsely claiming victory, tweeting that Biden's vote count was a result of fraud, and calling for counting to cease.

Trump's claims both originated from and were further promoted by a larger disinformation campaign known as Stop the Steal, which began in 2016 with Trump's then-political strategist, Roger Stone. Prior to the election day political influencers like newly elected Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) promoted these false claims through the hashtag

(#StopTheSteal) leading to dozens of private FB groups including one founded by Women for America First which resulted in over 316 thousand followers in one day before it was shut on November 5, 2020 (Hayden, 2020).

His loyalists weaponized campaigns of mis- and disinformation surrounding Biden's victory including that there was widespread voter fraud and that voting machines had been tampered with (Dan, Paris, Donovan, et al, 2021).[6] These allegations were used by prominent political and media personalities including Donald Trump and Former New York City mayor Rudi Giuliani, leading to mass protests as the ratification of the election drew near. At 9:00 a.m. on Wednesday January 6th, 2021, the "Save America" protest began in Washington DC. A collection of Trump's most ardent supporters, militias, Proud Boys, and evangelical leaders swelled in ranks as the morning wore on. Online influencers peddled conspiracy theories and calls for political violence. Stump speeches and calls for protest were offered by an array of political and religious speakers, culminating in Donald Trump's hour-long address, in which he stated, "We're going to walk down to the Capitol…You have to show strength, and you have to be strong…We fight like hell and if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore" (Trump, 2021).

Protestors marched toward the Capitol shouting threats, laughing, and chatting with each other as they filmed the event. They took up the chant "Fight for Trump!" and within an hour had reached the Capitol building. Inside, Congress ratified the vote and scrambled to secure themselves behind locked doors. Just after 2:00 p.m. the west and east sides of the building were breached. Chants of "Whose house? Our house!", "We're coming for you Nancy!", and "Hang

[6] Joan Donovan and others explain the difference between the two terms as one of intent. Whereas misinformation is spread by actors who believe their false information to be factual, disinformation is spread by actors who know it to be untrue but propagate it, nonetheless.

Mike Pence!" echoed through the hallways as rioters smashed windows and stole personal property out of Congressional offices. As the violence grew, one protestor stood on a short pillar dressed in a mixture of military and cowboy gear. He waved two flags stacked on top of one another; the American flag above, and below a punisher skull in front of two guns forming a skull-and-crossbones. The skull was overlaid by the stars and stripes and flanked by the words "Liberty or Death" on either side. Below him insurrectionists milled about, laughing, and chatting as a warbly rendition of "America the Beautiful" was played on trumpet in the distance.[7] At nearly the same time a few dozen insurrectionists entered the Capitol's rotunda.

One rioter with a Trump 2020 flag wrapped like a cape around his shoulders, used his cellphone to record as he and others began a spontaneous chorus of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." His voice broke as he swept the camera back and forth over the room. In a mixture of broken verse and sobs he fell to his knees. Bystanders asked, "Are you okay man?" as he laughed and stood, continuing to take in the enormity of the event that he was part of. The video concludes with men circling around the camera in collective prayer. This incident is significant. For those who have experienced evangelical gatherings his response and the use of the song would be disturbingly familiar. The jubilant religious fervor that led him to tearfully fall to his knees is expressive of a spiritual-political positioning found within white evangelicalism and showcases the radicalization prevalent to the U.S. militant religious-right.[8]

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[7] I found both videos on an open access archive of videos and images uploaded by participants to the social media site, Parler. The archive, titled *What Parler Saw During the Attack on the Capitol* was published by ProPublica and contains over 500 videos that were taken during that day. I have used this archive to get a sense of the timeline of events, as well as to gather my own data for my research. https://projects.propublica.org/parler-capitol-videos/

[8] The religious-right is one portion of the larger 'far-right,' an umbrella term that historically included the radical right and the extreme right, but now also encapsulates a larger portion of the right-wing political base. By prefacing the category with 'militant' I am specifying those that take part in militia movements, extreme gun culture, or that are willing to partake in violent and anti-democratic demonstrations and events, such as the Capital insurrection. Militancy, in this context, is a device used to bridge ideologically separate groups with shared tactics and goals and will be discussed more fully throughout the dissertation.

For many at the Capitol this wasn't simply a political movement. This was a spiritual battle that they had prepared for on and offline and were willing to go to extreme lengths to see play out. While it's impossible to label everyone in attendance under one category, there is an important element of U.S. cultural history that led to this moment: Christian nationalism. To understand this movement, we must trace the ways that race, and gender politics are coded via narratives of 'patriotism' through media networks, content, and political influence. Since January 6, 2021, pundits within the Democratic Party have been quick to point towards Trump as the key instigator of the insurrection and the rising fascist movement. While in some ways this is true, it remains a limited and linear approach to understanding the deeply complicated relationship between radicalizing discourse, political influencers, and the right-wing public. Fascism is growing globally, and within the United States there has been a marked increase in fascism as a decentralized movement.[9]

Research on U.S. fascism should not approach it as a top-down movement but should instead consider the ways that fascism is embedded within the mundane elements of the national being - a phenomena I've termed *banal fascism*. This term is drawn from Michael Billig's (1995) concept of 'banal nationalism', which describes how nationalism is constantly reproduced in banal, but not necessarily benign ways. In the banal form, nationalist and fascist ideologies are reproduced in public spaces by being coded through public discourse. Billig argues that banal nationalism is not the flag being waved in a moment of nationalistic passion, but "it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building" (Billig, p. 8). Similarly, banal fascism is not

[9] The Southern Poverty Law Center's yearly report on hate groups and extremism claims that while there's been a decrease in the amount of organized hate and anti-government groups since 2018, rather than signaling a decrease in extremism overall, it indicates a growth in the mainstreaming of their ideologies to a broader audience. The lack of closed membership is deeply concerning and showcases a growth in fascism nationally. See; (Miller & Rivas, 2022).

brownshirts marching in formation down the streets of D.C.,[10] but it is the gradual seepage of militant accelerationist tactics (Kriner, 2022),[11] and white supremacist rhetoric, featured as quippy memes on Facebook or worn as slogans on t-shirts at school board meetings. Even as the banal form exists outside a linear scope, the line between the banal and the overt grows hazier as political movements coalesce into actual strategy and ideation.

By exposing these histories, networks, and narratives, this chapter draws attention to the ways that many in the U.S. have been misled into thinking extremism or radicalization happens at the fringes, when in fact fascism has found a comfortable home within the pulpit, the national stage, and the Facebook page. This chapter argues that understanding the January 6 insurrection requires understanding Christian nationalism as a key historical attribute of the United States socio-political landscape and as integral to the establishment and maintenance of white nationalism and fascism. By analyzing archival materials of past christofascist leaders and influencers, and social media content of the contemporary era, this chapter will trace how fascist values are interwoven into white evangelicalism to then be grafted into mainstream politics. Through a close analysis of speeches, songs, tweets, and podcasts this chapter argues that Christian nationalism is a uniquely American brand of a banal fascism and offers a ready graft for fascist ideations and codified fascist movements in moments of political unrest.

[10] Brownshirts, also known as Stormtroopers or the *Sturmabteilung* was the original paramilitary group of the Nazi Party and were key to Hitler's rise to power.

[11] Militant accelerationism is the embrace of violent/terrorist tactics to bring about the collapse of the liberal/capitalist society so a new, authoritarian government can arise. This category exists on an implicit/explicit spectrum with varying degrees of violence and desire for the collapse of society. An example of implicit militant accelerationism is the Proud Boys.

1.2 Defining Christian Nationalism and Banal Fascism

Within the field of fascism studies there are other concepts that incorporate similar theoretical frameworks, the most useful being 'microfascism', which describes the malleability of social spaces that are not so easily defined by recognizable ideologies, as well as the "social investment in masculine forms of sovereignty, specifically the desire to give to oneself the powers of creation through a fear of realms and practices coded as "feminine" (Bratich, 12). Bratich thus sees both the covert and overt forms of fascism as being inherently male supremacist and argues that within the western context they are also white supremacist. While this chapter will draw from Bratich's work on microfascism, the term doesn't fully encapsulate the realm of the banal. Although both banal fascism and microfascism describe, "the realm where this collective body forms its capacities" (Bratich, p. 16), microfascism is the relationship between *desire* and fascism (Bratich, p. 12) whereas the banal form has no inherent desire, it simply exists as an articulation of an imagined past, present, and future through cultural production.

Bratich sees microfascism as "the growth of a fascist formation beyond organized efforts" and argues that (like banal fascism) it is akin to Eco's Ur-Fascism or "Eternal Fascism" (Bratich, p. 14). The core difference between the two terms is that banal better describes the proliferation of the micro into discourse and cultural content. It is not proto because it doesn't require a linear approach, but takes the micro, which is focused on gender, patriarchy, capitalism, and race, and explores how these are articulated for a consumer public. Banal can seep further into consumer culture, the so-called "mainstream," and within the production of the state. It is not a subsection of fascism, but rather a mode of communication. Whereas microfascism might

be considered the primordial ooze out of which fascism can arise, banal fascism is the coding in which fascism can be hidden.

The Christian element of U.S. fascism provides an important analytical tool that in part reconciles the seemingly contradictory nature of political movements based on libertarianism, or even Antebellum Southern 'liberalism' that believed foremost in limited government.

Roel Reyes argues that,

> Antebellum proto-fascism was not a coherent ideology but a fragmented set of convictions at the fringes of mainstream Southern society. The proto-fascism of the South was similar to the loose collection of romanticism, racism, antisemitism, eugenics and nationalism which existed in *völkisch* and right-wing circles before being coalesced, centralized, streamlined and sanctioned as official doctrine by the Nazis (Roel Reyes, 2021).

However, by insisting on the "proto" categorization this remains a constrained definition that requires an official doctrine or recognizable political movement. On the contrary, fascist scholar Robert Paxton argues that "Fascism does not rest explicitly upon an elaborated philosophical system, but rather upon popular feelings about master races, their unjust lot, and their rightful predominance over inferior peoples" (2004, p.16).

Furthermore, many prominent Black radical scholars have long held that racial capitalism "and its carceral apparatus" should be analyzed as the birth of U.S. fascism (Toscano, 2021). George Jackson and Angela Y. Davis (and by extension Aimé Césaire) argued that the U.S. state was a source of negotiation of a more perfect form of European fascism (Césaire, 2001). Ruth Wilson Gilmore explores this aspect by identifying racial capitalism and mass incarceration as the bedrock for the "anti-state state," an important element of fascism (Gilmore, 2017, p. 235).

Even an historical approach to codified fascist movements like German Nazism must view U.S. nationalism, populism, and indeed 'fascism' as a precursor to, rather than development of, European fascism (Catalano, 2020; Churchwell, 2019).[12]

As discussed in the introduction, this dissertation draws primarily from Umberto Eco's core tenets of Ur-fascism to analyze contemporary U.S. Christian nationalism as an origin point in a rising fascist movement. More recent scholarship on fascism has moved towards Eco's framework to break down the spatial, temporal, and ideological constraints placed on its usage by earlier scholars. Kevin Passmore argues that,

> Fascism is a set of ideologies and practices that seeks to place the nation, defined in exclusive biological, cultural, and/or historical terms, above all other sources of loyalty, and to create a mobilized national community. Fascist nationalism is reactionary in that it entails implacable hostility to socialism and feminism, for they are seen as prioritizing class or gender rather than nation (Passmore, 2002, p. 31).

Robert Paxton loosely defines fascism as,

> A form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion (Paxton, 2014, p. 218)

[12] As many scholars have pointed out, fascist movements like the German Nazi party were directly inspired by the United States' exclusionary tactics, Jim Crow Laws, and techno-industrialization. Hitler was quoted multiple times, including in *Mein Kampf* and his later unpublished writings, saying Henry Ford acted as a primary inspiration for his political goals, even going so far as to hang his portrait in his Munich office.

And argues that,

> Fascism in power is a compound, a powerful amalgam of different but marriageable conservative, national-socialist and radical Right ingredients, bonded together by common enemies and common passions for a regenerated, energized, and purified nation at whatever cost to free institutions and the rule of law…*Fascism in action looks much more like a network of relationships than a fixed essence* (p. 207) (emphasis mine)

This framework offers an opportunity to focus on an array of cultural objects to trace the growth and proliferation of fascist strategies in the U.S. mainstream.

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall argues that ideology is, "those images, concepts and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand and 'make sense' of some aspect of social existence" (2021, p. 271). In this sense, fascism and Christian nationalism are not ideologies themselves, but a collection of interconnecting ideologies. The concept of Christian or religious fascism is not new. Scholars of fascism have used the term 'clerical fascism' to describe the overlap between the doctrines of fascism and Roman Catholic clericalism in fascist Italy (Griffin, 2007). However, this term is less useful as it specifically refers to professional clergy, thus excluding the broader Christian public (Roel Reyes, 2021).

Likewise, the term 'Christofascism' coined by liberation theologist Dorothee Sollë (1970) describes an inherent totalitarianism in Christianity and inclination towards fascistic values. She theorizes that the ossification of Christian thought stems from its infatuation with civil obedience, which she sees as being quintessential to fascism. Readers of her work like David Newark argue that the origin of American christofascism came about in the Great Depression era

when fundamentalist leaders fused Christian and national symbols to form a proto-type American christofascism (Neiwert, 2009). Although there was certainly an uptick in networked global fascist ideologies in that era (Catalano, 2020), this ignores the longer violent U.S. history with chattel slavery, settler-colonialism, and exclusionary immigration policies, which should be included in the discussion of U.S. fascism.

To begin, we must settle on an understanding of the term, *Christian Nationalism*. Earlier work on the religious right was concerned with discernible subsects in the political movement, separating Christian nationalists like George W. Bush, from Christian theocrats like Revd. Franklin Graham, son of the Revd. Billy Graham (Davidson & Harris, 2006). The distinguishing factor between these two camps was Christian nationalists defined their beliefs around an expansive form of patriotism, articulated through a 'God and Country' ideology that allowed for a limited style of multiculturalism (albeit translated through overt Imperialism). Whereas Christian theocrats were more xenophobic and exclusionary, leaning heavily into an us-vs-them rhetoric, often directed against muslims and Islam (Braunstein 2017; Merino 2010; Shortle and Gaddie 2015; Straughn and Feld 2010), or Central and South American immigration, (McDaniel et al., 2011).

While this chapter agrees that there was a difference in how these two strands were articulated publicly, they amounted to different degrees of the same. McDaniel, Nooruddin, and Shortle (2022) contend that Christian nationalism is founded on American religious exceptionalism, which is, "an ideology that perceives the nation as divinely inspired, favored, and called upon to carry out a divine mission" and argues that this framework renders "piety and patriotism indistinguishable" betraying the image of 'civic nationalism' and instead reflecting the inherent "primordialism, the belief that a nation should be constructed based on a common

ethnicity, culture, or history" (p. 24). Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry (2020) view Christian nationalism as a cultural framework that includes "myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems" and encourages a combination of religious and civic life (Whitehead & Perry, p.10).

Christian nationalism situates America as being a distinctly "Christian" nation and any history presented that opposes this view will be rejected for a mythic past that better fits this narrative. While there are possibilities for separate, smaller communities to be labeled under the umbrella of Christian nationalism such as Mormons or fundamentalists, this chapter uses the term to specifically refer to the white evangelical movement.[13] Not all those who call themselves evangelicals are white nor white nationalist. However, within the U.S. the majority of evangelicals fit both of those categories, (Shortle & Gaddie, 2015). Anthea Butler (2021) argues that post-1970s evangelicalism became convergent with the Republican party, and the working definition of 'American evangelicalism' is centered in the maintenance of "the cultural and racial whiteness that they have transmitted to the public" (Butler, p. 4). She goes so far as to claim, "Evangelicalism is synonymous with whiteness. It is not only a cultural whiteness but also a political whiteness" (Butler, p. 9).

Like white supremacy, evangelicalism is a globally exported commodity that directly harms vulnerable populations (Forster, 2019). It's therefore best to understand evangelicalism not as a theology, but as a socio-political movement that is adaptable in its value system and

[13] Mormonism is a uniquely American construction that came about in the early 1830s, months before Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act. Its doctrine is deeply embedded in the white supremacy of its time, including direct passages that allude to 'whiteness' as blessed, and 'darkness' as cursed. Because its theology is based on spiritual inheritance through blood, race has been a hotly debated framework within its evangelizing efforts. While many within the broader category of Christianity reject Mormonism as part of their fold, Mormons consider themselves to be Christians. And because Mormonism is based on the building of a Christian/Mormon nation, including in the direct conversion of native peoples by a colonizing white population, it can easily be framed as Christian nationalism. For more on the history of race and Mormonism see; Mason, (2018)

categorization, which crosses denominational borders to include a broad coalition of like-minded Christian groups. Kristin Kobes Du Mez (2020) contends that white evangelicals are considerably more authoritarian than other Christian or religious groups in the United States. She defines Christian nationalism as "the belief that America is God's chosen nation and must be defended as such" (Du Mez, p. 4), and argues this identity leads to higher rates of intolerance towards racial minorities, immigrants, and those perceived as a threat to the "family structure" like the LGBTQ+ community. Similarly, many core white evangelical beliefs align with nationalistic and fascistic values, such as the myth of the white warrior, 'law and order,' the police state, patriarchal authoritarianism, male supremacism, xenophobia, and more.

Historically Evangelicalism has been influenced by the larger racist and patriarchal history of the United States. However, the movement is not a passive bystander, but an active leader and influencer of those oppressive hierarchies. One of the largest organizations within the evangelical movement is the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). Founded in 1845 to maintain the institution of chattel slavery, the SBC exemplifies many of the connective ideologies and histories of the larger evangelical movement and showcases its overtly white supremacist and male supremacist histories (Butler, 2021; Jones, 2020). Even today, as the largest protestant group, representing 6.7% of the U.S. adult population, the SBC maintains a significant racial disparity within their ranks with a membership of 85% white and only 6% Black and 3% Latino (Fahmy, 2019). The U.S. evangelical movement likewise has been at the forefront of culture wars formed around anti-Semitism, anti-liberalism, and anti-Marxism, which have led to the current white nationalist campaigns around critical race theory, the anti-vaccination movement, and even the conspiracy theory movement known as QAnon.

Scholars of Christian nationalism argue that white evangelicals have placed a mythic past alongside key issues such as gun rights, militant masculinity, and reactionary politics to form an expansive and powerful political movement, and they did so by expertly adapting to new forms of media and information technology. Christian nationalism is a key social mechanism for networks of misinformation. As many scholars have argued, shifts in the media landscape alter political and power conditions in significant ways (Bucher, 2020; Marwick and Lewis, 2017; Chadwick, 2013; Kreiss, 2016). Social media has grown in prominence as a core communicative sphere for American society, and American politics have shifted to fit this new shape. Far-right politics, extremism, white supremacy, and male supremacy have always found a comfortable home on the Internet (Nakamura, 2019; Cospey, 2003; Caiani, Della Porta, and Wagemann, 2012).

More recently social media sites have become the primary organizational and social space for the far right (Nixon, Mercea, and Rawal, 2013; Devries, Bessant, and Watts, 2021b). After January 6, hundreds of insurrectionists uploaded videos, images, and live streams to various social media platforms. Parler, a fringe social media site, hosted a wealth of these objects, which allowed researchers, journalists, and prosecutors access to an insider's view of the day. Christian nationalist leaders use global digital platforms to gain unfettered access to an audience that is increasingly at risk of radicalization and conspiratorial thinking.

A recent study by the American Enterprise Institute shows that three in five white evangelicals believe that the election was stolen from Donald Trump. The study also found that more than a quarter of white evangelicals believe in QAnon conspiracies including that Trump is waging a secret war with child sex-traffickers in the Democratic party and Hollywood, and nearly three in ten Americans, including 39% of Republicans agree that some violence might be

necessary to protect their way of life (Coz, 2021). Research has shown a positive correlation between radicalization and the amount of time users have spent in online spaces that traffic in hate speech and white supremacist rhetoric. Scholars like John Gallacher and Johnathan Bright argue that there is no extremist personality, but that radicalization is a group process that is predicated on a sense of threat from outsiders. This threat is then used to strengthen the in-group identity, and as the perceived threat grows, so does the potential for violence.

Violence is viewed as moral and ethical in the context of these groups' shared ideologies. And since the advent of the Internet and social media, radicalization has largely occurred in online spaces (Gallacher & Bright, 2021). Beyond base radicalization tactics, new media is also key to the spread of banal forms of extremism including banal fascism. As Bratich argues, "capitalism's specifically neoliberal expression sets the stage for contemporary fascism by being always-already in *crisis*" (p. 22). Multiple studies have argued that Christian Americans are set to become a minority by mid-century, and these demographic changes have been perceived as a distinctive threat to white evangelicals (Al-Kire, at al., 2021). Likewise, white Americans have long been threatened by the myth of minority status and this narrative has been used to grow support for anti-immigration policies and eugenicist politics, (Stern 2019).

White Christian nationalism is reactionary by nature. Corey Robin (2011) argues, "Historically, the conservative has favored liberty for the higher orders and constraint for the lower orders. What the conservative sees and dislikes in equality, in other words, is not the threat to freedom but its extension" (Robin, p. 8). He defines reactionary politics as, "Not a reflex. It begins from a position of principle - that some are fit, and thus ought, to rule others" (Robin, p. 18). Robert Jones (2016) argues that the decline of white Christianity has led to an increased sense of threat among white evangelicals. In his later book (2020) he draws from James

Baldwin's 1968 quote claiming most white Americans are beyond rehabilitation, as they have been "white too long." As the head of the Public Religion Research Institute, he calls on white Christians to denounce white supremacy, and recognize that, "American Christianity's theological core has been thoroughly structured by an interest in protecting white supremacy" (Jones, p. 6).

As a central tenant to American culture, nationalism in all its flavors has become so commonplace it is often unnoticed even by those participating in its maintenance. As the core element of the U.S. brand, nationalism is articulated through corporate liberal internationalism (Davidson & Harris, 2006). In its most banal fascist form, white supremacy and male supremacy are the hidden bones of the nationalistic structure. Part of the banality of white nationalism and U.S. fascism comes out of right-wing strategy. In the late 1960s, Republican strategist Lee Atwater was quoted saying,

> By 1968 you can't say [n- word] – that hurts you, backfires. So you say stuff like, uh, forced busing, states' rights, and all that stuff, and you're getting so abstract. Now, you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is, blacks get hurt worse than whites (Perlstein, 2018)

This strategy helped the right-wing to displace criticism, and to appear less reactionary (and overtly racist) to a wider political base. And yet, offering a slight distance this language does not change the outcome nor the intent, but instead helps to hide overt forms of oppression and exclusion in covert policies (Davis, 2019).

Banal fascism/nationalism did not arise out of fringe spaces. As Hannah Arendt (1994) remarked in her response to the Nuremberg Trials, the banality of evil does not lessen the severity of the horror of it, but instead describes the mundanity of those who willingly participate

in it. It is not 'radical' even as it is extreme. Christian nationalism is on its own violent, but white Christian nationalism in the United States is distinctly fascist, as it marries together networks of revisionist history, authoritarianism, blood and soil rhetoric, militarism, and intense xenophobia. And yet, like traditional U.S. nationalism, white Christian nationalism is transnational (Forster, 2019).

Even as it insists on theoretical and physical borders, as a brand it has been commodified and sold globally and has supported the rising tide of authoritarianism and fascism around the world. This element is part of the global networking of white supremacy and banal fascism, what Jesse Daniels (2009) might term, "a translocal whiteness - that is, a form of white identity not tied to a specific region or nation but reimagined as an identity that transcends geography and is linked via a global network" (p. 7). This global network has been leveraged by Christian nationalists and christofascist influencers of the past and its impact has reverberations in the twenty-first century.

1.3 A Short History of American Christofascism

An era of rising fascism, the 1930s were recognizable for the boldness of fascist organizations. On Feb 20, 1939, a rally of 20,000 participants took place at Madison Square Garden, the date chosen to coincide with George Washington's birthday, with leaders claiming him as "America's first fascist." The rally was organized by the German American Bund, an American Nazi organization, which attempted to blur Nazism with American nationalism by replacing Nazi imagery and music with patriotic content, switching out the "Seig Heil" with "Free America" (Bell, 1970). One of the main speakers was the public relations director of Bund, Gerhard Wilhelm Kunze, who encouraged audience members to remember and celebrate the

white supremacy inherent to the founding of America. Citing the Chinese Exclusion Act, Jim Crow policies, anti-miscegenation and restrictive immigration laws, he claimed, “You, Aryan, Nordic and Christians, Wake up! To demand that our government shall be returned to the American people who founded it!" (Kuhn, 1939). Kunze spoke upon a stage in front of a massive banner of George Washington’s likeness, bookended by swastikas, as the Star-Spangled Banner was played over the speakers. After the event concluded, a pamphlet was distributed containing the rally speeches alongside a list of books by prominent Nazis like the minister of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, as well as writings by Father Charles Coughlin, a Roman Catholic priest based in Royal Oak, Michigan.



Figure 3 *A Night at the Garden* (2017) Directed by Marshall Curry

Coughlin was known as the “Radio Priest” and although he was not a registered member of a Nazi party, he regularly regurgitated European fascist rhetoric through his radio program, *The Hour of Power*, and his weekly published magazine, *Social Justice* (Catalano, 2020). In

1938 his rhetoric became overtly militant as he argued for a Christian front that, "is not afraid of the word 'fascist'" and "will not fear to be called 'anti-Semitic'" (Catalano, 2020). According to Alan Brinkley (1982), as a prominent ideologue, Father Coughlin was a forerunner in the emerging radio talk show era (Warren, 1996).

Coughlin, alongside other right-wing political influencers like Nazi-sympathizer and clergyman Gerald L. K. Smith were early precursors to right-wing radio hosts such as Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, Ben Shapiro, or Dennis Prager, and TV personalities like Sean Hannity, Laura Ingraham, Bill O'Reilly, or Tucker Carlson. Over the radio he exhorted his listeners to, "wake up!" an appropriation of the Nazi slogan "Deutschland Erwache!" which translated means "Germany Awake!" (Catalano, pg. 49).[14] According to a governmental source, at the height of Coughlin's popularity his listeners amounted to one third of the U.S. population (approximately 42 million) making him one of the most influential persons of that era (Social Security). Coughlin's overt fascism grew alongside his militancy, culminating in the formation of the militia-like organization, Christian Front. Prior to this acceleration he coded fascist values in overt Christian nationalist rhetoric.

In a 1935 speech he stated, "We've got to say that we're either Christians in this country or not. Who established this country? Christians...When it comes to representatives in Congress, don't forget this is a Christian nation! Let's not overwork this democracy!" (Cremoni, 1998). Speeches like this, placed alongside anti-Semitic rants, and the circulation of content like *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, articulated a form of 'patriotism' that was dependent on

[14] This term also likely inspired the right-wing claim often shouted from FOX News platforms to, "Wake Up, America!"

Christian control and fascist ideologies.[15] Coughlin eventually lost his platform as the war began and American support for Germany waned, but his early content and political activities were expressive of a style of banal fascism in the 1930s that still has relevance in today's right-wing political sphere. During the growth of the 'New-Right' leaders and influencers proposed new strategies that drew from past successes, including from the left.

These tactics, appropriated and manipulated, have become mainstays of right-wing politics, including in later iterations like the Tea Party movement (Costley White, 2018), the Alt-Right (Stern, 2019) and finally the fascist movement much of the Republican party has become. The most impactful strategy of the political right, according to Davidson and Harris (2006), includes seven steps: 1. Identify the main enemy, 2. Build counter-theory, 3. Build mass communications, 4. Build base communities, 5. Build the counter-hegemonic bloc, 6. Take power in government, and finally, 7. Radical reconstruction of society (Davidson and Harris, p. 53-54). The final step rarely happens quickly, and in the case of the United States has amounted to a slow coup of all major ideological state apparatuses (Althusser, 2014), including education, churches, family, media, trade unions, and law. Although Coughlin held massive public sway, including acting as an early key supporter of Franklin D Roosevelt's presidential campaign, his overt antisemitism and eventual vocal support for fascism existed at the fringes of the political mainstream. By allowing his fascism to become overt he had not made it past the 5th step in the right-wing strategy.

[15] *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is a document that began circulating in Europe in the late nineteenth century that supposedly exposed a global plot by Jewish elders to control the world. It is one of the most highly circulated forms of conspiracy theory, having been cited in *Mein Kamph,* published by industrialists like Henry Ford, with fragments remaining in current conspiracy movements like QAnon and in shooter manifestos globally. For more on the history and circulation of *The Protocols* see; (Hasian Jr., 1997)

Post WWII era saw similar influential personalities rise to replace those of the past. A significant figure in the history of the christofascist right-wing movement is Patrick (Pat) Buchanan, an American paleoconservative, broadcaster, and assistant/consultant to three presidents: Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Ronald Reagan. Buchanan as well as right-wing 'shock jock' Rush Limbaugh have both admitted that they've studied the tactics of the left by reading and appropriating concepts from Gramscian theory and key thinkers from the Frankfurt school, like Adorno and Marcuse, (Davidson & Harris, 2006). However, Gramsci himself drew many of his tactics for spreading ideology from studying Mussolini and his fascist movement's "passive revolution" (Gramsci, 2020). Paleoconservatives like Buchanan ran on more openly white supremacist, anti-statist, isolationist, and "traditional" values than their neoconservative counterparts, pushing those politics into the mainstream (Lowndes, 2021).

Buchanan's father was an early backer of the America First Committee, a fascist, pro-Nazi WW2 organization founded by the CEO of Quaker Oats, R. Douglas Stuart Jr. and the Chairman of SEARS and retired Army General, Robert E. Wood. The committee's most prominent members included known Nazi supporters, Henry Ford, and Charles Lindberg. When Pat Buchanan ran for president in 1992, he dubbed his campaign, "American First" in support of that history.

In 2002 Buchanan co-founded *The American Conservative* (TAC) alongside Scott McConnell, and Taki Theodoracopulos.[16] Likewise, Buchanan has been featured in publications like the *Rolling Stone*, *National Review*, and *The Nation*. He was an original host of CNN's *Crossfire* and acted as commentator on MSNBC and FOX News. He is now a regular contributor

[16] Taki Theodoracopulos left *The American Conservative* in 2007 to found *Taki's Magazine,* with Richard Spencer acting as its managing editor. Spencer, an American neo-Nazi and founder of the alt-right movement, used *Taki's* to launch the alt-right into the mainstream media sphere. The magazine has also come under fire in 2013 for publishing articles in support of the Greek neo-Nazi party, the Golden Dawn.

to VDARE, a white nationalist and neo-Nazi website. He has published many articles and books that regurgitate fascist talking points, with a special focus on the 'Great Replacement Theory' (Buchanan, 2007; 2002). His past is riddled with controversies surrounding his Holocaust denial conspiracy theories, and his defense of Nazi war criminals (Kurtz, 1990). Buchanan's access to the highest levels of political power showcase how successful the right-wing strategy has been in his case.

It is not that his rhetoric or politics have been banal in themselves, but that he marks the moment when these values have shifted into the mainstream through a banalization of fascist content. One way of analyzing influencers in the 'modern' christofascist movement would be to break them into four ages with prewar members like Father Coughlin representing the first stage, political influencers of the 60s-80s like Jerry Falwell and Pat Buchanan representing the second, prominent radio personalities of the 90s and 00s such as Rush Limbaugh or Alex Jones in the third, and the more contemporary political figures like Tucker Carlson or Rep. Marjorie Taylor Green exemplifying the final stage.

This chapter began with a retelling of an insurrectionist singing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" as he took part in an attempted coup of the United States Capitol. The song in question is representative of the relationship the U.S. has with Christian nationalism. The lyrics, written by Julia Ward Howe in 1861, place Christian iconography alongside military references, and have inspired generations of Americans and Christians alike, in various eras of social unrest (Howe, 1883). "The Battle Hymn" has a long and complicated history with a range of religious and social movements. Originally the leading anthem of the Union army in the Civil War, variations of it have been used for civil rights movements, Christian organizations, and labor

protests.[17] As the militancy of American Christianity fluctuated over the years, the song likewise fluctuated in popularity within the church, often used as worship and patriotic anthem simultaneously. However, following 9/11 "The Battle Hymn" evolved in the American imagination, (Stauffer & Soskis, 2013).

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.

He hath loosed the fateful lightenings of His terrible swift sword.

His truth is marching on.

Glory, Glory hallelujah

Glory, Glory hallelujah

Glory, Glory hallelujah

His truth is marching on.

I have read a fiery gospel writ in burnish'd rows of steel.

As ye deal with my condemners so with you my grace shall deal.

Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel.

His truth is marching on.[18]

On September 14, 2001, President Bush stood in front of hundreds of politicians, dignitaries, and military leaders sitting in the pews of the Washington National Cathedral to offer

[17] According to Stauffer & Soskis, Howe took an already popular Union army marching tune, and transformed the lyrics to elevate her name in the ranks of poets of that era. She was inspired to write a pro-Union song after seeing the soldiers fight back against an attacking Confederate army. Prior to Howe, the lyrics focused on the abolitionist John Browne (John Brown's Body) which began as a parody song about a non-related soldier of the same name but spread and took on a broader meaning. In both cases, the song was distinctly pro-Union and anti-Slavery, and yet, it has since become recognizable as a militant song most frequently used by white Christian nationalists.

[18] Original lyrics by Julia Ward Howe in 1861. I have kept the spelling the same as the original version to give a clearer sense of the original content.

words of comfort to a grieving and enraged public. Prior to his speech, Christian leaders like the unofficial spiritual advisor for the past four presidential regimes, Reverend Billy Graham, had provided sermons and prayers that neatly tied together calls for national unity with calls for spiritual renewal. Bush then took to the stage, concluding his speech by claiming it was America's duty to "rid the world of evil" effectively calling for war from the pulpit (Bush, 2001). As Bush sat down in a nearly silent room the Navy's Sea Chanters began singing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" accompanied by a 10,600-pipe organ. The crowd took up the song with passion, some crying, some raising their hands in worship. The experience was marked upon with praise by many, and concern by a few. After that day the song became representative of a (mythic) national unity and collective defiance.

"The Battle Hymn" represents not only militant U.S. nationalism but evokes the imagery of the 'army of God' and the second coming of Christ. It is a call for United States Christians to rise in the service of the nation and to help usher in the Kingdom of God. Patriotism is code for nationalism, and nationalism in the U.S. is founded on a continuously negotiated conceptualization of race, gender, and power, and in the U.S. white evangelicalism has been a key driver in this negotiation. Fascism is animated by notions of death, immortality, and resurrection (Neocleous, 2005). Scholar of fascism Emilio Gentile (1996) argues that fascism amounts to a 'political religion' in which death plays a central role. The Battle Hymn enacts these same tendencies, especially as it's layered with white nationalist fervor and far-right militancy. While this could easily shift into overt fascism, "patriotism" provides a veneer that allows it to remain banal.

Songs like “The Battle Hymn" resonate so intensely with the evangelical understanding of patriotism because it codes gendered narratives with a form of militant nationalism that can be grafted onto racial and political movements.[19] With lines like “Let the hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel,” the American (white and male) citizen is imagined as Christ-like in their collective militancy. The soldier, a nameless vessel for America’s imperialism, is a perpetual martyr. In the context of the post-9/11 wars, the Christ-figure to rise from the grave was not the countless thousands who would die in pointless warfare, but the visage of the U.S. as a powerful, imperial force. Spectacles like the post-9/11 presidential address are used to encourage a nationalistic and emotional public into accepting tactics they would otherwise find distasteful or abhorrent. While the attack on the twin towers was an actual crisis, the response to that attack fed into the cult of crises, furthered by a media ecology primed for such a moment. The rhetoric and politics that blossomed from this event can easily fit into Eco’s traits. The Battle Hymn is not in itself fascist, although it indicates a step towards ultranationalism. However, it can also, in specific social and political contexts, be code for fascism, or rather, it can be layered on top of other cultural objects, ideologies, or actions to code fascism as patriotism - marking it banal. Eco’s *UR* traits, when applied to U.S. Christian nationalism, and the larger right-wing socio-political sphere, expose a recognizable fascist undercurrent.

The events of 9/11 reinvigorated a culture war that had stalled in the post-cold-war era. It acted as a rallying point for white evangelicals who used ‘Islam’ as a ubiquitous enemy, much like communism had been in years past, to grow their political and economic power and the ranks of their followers. Following the direction of political and religious leaders, the media leaned into nationalist rhetoric with vigor. Political cartoons took up an adage of “awakening the

[19] Even the national anthem, *The Star-Spangled Banner* has a deeply racist and white supremacist history, with an earlier stanza describing the murder of escaped enslaved persons in a positive light.

sleeping giant" to rally an us-vs.-evil political praxis (Achard, Kemmer, & Bergen, 2004). The phrase came from a popular 1970 movie quote, "I fear all we have done is to awaken a sleeping giant and fill him with a terrible resolve" attributed (falsely) to Japanese Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto after the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor by the Imperial Japanese forces.[20]

Connecting WWII to 9/11 acted as a rhetorical link to what has been considered, in U.S. popular culture, as America's last "good war." In referencing Pearl Harbor against the backdrop of 9/11, even tangentially, the wars become morally relatable. The Christian Right had a common goal, to unite under a nationalist banner, and rally citizens to recognize the U.S. as a truly Christian nation. They used 9/11 as an opportunity to reinvigorate an American nationalist masculinity, which they saw as waning in power since Reagan's era, as well as an opportunity to distinguish themselves as the spiritual leaders in the upcoming holy war. However, this moment of renewed red-white-and blue nationalism did not arise out of a vacuum. Christian nationalists had deployed patriotism as a narrative weapon for decades, and that tactic only increased in the wake of 9/11.

Christian nationalism in the United States is wrapped in branded goods and consumer culture. This often looks like Christian television networks (CTN) with overpriced goods sold by phone or big budget movies like Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). It can also look like hyper-patriotic products such as branded bibles. In May 2021 a subsection of HarperCollins Christian publishing arm was set to produce a "God Bless the U.S.A. Bible" inspired by Greenwood's song of the same name. After uproar from prominent liberal Christian voices, and a petition that had over 900 signatures on it, HarperCollins dropped the book and denied having

[20] This quote is from the 1970 war film, *Tora!Tora!Tora!,* in which the writers claimed to have found the quote in writings by Yamamoto, although there is no proof for this claim.

had plans to publish it in the first place (Olmstead, 2021).[21] Eventually it found a second home and is now being sold exclusively off their website. This is not the first nor the most overt Christian nationalist bible to be published. The trend can be traced back to Jerry Falwell's 1983 *I Love America Bible,* which corresponded with his 'I Love America' campaign of the late 1970s.[22]

The Greenwood bible is not unique, but it does exemplify the relationship the Christian Right has with movements like Trump populism.[23] According to its website, the book contains; a handwritten chorus of 'God Bless the U.S.A.' by Greenwood, the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, the U.S. Constitution, and the Pledge of Allegiance. The website markets this book as a "perfect gift" for homeschooling households, the military, brides, 'New American Citizens,' teens, and "Anyone that loves America." By combining these elements, the collective object encourages consumers to buy into the concept of Christian citizenship, one that marks them as true American citizens. While Greenwood's bible made waves in public media spaces leading to organized pushback (to the extent that it's not sold through major retailers like Amazon), there is an even more militant, nationalist bible that was made a decade earlier.

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[21] The opposition to the Greenwood Bible claimed the overtly nationalist tone of the publication was dangerous and not in line with Christian values (Morehead, 2021)

[22] Falwell was an American pastor, televangelist, and conservative activist who held significant influence over the Republican party until his death in 2007. He was the founder of a megachurch in Virginia as well as the Lynchburg Christian Academy, now known as the Liberty Christian Academy, originally a segregationist institution. He also founded Liberty University, which has been in the news recently for lawsuits by staff and students that claim a culture of fear, discrimination, and sexual assault. Falwell was the co-founder of the Moral Majority, a religious-right organization that mobilized political power for the Republican party in the 1980s. The Moral Majority focused on key religious-right issues like anti-abortion laws, the promotion of gender and sex discrimination, anti-LGBTQ+ laws, and the conversion of non-Christians, with a special focus on Jews.

[23]In November 2020 at a Tennessee Trump rally, Lee Greenwood sang 'God Bless the U.S.A' from the stage as Trump walked to the podium. When Greenwood got to the line "And I'll gladly stand up - next to you" he turned and placed his hand on Trump's arm, situating him as the hero referenced by the song.. By stumping with that song, Trump both marked himself as a pro-military, pro-Nationalist candidate, but also as a militant hero that would defend the Nation against threats.

Published by Thomas Nelson, Inc, a major bible publisher and distributor, the *American Patriot's Bible* was created by Richard G. Lee, a pastor with connections to Liberty University and who has been a regular guest on Fox News and other right-wing media outlets. The book's introduction, written by Lee, begins with a retelling of the 1776 declaration of independence and a quote by Andrew Jackson stating that the Bible is the "Rock upon which our republic rests." Lee goes on to state,

> On the whole, Americans are a people who love the Bible and the God of the Bible...While other nations have built their governments upon shaky foundations of communism, socialism, and countless other anti-God philosophies, only to see those foundations crumble, American stands without equal as a beacon of hope and freedom in a hurting world. (viii)

The blurring of a very specific type of nationalism with a narrow version of Christianity is not subtle, though it is so commonplace that this book would not shock those who grew up in an evangelical setting. And yet, the language here is quite violent.

By marking other nations as innately flawed and "anti-God" this quote places them as lesser-than and potentially dangerous. It encourages its readers to see the fall of nation-states as being preordained, like Sodom and Gomorrah of the Old Testament, their faithlessness and idolatry subjecting them to the wrath of a vengeful God. In this context the United States is positioned as the army of Christ, and any imperialism or military incursion as acts by 'the hand of God'. Eco's second tenet of Ur-Fascism is a rejection of modernism, or *irrationalism,* in which an ideology of blood and soil replaces support for egalitarianism and progressive values. Eco argues that this takes the form of a rejection of the values represented by 1776 (Declaration of Independence) and 1789 (signing of the Constitution). However, with the resurgence of

patriotism as the primary code for fascism, 1776 has become code for a new set of values that include rejection of progressiveness and a promotion of heroism, militancy, resulting in a new version of traditionalism and blood and soil ideology.

Other addendums in this book include a full page offering of the Battle Hymn of the Republic, a page exploring 'the right to bear arms, and a mythic version of the origin of the U.S. Navy, which the book claims arose not out of the Revolutionary War against the British, but as a response to 'Muslim terrorism in the form of the Barbary Pirates. The bible lists "The Seven Principles of the Judeo-Christian Ethic" which argue for, among other things, "the traditional monogamous family," "the right to a God-centered education," and "a national work-ethic." Prefacing this list Lee claims,

> When our nation's founding fathers gave us documents such as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and others, they had to lean upon a common understanding of law, government, social order, and morality. That understanding sprang from the common acceptance of what has come to be known as the Judeo-Christian Ethic, which is the system of the moral and social values that originates in the Old and New Testaments of the Word of God. Whether each of the Founding Fathers was a Christian is not the issue. Their writings, their statements, and their votes evidence the fact that the majority of them embraced these great principles as the basis for a civilized nation. (ix)

The revisionism in this statement is easy to recognize, but there is a second element to this ploy that is more subtle. It marks Judeo-Christianity as something innate to civilization (as opposed to uncivilized nations) and dehistoricizes this identity so that it becomes eternal, something that always was and always will be. The doctrine is not even a settled theological framework, but

something more undefined, that easily slips between the spiritual and political. And because it's situated as being innate to the origin of a preordained nation, the consent of participants in the making of this history is unnecessary. Christian nationalism insists on the infallibility of the 'founding fathers' as well as the 'Judeo-Christian' doctrine. These two elements are integral to one another, and require a mythic past, present, and imagined future.

Christian nationalists are deeply committed to viewing national documents like the constitution as sacred, and this inclination is represented by the first tenet of Ur-Fascism, (traditionalism) which describes a primordial wisdom and a rejection of progress. Mary Anne Franks (2020) explores this aspect through the lens of white nationalism and Christian nationalism. She argues that "the Constitution is first and foremost for white men," and that Constitutional fundamentalists, "idealize the founding fathers, read passages from the Constitution in isolation and out of context, believe themselves and their values to be constantly under attack, and rationalize extreme inequality as the product of natural competition" (Franks, p. 6-7). As she and other Constitutional scholars have pointed out, the actual history is at odds with the mythology of equality surrounding it. The 'founding fathers' purposefully and strategically consolidated power away from women, non-landowners, Indigenous populations, and Black people, maintaining a strict power hierarchy that privileged the few (Franks, p. 32). She concludes that the Declaration of Independence and the Preamble to the Constitution acted as effective propaganda and became symbols as well as "instruments of mass persuasion" (Franks, p. 33).

U.S. nationalism broadly works to maintain the mythos of the founding documents (often a function of liberalism), but Christian nationalism goes beyond this by exposing and marking the inherent inequality intended by the founders as natural and good, coding it as patriotic.

Cultural objects like *The Battle Hymn* and the founding documents act as symbols, ones that connect the relationship between Christian nationalists and their ideologies. White evangelical men (and to a slightly lesser extent, women) see themselves in these symbols and in doing so view any critique on these objects, or on their loose understanding of 'patriotism', as an attack on their very identity and person. Members of these communities view themselves as potential soldiers, heroes, and an extension of the nation.

When Howe wrote, "Let the hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel" she was referencing a Biblical passage describing Jesus.[24] 'Born of a woman' is used in multiple biblical passages to describe a human man, one that must reckon with his own mortality. When applied to the Christ figure it speaks to his earthly body and the duality of his nature as the eternal son of God. However, 'hero' is meant to represent both the Christ figure and the soldier. The soldier, likewise, exists in a duality. He is mortal, but to be a hero he must give in to his mortality (die) to attain this status and thus gain immortality in the national memory. Unlike Christ he will never be individualized, remaining in the abstract. This is the hero of the Christian nationalist ethos, masculine, militant, and eternal.

1.4 The Contemporary Patriot Movement and Christofascist Influencers

Since January 6, some of Trump's supporters have proposed an alternative political party, called 'The Patriot Party' and worked to gain support through the networks already established

[24] The New King James version of Galatians 4:4 states, "But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law," which speaks to Jesus' duality of both his mortal body (born of a woman) and his godhood (the Son of God).

by the Patriot Movement, focusing heavily on Facebook groups and affordances.[25] Prior to social media influencers in this movement relied heavily on other forms of technology to reach large audiences such as radio, newspapers, fliers, and eventually television. However, the advent of the Internet and social media has had considerable impact offering greater growth potential. Pre-Internet, single influencers like Father Coughlin might have an outsized impact, now a multitude of individuals could grow their base by tapping into a ready-made network that is strengthened by the viral nature of far-right spectacle. Christofascist influencers of today have taken advantage of this to push nationalist and fascist ideals, and recruit supporters for political leaders of their movement, such as Donald Trump. According to a Pew Research Center study, 77% of white evangelical voters supported Donald Trump in the 2016 election, with 88% of Trump voters categorized as white (Jones, 2018). Rather than seeing an exodus in evangelical circles post-Trump, there was a marked increase in white voters that identify as evangelical since 2016 (Smith, 2021).

Trump has remained a central organizing focal point for the Patriot Party even after his failed bid for the Presidency in 2020. The Tech Transparency Project found that in early 2021 this political movement was gaining thousands of new members every day, encouraged by Trump's 'Save America PAC', which eventually gave up on their attempt to form a separate political party once the movement lost traction. Their decline only came after Facebook banned key organizing words like 'Stop the Steal' and altered their algorithm to cease recommendations

[25] One of the most confusing elements of this movement is their choice of names. The Patriot Party was already an established party in the 1970s, made up of poor, working-class white socialists, who believed they could end white supremacy by focusing on capitalism as their core enemy. They were part of the 'Rainbow Coalition' founded by Black Panther leader, Fred Hampton. However, like the new version, the original Patriot Party was also heavily nationalist, and even wore the Confederate Flag as part of their uniform, albeit as a way of linking to 'southern heritage' (i.e., southern nationalism) rather than a desire to reinstate slavery. For more on this history see Black Panther, Bobby Lee's account on the Patriot Party and Rainbow Coalition, James, T., (May 17, 2020).

of civic and political group pages (Paul, 2021). While not obvious from the outside, Christian nationalist and militant anti-statist movements have more overlap than not and have been forming loose coalitions in the wake of Trump's failed bid for presidency. Nearing the end of Trump's four years in office a new type of church cropped up. Launched on September 11, 2020, the "Patriot Church" is a loose organization of non-denominational, evangelical churches, where the leaders of the movement preach that Trump is still the legal president, and that patriotism is equal to holiness. At the time of writing this the church movement is small, and yet it exemplifies a larger trend in white evangelical circles that exists under the surface. By connecting to other reactionary and militant accelerationist organizations, this network has spread considerably beyond their in-person congregations through online spaces.

One leader of this movement, Ken Peters, began his career preaching in various churches in Spokane Washington. When he decided to move to Tennessee he recruited Matt Shea, a Washington state representative, who has known ties to the militant leader Ammon Bundy, to become the new pastor of his WA congregation (Leodler & Leodler, 2019). While white nationalism and neoconservatism are not new to the evangelical movement, there are a few elements in these churches' teachings that stray from traditional evangelical ideologies. One distinction is how "globalism" is understood. Peters preaches that Christianity is inherently nationalistic. He claims, "Jesus, by the way, is a national god, not a global god," and that while Jesus came to save the whole world, he spoke in terms of nations and therefore his followers should view their religious identity as inherently nationalistic. A second common refrain found in this movement is the call for martyrdom. Evangelicalism has historically encouraged martyrdom in the abstract. They, like other Christian denominations that participate in mission work, view evangelizing as potentially dangerous and often encourage members to spiritually

prepare to give their lives for 'the lord's work'. However, preachers like Peters are framing this ideology in newly militant ways.[26]

In a series of sermons titled 'A Patriot Spirit' Peters pushes a religious-political ideology that likens a narrow version of patriotism to godliness and encourages his followers to view nationalism as the truest form of Christianity. When discussing the ultimate reward for faithfulness he describes heaven as a bordered/gated community saying, "there's no illegal alien gonna get in! There's a big ol' wall up in heaven," and "we're first kingdom patriots...it's not anti-kingdom of God to fight for this country." Peters, and others in this network of churches, regularly traffic in overt xenophobia, claiming that it is natural and justified by biblical teachings. He views the United States as a nation ordained by God, one that requires a limited citizenship informed by white male supremacy. By equating the 'gates of heaven' with a bordered nation, specifically the United States/Mexico border wall, preachers like Peters encourage their audiences to view themselves as political and militant agents of an ongoing conflict. He argues "we want to raise up true patriots. First of all, kingdom patriots but also American patriots." His sermon then shifts to discussing Patrick Henry, the Revolutionary War, and the supposed problems in current society, stating, "I think we've reached the point in our country that it's probably not just going to go away, and so it's going to have to be some action, some godly confrontation in our country" (Peters, 2020).

Supposed federal overreach in the form of mask and vaccine mandates is equated to government oppression (like British taxation), and members are encouraged to see the refusal of these mandates as akin to historic resistance movements leading up to the Revolutionary War.

[26] When I say "new" I do not mean to ignore the history of early 19th century militant evangelical movements, nor the longer history of Christian militancy such as the 11th century Crusades, but to point out the new ways this ideology is framed for our current era.

Peters regularly draws from pseudo-historical retellings of figures like Patrick Henry, who is perhaps most famous for his quote, “Give me liberty or give me death.” In sermons Peters connects scripture to a speech given by Henry before the Virginia Assembly on March 23, 1775, which was used as a rallying cry for the revolution (Currier & Ives). He preaches that government ‘overreach’ is a form of slavery that should be fought against even at the cost of one’s life (Peters, 2020). However, the form of martyrdom that Peters argues for is not the sacrificial ‘laying down of one's life’ as with the non-violent Christ figure.

Instead, Peters invokes the visage of the soldier, whose potential death comes alongside promissory violence against one's enemies.[27] Jason Bruner in *Imagining Persecution* argues that the concept of the persecuted church offers authenticity for those willing to face violence for their beliefs (Bruner, 2021). This is often framed as the difference between “true Christians” and “cultural Christians.” In the case of the Patriot Church, “patriot” has replaced “Christian” as the signifier for authenticity, even as it’s married to a religious framework that marks their cause divine. Peters defines *patriot* as someone who is willing to die, “for the gospel, for their country, and for their family” equating the use of COVID masks to a ‘spirit of fear’ that marks them as unpatriotic, and therefore ungodly. In the same sermon he argues that an example of persecution coming to the church is the Equality Act, that if passed would be, “the most dangerous for the church of Jesus Christ than any law...and it would force churches...and schools to not make

[27]The pressure to view oneself as a potential martyr for this faith is not new. While this form of ideology goes back centuries, it became a popular talking point in evangelical circles in the 70s and 80s. 1980s publications like *The Voice of the Martyrs* pushed this narrative, influencing youth culture and leading many in youth circles to claim that they felt ‘called by god’ to potential martyrdom. This allowed practitioners to view their ‘spiritual warfare’ as something that could bleed into actual life and offer them an opportunity to prove their faith to their god via the threat of torture and death. However, even at its highest point of cultural relevance it led to few if any actual deaths (an exception might be the occasional missionary death in the field, but it would be difficult to prove a direct correlation). Earlier versions of this narrative only fantasized about harm to oneself, but the new narratives focus on making ‘soldiers for Christ’ that are not self-sacrificing, but active participants in violence against an enemy. This shifts the narrative scope from martyr to militant.

decisions at all based on sexuality...because they've made immorality an ethnic group (Peters, 2021). He claims that the Act would marry the categories of sexual immorality and perversion to race and ethnicity, and that Christians would be labeled "racists" if they take issue with homosexuality or transgenderism.

The Equality Act is based on Biden's executive action with which he extended civil rights protections to LGBTQ+ communities. If passed, the Act would make those protections permanent by, "prohibit[ing] discrimination on the basis of sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation, and for other purposes" (Cicilline, 2021). The rest of Peters' sermon is a loosely historical retelling of the revolutionary war that seems predominantly drawn from Mel Gibson's 2000 film, *The Patriot,* jokingly arguing that every member of his church is required to have seen the film.[28] By blurring fictional cultural objects, and a revisionist telling of the founding of the United States, the 'theology' presented to members of this movement can be adapted to the developing political needs of its leaders.

Through their pulpits and over social media, preachers like Peters are actively preparing their audiences to follow in the footsteps of the 'patriots' of history, whether fictional or real. On January 6, at 2:01 p.m. EST Peters tweeted "Patriots are now storming the Capitol in front of us." He later claimed that he posted that from his hotel room, and that he had no idea there was an actual riot happening (Kuznia and de Puy Kamp, 2021). At 4:00 p.m. EST Peters took video footage of the riot outside of the Capitol, as he stood to the back of the raging crowd. Post insurrection, Christofascist influencers like Peters have walked a fine line with their followers,

[28] The larger Patriot Movement, much like other groups within the far-right, regularly draw inspiration from many of Mel Gibson's films including *The Patriot* and *Braveheart.* Mel Gibson himself is seen as somewhat of an icon of the Christian right after his 2004 film, *The Passion of the Christ,* and did not seem to lose supporters in these groups after his public meltdown and misogynistic, antisemitic, and racist rant to his ex-girlfriend, Oksana Grigoriva. See, (Salon Staff, 2011)

attempting to maintain a distance from the violence at the Capitol to avoid legal ramifications, while still expressing support for the movement they are active participants of. Through their continued online activity, they promote a white nationalist and male supremacist framing of the United States and traffic in pseudo-historical narratives to legitimize the hierarchies they support.

Peter's move from Washington to Tennessee was largely funded by another notorious pastor, Greg Locke, who originally became famous in 2016 for a transphobic rant posted on Facebook about Target's change in bathroom policy that allows guests and team members to choose which bathroom they use based on their gender identity (Target, 2016).[29] Locke's video garnered millions of views and made him a person of note in the Christian nationalist movement. More recently Locke has increased his audience on and offline by his hard stance against masking and vaccine mandates. As of mid 2022 he had over 2.2 million followers on Facebook, with more on Instagram, and over 97 thousand subscribers to his YouTube channel. At the time of writing this he has been banned from Twitter since September 13, 2021, but claims he had almost 114 thousand followers prior to being removed.

In video and sermon rants Locke often uses his removal as proof of his victimhood against the "liberal elite" or corrupt government agents. This exemplifies both the 8th tenet (victim/victor dichotomy) and a subsection of the 13th (selective populism) in which "we the people" struggle against the corrupt elite. While christofascist influencers like Locke are still in the position of a traditional pastor, social media is where they receive most of their engagement, and this encourages them to include spectacles as part of their branding in the hopes of going viral on their platforms. Locke's live videos on FB have significantly more views than the posted recordings of his in-person sermons.

[29] Target also claims to support the federal Equality Act and has not backed down on this policy even with considerable blowback.

His direct and indirect ties to overt fascists and militant accelerationist groups allow his followers to maintain an ideological connection without requiring ingroup membership. He actively plays with QAnon conspiracy theories, including the claim that the election was stolen from Trump, and that the pandemic is being used strategically by the U.S. government to control the population. He has also become notorious for claiming 'demons' and 'witches' are at the root of many social ills, going so far as to argue that what doctors diagnose as Autism might be demonic possession.[30] Locke's use of controversy to increase audience engagement is both part of the age of online spectacle and a mechanism of fascism. In the foundational text on spectacle, Dubord (1994) argues that spectacles, like those that Locke traffic in, are a way of *eliciting irrational responses* from a passive audience. Stephen Duncombe (2007) encourages a leftist appropriation of spectacle, but still claims that "spectacle, by definition, is anti-democratic. It is created by the few, to be followed by the many," (p. 133). Tauel Harper (2011) argues that "public space is no longer ruled by judgments of utility or instrumentalism, the hallmarks of the modern era; now public communication is dominated by spectacles—where the sensational rules" (p. 65).

Christofascist influencers like Locke utilize the 7th tenet of Ur-Fascism (*obsession with a plot*) to work on their audience's fear and anger towards an unidentifiable mass enemy (Jews, communists, leftists, witches, etc.) that can then lead to individual targets. This seeds into the 9th tenant (*life is permanent warfare*), which is supported through the ecology of crises and continuous spectacles. In more recent videos and sermons his scaremongering of 'witches' has

[30] This is not a new claim in Evangelical circles. Historically many mental and physical health concerns were labeled as demonic, or at least caused by Satanic influence, with the more charismatic denominations holding 'healing revivals' where pastors would 'cast out' the sickness from audience members. For more on this history see; Du Mez 2020.

increased, including accusing women in his congregation of witchcraft. The accusation of witchcraft is historically centered in the Christian tradition, leading to vigilante and mob violence. Bratich argues that in a hypermasculine or microfascist society, "women's very existence is the disruption of the mythic order that established God in the first place" (p. 29). Within the Christian origin myth, the creation of women brought about the downfall of humanity and their easy communion with God in paradise.

Women are the origin of sin, and therefore are seen as both susceptible to evil (thus needing masculine protection) and as threats (thus needing masculine control). Locke exemplifies the 12th tenet of Ur-Fascism, *machismo,* what Bratich might call misogyny, and what is better termed as male supremacism. This element includes a general disdain for women and non-gender conforming persons, a glorification of toxic masculinity, and leads to more overt attacks on LGBTQ+ members and women, including in the form of accusations of witchcraft. Silvia Federici (2018) argues that the witch hunt is an original tool of capital accumulation, and a *reinstitution* of a "founding violence that occurred in precapitalist religious formations" (Bratich, pg. 60). When christofascist influencers like Locke mark the "witch" as their target, they are encouraging support for these formations within a militant social sphere.

On February 2, 2022, Locke hosted a book burning to rid his congregation of 'demonic influence' and witchcraft. The event was hosted live over Facebook with over 352 thousand views. From the stage he claimed that the fire department had threatened to shut them down, stating, "We have a constitutional right, and a biblical right to do what we're going to do tonight. We have a burn permit. But even without one, a church has a religious right to burn occultic materials that they deem are a threat to their religious rights, and belief systems, and

freedoms!"[31] There is a long history of book burnings both in the Christian nationalist and fascist traditions, with the most famous contemporary example being the Berlin book burnings by the Nazi party. Both historic and current book burnings are meant to create spectacle, but Locke's event was intended primarily for an online audience.



Figure 4 Screenshot of book burning. Facebook live video. Feb 2, 2022

The traditional sermons he gives, while equally reactionary and political, do not have the same affective signifiers as the live videos where he stares directly into the camera, speaking off script, mixing reactionary politics, scripture, and white nationalist talking points. This shift speaks to the social audience who sees him as a spiritual commander rather than pastor, one that will lead them into battle in the culture wars beyond the Sunday pulpit. Pastors like Locke act as

[31] This event came amidst a rise in book bans across school systems and increased hostility by parents targeting libraries, schools, and school boards, both of which have similar ideological roots. Chapter 4 discusses this in more depth.

influencers for a growing christofascist movement by regularly trafficking in affective politics to encourage a warfare mindset in their audiences. As Vian Bakir and Andrew McStay (2018) point out, emotions are used regularly to create collective group identities, even at the expense of their own self-interests such as in right-wing populist movements. However, the digital media ecology has 'super-charged' this tactic, allowing those that traffic in politics of fear and fidelity to become strong-man leaders to a broader and more diffuse audience.

Another tactic used by members of these communities is to refer to themselves as a collective by using the term 'we the people'. A recent example of this is found in the death threat left over voicemail to Representative Ilhan Omar, which she then read during a press conference on November 30, 2021. On the recording a man spewed racial and gendered epithets at her and referred to himself in the collective 'we', stating, "you will not live much longer…we the people are rising up." Omar claimed the threat, one of hundreds, came directly after Colorado representative Lauren Boebert posted a video in which she referred to Rep. Omar as part of the "jihad squad" and implied that she was a terrorist (Omar, 2021). The use of the plurality here is noteworthy, as it marks a mob mentality, and feeds into the 13th tenet of Ur-Fascism; selective populism, in which the people are conceived as a quality rather than majority.

The danger here is the use of the plural 'we' which indicates an agency offered to individuals, to speak and act for their socio-political movement. This creates a network of ideologies and affective politics, which lend support for extreme actions taken under collective goals. Likewise, this can encourage individuals, at times called 'lone wolves' to take drastic actions, knowing they will be seen as heroes to their movement, even as the public facing leaders can maintain cautious distance from any violence perpetrated.[32]

[32] For a deconstruction on the use of the 'lone wolf' narrative see; (Belew, 2018)

In social media videos Locke claims federal or state authorities are coming for the church, equating this imagined government enemy and mask mandates to Nazi Germany. The 'church' that Locke speaks of here is not the larger Christian global body, or even American body, as many of his tirades are directed against other pastors in his area. Locke is instead referring specifically to those who fall under the patriot movement umbrella, and those in the larger socio-political ecology that includes Trump populists, militant accelerationists, and the rising fascist movement, all of whom connect through shared grievances and goals.

For christofascist influencers the COVID pandemic has been a hot button topic and effective in furthering their influence outside their direct ingroups. Early in the pandemic Locke argued that his position on preventative health measures was one of choice, that he wasn't opposed to masking, only to forced masking. His language later shifted to being overtly against masks, vaccines, and any form of social distancing, claiming he will remove congregation members if they come to services in a mask. In a live video posted on FB with over 15 million views Locke equates abortion with masking, claiming, "I'll go to jail over this situation…I'm sick of Christians saying, 'It's just a mask'...they used to say 'It's just a baby, it's just a zygote...so let's kill it'. No, it's not just a mask, it's a compliance device!" (Facebook, July 28, 2020). Focal points for culture wars like critical race theory or mask mandates ebb and flow based on public attention, but the topic of abortion rights has maintained its prominence due to right-wing strategy and activism (Mason, 2019; Briggs, 2018). On July 13, 2021, Locke and another pastor formed a rally against Planned Parenthood in Salem, OR and claimed 'antifa' had come to harm them.

In a live video, with over 324 thousand views, he claimed the Proud Boys had shown up to protect the church members from the 'antifa' activists who'd shown up with bullhorns. Through political stunts and video messages like these Locke encourages the relationship between his community and those of white nationalist (Stern, 2020) and militant accelerationist (Kriner, 2022) groups like the Proud Boys. Even as Locke is not yet ready to integrate physical violence into his movement (although he often encourages the idea from his platforms), he maintains a relationship with more fringe groups that are willing to physically confront their collective enemies. In a sermon on May 30, 2021, Locke preached that his church had "a first amendment right to gather" and that if someone comes to stop them "we'll meet them at the door with our second amendment right. Because this is the United States of America!" He continued with "God bless America!" claiming that this is "our 1776 moment" (Facebook, July 28, 2020).

Pastors are not the only nor the most prolific influencers in the Christian nationalist movement of this era. Far-right politicians also have massive amounts of influence through their political pulpits and their social media accounts. As guest speaker at the Cornerstone Church service, Representative Lauren Beobert (R-CO) offered a sermon heavily layered with nationalist talking points. Posted in June 2022 on YouTube the video has over thirteen thousand views (Chen, 2022). In it she claimed that Donald Trump was called by God to be president and stated "I believe that there are two nations created to glorify God. Israel…and the United States of America." She continued her sermon arguing in favor of Christian nationalism saying, "the church is supposed to direct the government. The government is not supposed to direct the church…I'm tired of this separation of church and state junk that's not in the Constitution."

As congresswoman of Colorado's 3rd district since 2021, Boebert has 2.6 million followers on her congressional Twitter account alone, and has played with multiple controversial issues including QAnon, the Stop the Steal movement, supporting known insurrectionists, and actively working with the anti-mask and anti-vaccine crowd. Running on a pro-gun platform, Boebert hits all the markers desired by the Christian nationalist movement. On September 12, 2021, she spoke at a Christian nationalist conference hosted by the Truth and Liberty Coalition.[33] During the conference Boebert ranted about a range of hot button topics and argued that Christians under the Biden administration were being threatened. She concluded that leaders in D.C. who are not in support of 'patriotism' should be ousted and replaced by "righteous men and women of God."[34] Likewise, her relationship with far-right religious groups, as well as militias like the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters makes her a dangerous voice in the movement. However, it's the ease with which her statements on social media are accepted by a population that would not align themselves normally with avowed far-right groups, that showcase how banal fascism has integrated itself so fully within the United States today.

Another politician of the far-right is Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Georgia), who has 2.4 million followers on her official Twitter account. In 2020 she ran on a QAnon conspiracy platform and offered strong support for Trump. She's known for sharing antisemitic and white supremacist content, including supporting executions for her political enemies (Mutnick and Zanona, 2018; Steck and Kaczynski, 2021). She's become a prominent voice in the anti-mask and anti-vaccine movement, equating vaccine passports to the Biblical 'mark of the

[33] The Truth and Liberty Coalition was founded by right-wing pastor, Andrew Wommak who has made a name for himself by espousing particularly violent anti-gay and anti-trans rhetoric, among other things.

[34] I want to recognize here that the United States has for decades participated in the active overthrow of democratically elected officials and state leaders in other countries. The difference here is not in scale so much as in its boldness, and the easy acceptance by their followers.

beast'. In March 2021 she posted a video to Facebook where she claimed that having businesses require proof of vaccination is "corporate communism." Her content receives hundreds of thousands of interactions across her various platforms.

Like Boebert, Greene understands her audience and provides content they can react to, out of fear, xenophobia, or anger. She regularly mocks her political rivals, focusing especially on progressive representatives like Minnesota's Ilhan Abdullahi Omar. On a podcast episode with Steve Bannon, Marjorie Taylor Greene (MGT) stated, "we have to turn the Republican party into the party that represents the American people, that represents families, that represents family values, that represents children, that represents freedom" (Bannon, 2021). Bannon ends the podcast by stating, "we're taking over school boards, we're taking over the Republican party through the precinct election strategy, we're taking over all the elections."[35]

In June, Greene spoke on her show, MTG:Live arguing for the use of Christian nationalism, stating Americans "should be proud of nationalism" and "America First" nationalism. Greene added that "we should be most proud of Christianity. So, if Christian nationalism is something to be scared of, they're lying to you," (Greene, 2022). MGT and Boebert both understand their audience and have curated highly effective brands that play with white nationalism and militancy to form a uniquely American christofascism. On MGT's official online store she sells t-shirts that boldly state "Proud Christian Nationalist" overtop an image of a cross. She traffics in increasingly militant language, incorporating her original gun rights platform into content that calls for a militant uprising against the "leftist elite" and "socialists" or "communists" that control the state. As members of congress figures like MGT or Boebert

[35] His podcasts are hosted by Apple.

cannot be considered fringe at this stage, but they push an extremist platform, nonetheless. This tactic is shared by major media figures with massive platforms as well.

Tucker Carlson is the most watched show in cable television, with an average of 3.3 million viewers (Johnson, 2021).[36] On Sep 20, 2021, he claimed that,

> "The point of mandatory vaccinations is to identify the sincere Christians in the ranks, the free thinkers, the men with high testosterone levels, and anyone else who does not love Joe Biden, and make them leave immediately. It's a takeover of the U.S. military."

Carlson's rhetoric positions Biden's presidency and military leaders against military members and the vaccine itself. His intent was to stir up division within the military, to remove the compliance of its members away from the current administration, and towards the fascist movement Carlson has aligned with. The goal is either to sow immediate discord within the ranks, or, more likely, to create a simmering movement that can be mobilized when the 2024 elections arrive.

COVID-19, and the vaccination debate have provided useful fodder for Christian nationalists and fascists to connect civilian and military factions in the collective extremist movement. This requires the use of overt and banal tactics, which men like Carlson provide. Carlson is the most prominent face of FOX News, which acts as the dominant propaganda arm of the Christofascist movement. FOX News rose to prominence in the 1990s amidst a revival of partisan politics, which created an opportunity for media brands to cash in on the "emotional capital" of their audiences. FOX, likewise, provided a collective identity, which other major media channels had not attempted at that time (Peck 2019). FOX excelled at managing an ecology of crises, originally focusing primarily on reactionary politics. The shift towards

[36] After writing this chapter Tucker Carlson was removed from his position at FOX News on April 24, 2023.

Christofascism fed into and was fed by a network of more fringe far-right media content, with a significant increase under the Trump administration. Carlson has been more overt in his message, even as he exists as a mechanism for banal fascism by translating fascist rhetoric and newspeak (14th tenant of Ur-Fascism) to a massive audience.

On November 1, 2021, Carlson released the first of a three-part series titled "Patriot Purge" a documentary-style film that claims to expose the "real story" of January 6. Carlson walks a careful line, insinuating that the insurrection was a conspiracy planned and implemented by "outside actors" like 'antifa' and governmental insiders like the CIA. This version of the event is then paired with a glorification of the actual participants, who he terms "patriots" situating these individuals as both victims and victors, perpetual heroes engaged in a war that are being attacked by an organized elitist plot. Carlson traffics in conspiracy theory throughout these three videos, offering speculation up as informed insider knowledge. Alongside this dangerous element, he pushes the narrative that the 'patriots' are "legacy Americans," which is simply code for nativist and white supremacist language. The videos use music, images, and voice overs to warn its audience of a coming attack by the United States Government, under President Biden, against 'patriotic Americans'. It encourages listeners to prepare for such an eventuality and argues that leaders of the Christofascist movement like Carlson and politicians who continue to support Trump, are the only trustworthy media voices.

1.5 Conclusion

The more overt forms of fascism and right-wing extremism have always had a draw on scholars, and this has resulted in some truly excellent work that has been vital for this research. However, few scholars of the far right have considered the micro, the everyday, or the banal side of fascism in the United States. To do so requires an interdisciplinary approach that ties in strands of cultural, extremism, media, and digital studies and considers multiple theoretical and methodological frameworks. Banal fascism provides a necessary lens to the hidden networks that lay below the surface of the far-right socio-political ecosystem. The banal acts as code to hide and spread fascist discourse to an increasingly larger audience, to commodify ideologies and allow for the consumption of this content in the mainstream.

This chapter has provided a cultural history of Christian nationalism and its relationship to christofascism. Through the exploration of key figures and objects, this chapter considered how the fourteen tenets of Umberto Eco's Ur-Fascism is applicable to a range of socio-political movements. Throughout each section of this chapter 'patriotism' has been examined as a primary function in the banalization of nationalism and fascism with the United States, and the ways that it has been weaponized in the current christofascist movement. While there has been an influx of research into these topics, further exploration into the networks and tactics of the Christian element of the far-right is vital. But beyond a call for more scholarship, this chapter exposes a clear need for aggressive and immediate actions by activists, policy makers, and voters, to push against the legal, cultural, and political attacks against our democratic institutions.

Chapter 2 They Hate Us for Our Freedom: Warrior Media and the Making of a Fascist Hero

"In Ur-Fascist ideology, heroism is the norm…The Ur-Fascist hero is impatient to die. In his impatience, he more frequently sends other people to death." Umberto Eco, 2995

2.1 Introduction

On May 25, 2020, a Black man named George Floyd was murdered by a white police officer, Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis Minnesota. His death was filmed by Darnella Frazier, who recorded the crime on her cellphone and whose subsequent choice to post it to Facebook and Instagram undercut the Officer's initial report. The video was eventually used as evidence in Chauvin's trial and conviction (Bogel-Burroughs & Fazio, 2021). George Floyd's death in police custody proved to be the tipping point for a public that had become increasingly desperate as examples of police brutality spread over social media platforms. The Black Lives Matter movement had begun in 2013 after the acquittal of the man who shot seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin and was centered around calls for police reform and defunding (Morrison, 2023). In the wake of yet another senseless killing, cities across the country engaged in largely peaceful demonstrations which were met with a brutal police response (Chenowith & Pressman, 2020).

June 2022 in Detroit, Michigan, Black Lives Matter protestors stood their ground against heavily armored police officers as a newly instituted curfew offered an excuse for state response (Williams & Grzelewski, 2020). Officers fired tear gas canisters, "crowd-dispersal" projectiles, and struck at least one protester with a vehicle (Snyder, 2020). As news articles and social media content emerged from the Detroit protests a patch on the police uniforms began to raise questions. The patch depicted a skull with long teeth, and insignia indicating it represented a special forces unit in the department. The skull is a variation of a Marvel comic book insignia from the comic book series *The Punisher.* But the police unit did not select this image as an homage to the character or Marvel television series by the same name. This skull had become a cultural signifier for something darker, arising from U.S. military culture, and by using it the police unit was loading their uniform with meaning, including a willingness to engage in extralegal violence and vigilante justice.

In recent years it has become recognizable as a fascist icon, but its growth to that point was complex and driven by a uniquely American form of nationalism. Detroit was but one example of police units across the country aligning themselves with variations of this image. A protester, when confronted with the skull patches on police uniforms stated, "many of the police officers ... used the Blue Lives Matter scarves. Many of them had Punisher skull logos on their helmets or on their face masks indicating they were very much ready to use violence against us and were proud to do so" (Summer, 2020). This is an example of one of the ways the Punisher skull has been layered with other symbols, drawn from political movements or far-right groups to transform an image already loaded with meaning into something more specific for the individual's or group's needs, while retaining the underlying fascist ideals it represents.

This phenomenon came about because of the popularity of a memoir turned film called, *American Sniper,* in which the protagonist and author, Chris Kyle claimed to be the deadliest sniper in American history. In the memoir Kyle detailed his time in the Iraq War and described the violence his unit, "The Punishers" unleashed on their enemies. After his death in 2013, both the skull and Kyle himself became iconic figures for a network of groups and individuals who subscribed to fascist ideals and positioned themselves as warriors engaged in a battle against internal enemies. Military members, militias, far-right organizations, police units, and a plethora of antagonistic figures online have all adopted this image as a symbolic representation of their social and political views which revolve around violent fascist ideals.

Intentional or not, Chris Kyle and the Punisher skull have become fascist icons in American society. The Punisher skull is now commonly used in militant communities, police units, and extremist organizations, and is often used as a meme in antagonistic or hyper-patriotic online engagement. It has been seen on police cars, on Proud Boys paraphernalia, and in military units in multiple countries that are emulating U.S. military culture. As an icon it has taken on a new meaning, fully divorced from its original comic book origin, and now can be rightly understood as a fascist image that, like the Nazi death skull, is meant to invoke fear and fraternity.



Figure 5 George Floyd Protests, Detroit, June 2, 2020. David Guralnick, The Detroit News.

The U.S. comic book and film industries have long been supportive of the construction of the national project, which situates masculinity, whiteness, able-bodiedness, and violence as ethical and righteous. However, the Punisher skull goes beyond this in its transformation into a fascist icon. Chris Kyle is likewise offered up via his supporters as a patriotic figure but has become emblematic of and a hero to a growing fascist movement. As a soldier and an emblem of nationalist masculinity, he is held up as a model for warfare, manhood, and justified violence. However, in his memoir he exposes himself as an individual whose identity is wrapped up in his ability to engage in state-sanctioned murder, and who is then valued primarily in how effective he is in those goals. In doing so he becomes a mechanism for imperial force. Likewise, his depiction of non-white enemies' feeds into the white supremacy inherent in the American imperialist project. However, it is only after he was martyred and remade in the public imagination that he became an embodiment of the fascist body.

Scholar of fascism, J. A. Mangan (1999) argues that the body acts as a metaphor for society, especially a society that views the body as emblematic of the supremacist nation. For the fascist society, the body of the male warrior is an articulation of the perfected race and emblematic of state power. As fascism is a religion of war and death, the fascist body must be a soldier. Mangan calls this figure the fascist Superman. He claims that in codified fascist movements the primary goal is to create a new, supreme form of human, the *homo fascistus* (1999). This is the genesis of the fascist Superman, which is based in a longing for barbaric primitivism and sustained through myth making and hero worship. Codified fascism such as Italian Fascism is born out of a militant doctrine.

In March 1919, Mussolini formed the *Fasci Italiani di Combattimento* (Italian Combat Squad), inspired by the camaraderie and fraternity he saw in the war trenches. This was the launch of the Italian fascist doctrine, and led to Mussolini's march on Rome and eventual *coup d'état* in October 1922. Prior to his takeover, martyrdom was linked with the rebellion of the Fascist movement, but after he took control of the Italian state it became absorbed into the official ideology of the central government (Malone, 2022). This is not unlike the U.S. model in that martyrdom is linked to nationalism (what many understand as patriotism) but as fascism has never been fully encapsulated by the state, it remains an unevenly distributed ideology that is strengthened and spread through the public lionization of the military figure.

This chapter analyzes the growth of the Punisher skull as a fascist icon and as a vehicle to express an ideological lineage to the iconic figure Chris Kyle has come to represent for a growing fascist movement. This chapter asks two questions; 1. How has Hollywood supported the military industrial complex in forming the fictional soldier into an iconic nationalist figure for the American public? and 2. How does Chris Kyle and the Punisher skull represent an

asymmetric but growing fascist movement? To answer these questions this chapter begins with theorizing the fascist Superman by drawing comparisons between Fascist Italy and the ways that fascism operates in more banal and hidden forms in the United States, including in the sniper memoir written by Chris Kyle. The chapter then shifts to an analysis of the growth of the fascist Superman figure in Hollywood film and how that has been translated into fascist iconography such as with the Punisher skull. Finally, the chapter explores the ways that this icon has been commodified and sold, leading to its adaptations in other fascist forms including the Thin Blue Line movement and the ways this has become code for anti-Blackness and support for an increasingly militarized police state.

While the other chapters in this dissertation tend towards an analysis of cultural products and digital platforms, this chapter is invested primarily in the spread and propagation of images, both in film, in person, and online. The Punisher skull may be more loaded with obvious meaning for the fascist than the American flag or the Christian cross, which Chapter One interrogates, but it remains a banal symbol through the careful layering of patriotism and military imagery. This chapter provides a necessary contribution to the field of fascist image studies, which argue that icons, especially those that represent the fascist Superman, are integral for the fascist project. However, very little work has been done on how banal fascist images can emerge and propagate, leading to collective fascist ideation while remaining strategically distanced from more overt forms of fascist imagery and symbols.

2.2 The Fascist Superman

War and militarism are deeply intertwined in the American identity, both a nationalist identity, and for many, a personal one. To be American for many means to be patriotic, and to

support the military industrial complex's global imperialism. However, this is not a simple top-down project. The making of the American warrior icon happens asymmetrically, being constructed by individuals and institutions encouraged by the U.S. military, what Political Scientist Carl Boggs (2017) calls a *culture of militarism*. Boggs likewise argues that patriotism has become a secular religion for many Americans. However, as Chapter One shows, it's hardly secular under Christian nationalism. God and Country are wrapped up in the branding of the culture of militarism and patriotism has become code for a growing fascist ideation. The making of a cultural fascist icon is a form of soft power, one that fascist nations like Germany's Nazi regime regularly utilized by taking over cultural knowledge production. Paired alongside more overt forms of knowledge production like the education or media sectors, soft power also includes control of film, art, music, and other cultural products that help shape national identity.

The fascist Superman is militaristic, deadly, hyper-masculine, and an icon for fascist ideation. In his second volume on the fascist Superman Mangan argues that the fascist body was crucial to fascism because the longevity of the fascist project hinged on its powerful addictive components (what we might call its viral components) which included an appeal to emotion, to heroism, and the exultation of violence and death (pg. 3). Fascism satisfies both the heroism inherent to romantic individualism as well as the desire to be part of a collective fraternity. In fascism every man desire to be the fascist Superman, and to see it achieved by a soldier like Chris Kyle makes that desire approachable and therefore achievable for the American man. He became the image of the martial male body that stands as a symbol for nationalist power, however, in the banal form, this symbol is taken up and propagated not by the state but by the individual. For police officers and others who took up the mantle of Kyle using the Punisher skull, they signaled a fascist body, albeit one not fully sanctioned by the state.

According to another scholar of fascism Ian Kershaw (1993) key fascist attributes that exist in multiple national contexts include extreme chauvinism, anti-socialism and Marxism, selective populism, extreme intolerance, and a limited form of capitalism. Many of these attributes are listed in Umberto Eco's (1995) Ur-fascist traits, but both he and Mangan also add hyper-militarization and the valorization of the martial male body. There is a long history of fascist figures becoming emblematic of the national being. This can be in the form of the fascist leader like in the case of Bonito Mussolini who often posed partially nude for photographs to highlight the masculine form he saw as vital to the national future (Antola Swan, 2016). As Kershaw indicates, limited capitalism remains key to the fascist state, and in the U.S. where capitalism is in its late stages, the fascist movement takes part in this through commodification of its imagery and integration into major institutions like Hollywood. The fascist Superhero in the United States is therefore not limited by state-control of the media, as it was in Fascist Italy. It can reach mass audiences, or tap into already established populist movements, as it did with the MAGA movement of Trump's era, to appropriate other emblems and rhetoric, and graft onto groups, movements, or organizations through the layering of individual group identities.

In a fascist society everyone is *educated to become a hero*. Likewise, fascism glories in war time, viewing *life as permanent warfare* (Eco, 1995). As is common in soldier narratives, Kyle's memoir depicted his struggle to realign himself to civilian life, and consistently desired to be back at war where he was confident in his identity. This is a struggle many who have experienced military service face. It's a complicated phenomenon but it does often lead to veterans seeking out other fraternal militant spaces to regain that sense of belonging, which as discussed in Chapter Three, are often targeted for far-right recruitment. As a state of permanent warfare fascism curates for not only soldiers but also the civilian. Likewise, the United States has

become so impregnated with military culture that even those who have not experienced war can have a similar sense of misplacement, ultimately seeking out militant community spaces for themselves.

Gender scholar Susan Jeffords (2004) argues that the body of the soldier merges with the spectacle of war and war technology (pg. 13). The masculine form represents and embodies the American technology of war and in doing so the masculine form represses the erotic but is still consumable as a desirable object. Philosopher Steve Neale (2000) asserts that "in a heterosexual and patriarchal society, the male body cannot be marked explicitly as the erotic object of another male look...that look must be motivated in some other way, its erotic component prepressed" (pg. 9). Much like the figure of Rambo running shirtless with guns strapped across his chest, militant community brands utilize the hyper-masculinized form, intended for the male gaze, as representations of nationalist technology and manhood. In doing so fictionalized characters are offered up as mythic beings, much like comic book superheroes, for an audience to consume and replicate. The desire the fascist Superman creates for a fascist audience is to become rather than simply consume the figure.[37]

The various elements that go into the wide-spread and seemingly disparate uses of icons such as the Punisher are all linked to a growing trend toward fascism in the United States. John Weiss (1967) in his work *The Fascist Tradition* speaks of the warrior fantasy, an ideology that imagines a "primal, barbaric peasant-warrior tribalism" in which he argues that fascists encouraged a belief in a unified tribal society with shared ideologies rooted in militant civic engagement, self-sacrifice, and passionate heroism (pg. 13).[38] This is particularly useful, and

[37] I use consumer in here in the sense of the 'consumer' or one that utilizes economic goods as a way of constructing personal identity.
[38] Weiss, *The Fascist Tradition.* pg. 13

while Weiss' definition of fascism is perhaps too historically-minded to understand the current spread of the far-right, including banal fascism, it still helps situate the historical roots of this particular warrior myth within the U.S. political tradition.



Figure 6 Benito Mussolini (left) Chris Kyle (right)

The fascist Superman takes on the branding of the nation he represents. In Fascist Italy sports were vital to the construction of fascist masculinity, leading to Mussolini frequently being photographed bare chested, taking part in sports such as skiing. In the United States sports are still relevant to the nationalistic and fascist imagination, but guns are the primary addition to the body to showcase fascist strength. Chris Kyle as a soldier, a Texan, and a patriotic man is often photographed with a gun to highlight these elements. In both examples the land plays an outsized role as both a backdrop to the body, and a key element in the 'blood and soil' roots of fascist ideation (Mazumdar, 1990). Fascist states like Nazi Germany were permeated with an obsession

with race and the idea of a pure form of the human and nation. Their conceptualization of the nation was rooted in a romantic nationalism that viewed the 'peasantry' as representing the purest form and foundation of the German people. Fascist Italy was originally less concerned with racial purity, but their view changed after the endorsement of the *Manifesto of Race* in 1938, with the fascist party adopting racial purity laws and beliefs (Livingston, 2013).

The fascist Superman must be understood, in all its iterations, as an act that serves systemic power, one that draws from a 'possessive investment in whiteness,' a term introduced by George Lipsitz (2018). Lipsitz argues that whiteness has cash value, and therefore individuals become invested in the continuation of the privileged identities that provide them with access to resources, opportunities, and power. Likewise, the possessive investment in whiteness is encoded with national narratives of male heroism that began in earnest in the United States with the Regan administration, and, in retaliation to the belief in the systematic failure of American society, post-Vietnam War (pg. 82-83). In particular, he argues that Reagan's presidency provided a space where patriarchal identity and patriotism were able to be fused more fully to whiteness, specifically by encoding national narratives of male heroism and patriotic individualism. This allowed for every white male to be the potential hero in his own narrative.

In Fascist Italy national values were drawn heavily from real and imagined figures. Those figures helped persuade the citizen population of the morality of the state by offering a clear cut "good and evil" praxis. Hannah Malone discusses the role of soldiers, and fallen soldiers specifically, in this practice by saying,

> In particular, soldiers who fell in the First World War, together with others who were seen to have died for the nation, were a major source of Fascist exemplars in that they represented older traditions of military heroism, while satisfying new needs through

> which heroism was closely associated with a spirit of sacrifice. Official propaganda presented fallen soldiers as role models in order to encourage patriotic feelings favorable to the regime (2022).

For the United States, the fallen soldier existed as a national hero figure before the Vietnam War, but the identity crises of that war led to a reinvigoration of this narrative once President Regan took power. As Historian Kathleen Belew states in her seminal work, *Bring the War Home,* the Vietnam War acted as a powerful symbol, one that influenced the greater society, increased the nation's internalized militarization, and actively worked to radicalize some of those into the far-right (2019).

While the loss in Vietnam helped jumpstart a right-wing campaign to renew the masculine identity of the nation, even to a point that it became embedded in United States culture, its origin was also dependent on the rise of a newly powerful Christian-right political base. Sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue that the new right originated in opposition to the Civil Rights movements of the 50s and 60s and were strengthened by right-wing populism through figures such as George Wallace in 1968 (pg. 53-7). Omi and Winant distinguish between the 'far-right' and the new right by situating the former through clear neo-fascist tendencies, while the latter argue more mainstream in their views.

While they coincide that the new right was influenced by far-right ideologies they still see a clear distinction in its position within the political mainstream, unlike the far right, which they claim identify through their antagonism towards the state. This, however, has changed in recent years, and as explored throughout this dissertation, the far right has now become expansive and includes much of the right-wing in the United States. Like the fascist 'blood and soil' ideologies of prior fascist nations, the new-right that Belew discusses helped usher in an

American version in the form of 'god, country, and military' which has influenced the rise of the American fascist Superman figure in literature and popular culture.

In 2012 Chris Kyle, an ex-U.S. Navy Seal published the memoir, *American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in the U.S. Military History.* The narrative detailed his time in the Iraq War over the course of four tours and his eventual return to his family. His primary claim to fame was the amount of enemies he was able to kill. He claims the title of *the most lethal sniper in U.S. history* with around 160 confirmed kills.[39] Co-authored with Jim DeFelice and Scott McEwen, the memoir provides an exaggerated (potentially fabricated) retelling of his time in the Iraq War, with the film version completely fabricating plots and characters to represent an even more iconic figure for American audiences (Lighter, 2023). In his work Kyle depicts himself as an emblem of American patriotism, militant nationalism, and the masculine ideal who is in a godly struggle against an amorphous evil.

The memoir begins with Kyle on a rooftop in an unnamed village in Iraq as he waits for a convoy of Marines to pass through. His job, he writes, is to ensure their safety by shooting any threat that arises. Eventually he spots a lone woman who takes out a grenade. Kyle shoots and kills her, claiming that he felt no remorse in doing so because, "She was too blinded by evil to consider them. She just wanted Americans dead, no matter what" (pg. 2) and that,

> My shots saved several Americans, whose lives were clearly worth more than that woman's twisted soul. I can stand before God with a clear conscience about doing my job. But I truly, deeply hated the evil that woman possessed. I hate it to this day. Savage, despicable evil. That's what we were fighting in Iraq. That's why a lot of people, myself included, called the enemy "savages" (pg. 2).

[39] The number is slightly contested but according to HarperCollins, the publisher of his book, the Navy confirmed he held the record at the time.

In this passage Kyle identifies the woman as subhuman, not deserving of empathy or human consideration. His reference to God articulates the Iraq War and his actions as part of a holy war in which American soldiers are on the side of good fighting a dangerous evil. The woman becomes blurred with the entirety of Iraq, and the ubiquitous Muslim figure, all of which are narrativized as Kyle's, and therefore, America's enemies.

The first chapter of his memoir begins with a depiction of his childhood into early adulthood. He goes into detail about his home state of Texas, and the working-class background he came from. Fascism requires selective populism, and the 'blood and soil' fascist narrative requires a close tie to the land. Small-town heartland or rural Texas is often seen as the proverbial 'true American land' in nationalist narratives. American fascism draws from that and seeks to link the body to the land through origin stories, generational lineages, or significant experiences that allow the fascist figure to claim legitimacy. The land here is not simply geographical, it also comes with a set of nationalist traits that prove manhood, loyalty, purity, and strength. In the U.S. the figure that often does the rhetorical work of providing those links is the trope of the cowboy. Kyle links to this by saying, "I've always loved guns, always loved hunting, and in a way, I guess you could say I've always been a cowboy" (pg. 6). Kyle sets up his origin myth by drawing on other key nationalist narratives including God, "My family had a deep faith in God…we didn't consider ourselves overly religious, just good people who believed in God" and familial traits like, "My dad worked hard. I suspect it was in his blood—his father was a Kansas farmer, and those people worked hard" (pg. 7). Guns, hunting, religion, and cowboys are all narrative devices in the American nationalist narrative that lend themselves easily to the fascist hero-myth.

Fascism is a religion of war and death. Eco describes this as *life is permanent warfare* in which contempt for the weak is integral to Ur-fascism. Kyle claims that when asked if he was ever impacted by all the death, he caused he claims that not only is he not bothered but that when,

> You kill your enemy…You say Great! You do it again. And again…You do it until there's no one left for you to kill. That's what war is. I loved what I did. I still do. If circumstances were different—if my family didn't need me—I'd be back in a heartbeat. I'm not lying or exaggerating to say it was fun (pg. 3).

Kyle portrays his experience as a soldier and as a mass killer as joyful and entertaining. He gives permission to his audience to share in that joy and entertainment. This is fascist mythmaking in which a population is offered the opportunity to join the fascist Superman in his adventures and heroism, and in his pleasure in death. He ends this passage with the claim that, "In the end, my story, in Iraq and afterward, is about more than just killing people or even fighting for my country. It's about being a man. And it's about love as well as hate" thus proffering up the love of nation, of the family, and of martial fraternity as justifications for the violence he depicts.

It isn't until later in the memoir that he introduces the Punisher as a symbol. The entirety of the memoir is a combination of quippy retellings of death and destruction he and his unit caused intermixed with conversations between he and his family back in the states, consistently placing those back home as justification for his actions abroad. The introduction of the Punisher skull serves the purpose of providing an insider view of his unit's mindset and desires in the war, and to brand some of his actions as outside the "bureaucratic red tape" through his investment in a vigilante style of justice. Kyle claims that the reason for selecting the Marvel character's symbol is that "He's a real bad-ass who rights wrongs, delivering vigilante justice…That's what

we were all about. So we adapted his symbol— a skull— and made it our own" (pg. 230). He goes on to say,

> We spray-painted [the Punisher icon] on our hummers and body armor, and our helmets and all our guns. We spray-painted it on every building or wall we could. We wanted people to know we're here and we want to fuck with you (pg. 230).

The fascist Superman must exist in a duality between approachable, to be consumable by a public, and removed, so as to remain eternal.

Kyle positions himself that way in his work with passages like, "SEALs are silent warriors, and I'm a SEAL down to my soul. If you want the whole story, get a Trident. If you want to check me out, ask a SEAL" (pg. 4). Here he claims an insider's status that is unattainable to the common man, and yet he consistently positions himself as part of the commoner-class. The use of the Punisher created an access point, not to Kyle as a person, but to the fascist Superman he'd come to represent with the release of the film *American Sniper*, but this phenomenon did not happen in a vacuum. Hollywood and the military industrial complex had primed the American public for decades to accept a fascist hero figure through the production of the martial nationalist hero.

2.3 Hollywood and American Sniper

In the beginning of the twenty-first century the United States became the greatest military power in the world. This military was maintained not only through technological advances and human numbers, but also through a media industry designed to spread the ideologies and propaganda of the burgeoning military industrial complex. War and the film industry have had a mutually beneficial relationship since the advent of Hollywood. The symbiosis went both ways,

with instances like in 1954 the U.S. military commissioning the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), an American film and lobbying organization, to identify spaces for improvement in the military's current film productions, used primarily for propaganda purposes (Grieveson, & Wasson, 2018). Likewise, film productions benefit from the legitimacy the military can bring to films through consultation and providing technology and bodies to the screen. This benefit often comes at the cost of veto power in scripts for major budget films reliant on having access to military vehicles, planes, etc.

Film scholars Tom Pollard and Carl Boggs (2002) explore in depth the relationship between Hollywood and the military industrial complex and states,

> All power structures require systemic ideological and cultural supports—popular consensus—but the imperatives of empire add more complexities to these ordinary requirements…Motifs of national exceptionalism, superpatriotism, high-tech warfare, and civilizing mission help satisfy this legitimation function, as does the national chauvinism associated with economic, technological, and military supremacy…In the United States today, the sprawling media complex is an extension of megacorporate operations that comprise the largest and most influential media-entertainment system ever known. And Hollywood filmmaking, as we indicate throughout this book, is increasingly central to that system—an indispensable bulwark of empire (pg. 3)

Hollywood has played an integral role in cultivating and maintaining a male supremacist and nationalistic ideal of the patriotic warrior (Jeffords, 2004). The right-wing politics that drove much of this interaction framed the war hero pre-Vietnam as a rugged paternalistic figure that acted as protector and guide for the national body. However, post-Vietnam changed this, providing an opportunity for a more complex, but violent figure of war to emerge. The martial

nationalistic figure is a mainstay of Hollywood film and has shifted in periods of war with public opinion.

The Vietnam War led to a change in the depiction of the American soldier in films and Television of that era. The 1980s Rambo franchise arose out of the national belief that the failure of the Vietnam War was a failure of U.S. whiteness and masculinity, and that it was "brought home" via military trauma (Belew, 2019). Belew similarly sees the rise in military-inspired popular culture as a "remasculinization of America" (pg. 8). In this sense, popular culture responded to the after-effects of the Vietnam War with a reconstruction of the American hero. One that experienced a complex relationship with the military and police forces. The popularity of the Rambo film franchise, in which Rambo fights against police units in a war-like scenario, speaks to this ethos directly.

Rambo, unlike earlier iterations of the American soldier depicted on film, became a new kind of individualistic. Pollard and Boggs articulate this by arguing that,

> "The concept of a righteous war became more difficult for the American public to internalize during and after both the Cold War, and Vietnam, which stirred unprecedented dissent over what had been achieved that could possibly justify such huge losses of human life… [The] Hollywood War Machine, however, broke down during and after the Vietnam War; films conforming to the formulaic combat genres in which distinctly American (usually white male) heroes are portrayed as courageous, decent, and victorious now become scarce, most of them poorly made and attracting few viewers. (pg. 13).

Whereas before, the rugged individualism or cowboy aesthetic that the film's heroes were depicted with could allow them to be ethically complicated on the battlefield, but when they

returned home, they represented a renewal of patriotic morals. Films of the late sixties like *The Dirty Dozen* (1967) still offered up cruelty as part of war, but the humanity of the enemy was rarely depicted as part of the trauma heroes were meant to face. Simultaneously, the violence that soldiers engaged in was not a reflection of a failure of the state, nor did it return home with them until the failure of the Vietnam War complicated this. Post-Vietnam soldiers' rugged individualism became more complex, impacted by a growing mistrust of the State and a national identity crisis after the failure overseas.

In 1982 *Rambo: First Blood* premiered with actor Silvester Stallone depicting Rambo, a Vietnam veteran and ex-Green Beret who has been abandoned by the military and Federal government. The character is shown roaming around the country until he enters a small town where he discovers his friend from his old platoon had died from cancer he developed from exposure to Agent Orange, a deadly herbicide used by the U.S. military's chemical warfare in Vietnam. As he continues his journey through this county he is arrested by the local sheriff, leading to abuse by police that triggers his PTSD and reflects the torture he faced in war. He escapes into the forest, a mirror of his time in the Vietnam jungle, where he engages in guerilla warfare and claims violent revenge against those who harmed him.

The success of the first and second film led to his character becoming a cultural icon for a new generation and helped curate a new set of cultural ideologies and myths around nationalism, patriotism, and masculinity. Rambo, in fighting emblems of the state (police, national guard) represents the abandoned American hero as they act as stand-ins for those that rejected soldiers as they returned home (Sweeney, 1999).[40] It provided an audience, disgruntled about America's

[40] Frank Sweeney, in his analysis of the film franchise, also argues that the first two films are a critique on the style of traditional warfare America engaged in, which the National Guard in the films depict. In this viewing, Rambo acts as a representative of the Viet Cong, who engaged in guerilla tactics, leading to a more complex reading of the film that could also be seen as a critique on military strategies or the choice by the U.S. to enter the war.

place in the world as a military power, an outlet to seek imagined revenge, while reclaiming the lost masculine idealism that had been damaged in the national failure of the war. Rambo became a new national emblem, one that was justified in his violence, and vigilante justice, and one that represented the American people rather than the state. In doing so, vigilante justice became a popular characteristic of the militant hero in film, television, and comics of this era and beyond.

The Punisher, a Marvel Comics character, was created by writer Gerry Conway and first appeared in *The Amazing Spider-Man* issue #129 in 1974 as a villain. His popularity with readers inspired Conway to eventually write him as an anti-hero; a Vietnam War veteran who was disillusioned by 'the establishment' and fought criminals as a vigilante. Eventually Marvel created a solo series for the character in 1986 (Marvel, 2019). The comic book industry has a long history with the military overseas, and the use of the Punisher skull within the ranks of the U.S. military became widely and frequently used, even as it eventually became divorced from the comic itself (Hirsch, 2014). Like many Marvel titles the comic has been reimagined into a Netflix series, and has been included in the larger Marvel universe, growing and shifting over the years. However, the central element of the character has remained consistent throughout, that of vigilantism and a willingness to engage in styles of violence other 'heroes' ethically reject.

After the failure of the Vietnam War and the slow collapse of the Cold War, the American public was hungry for a newly invigorated heroic form. The Bush era and the War on Terror provided that for them. Pollard and Boggs argue that, "Hollywood War Machine has moved full-speed ahead over the past several years, capitalizing on the post–9/11 American sense of a wounded, vengeful, but still international-ally powerful nation ready to set the world straight, by military force where necessary" (pg. 4). The film rendition of *American Sniper* premiered in 2014 and incorporated references to the Punisher comic and icon. Directed

by Clint Eastwood and starring Bradley Cooper as Chris Kyle, the film was released over the Martin Luther King holiday weekend, outpacing the prior record with over $105 million over the four-day period (Lang, 2015).

American Sniper eventually grossed $350 million in North America and $547 million worldwide. Following the book and film, the spread of the Punisher imagery increased considerably and became emblematic of the U.S. armed forces for military and military-adjacent communities both online and off. The film, which presented Kyle's character more cautiously than he did in his memoir portrays Kyle as a violent, but morally conflicted American superhero. The partially-fictionalized protagonist of the film is more complex than the self-labeled 'bad-ass' soldier of the memoir. However, even in this rendition of Kyle's experiences in the Iraq War, he is merciless against his fictionalized enemies, and propagates a deeply polarizing and Islamophobic view of the Middle East, feeding into an already enraged public.

The film *American Sniper* presents Kyle as a conflicted hero that struggles with killing, hesitating when he sees a young boy with a grenade. His unwillingness was at odds with the book version, in which he insisted he had no hesitation and no regret. However, the film quickly provides a fictional enemy in *Mustafa* who shows no humanity and no remorse, thus offering Kyle's character an opportunity to respond in kind. Superhero stories, including fascist ones like *American Sniper* are modern day myths. The distinction is in how power is articulated between the classic superhero, which represents an amorphous community or even nation, and the fascist hero, which represents an idealized form of embodied power. Superheroes in comics can be nationalist such as Superman and Captain America, or they can represent an ideal, as the X-Men represent multiculturalism and immigration. Fascist superheroes can only represent supremacy

because fascism is only concerned in the death and renewal of its people after it's been purified of cultural and racial flaws. It is by nature violent and exclusionary.

The film was released amidst ongoing anti-Muslim and xenophobic hate in the United States. The U.S. animosity towards the Middle East had steadily continued in the wake of 9/11 and the passing of the Patriot Act (2001), with acts against perceived outsiders coming to a boiling point in 2015 (Alsultany, 2023, pg. 3). *American Sniper* is a highly inaccurate depiction of the events surrounding 9/11 and the United States-led global campaign that entrenched much of the world in multiple wars that cost millions of lives. The film shows Kyle and his wife watching horrified as the Twin Towers are struck by terrorists, leading to Kyle signing up for military service. The film then shifts to Kyle leaving for Iraq, with no inclusion of Bush's choice to enter Iraq or false claims of weapons of mass destruction that led to the decades-long bloody campaign. This rewriting of history for a more 'patriotic' and easily consumable narrative is a common tactic in fascist myth-making and is likewise used frequently in American war propaganda. *American Sniper* frames the U.S.'s decision to invade Iraq as a logical conclusion to the threat Al-Qaeda posed in the area, when in fact Al-Qaeda's presence in Iraq came as a result of the U.S. incursion into Iraq, rather than the reverse (Al Jazeera, 2021).

While widely popular with a right-wing base, the film also received mass backlash for its mischaracterization of the Iraq War, its racist depiction of Arab characters, and for the ways it propagated the myth of the fascist Superman figure. The criticisms of the film came in the wake of multiple deaths linked to anti-Muslim and racist ideologies including what became known as the Chapel Hill murders. On February 10, 2015, three young Muslim individuals, Deah Shaddy Barakat, Yusor Mohammad Abu-Salha, and Razan Mohammad Abu-Salha were killed in their

home in what was later determined to be a hate crime.[41] In an attempt to garner national and federal recognition of this crime the non-profit CAIR alongside other human rights organizations sent a letter to Attorney General Eric Holder, urging him to act. The letter argued,

> These killings come in the wake of a disturbing rise in especially threatening and vitriolic anti-Muslim rhetoric and activities. In recent weeks, after the release of the movie American Sniper, many tweeted hateful and deplorable messages demeaning to Muslims and Arabs. For example, one user tweeted that the film "makes me wanna go shoot some f**kin Arabs," while another stated that "American sniper made me appreciate soldiers 100x more and hate Muslims 1000000x more." (Muslim Advocates et al., 2015)

The film's propaganda had clear consequences and added to an already dangerous narrative. Muslims, Arabs, and those swept up into the category of 'other' during the era were positioned as the enemy by a growing fascist population.

The Punisher skull eventually became popular outside of U.S. troops, and were used by Iraqi troops and police, security forces and Shi'ite militia (Collard, 2015). Similarly, the icon has become recognized as a specific brand of militarization and adopted globally, even beyond units directly trained by U.S. forces. According to the Daily Mail, an elite Norwegian troop called the Telemark Battalion, designed specifically to fight ISIS and other enemy groups in the Middle East have also been seen using the skull as an emblem to signal troop membership. The troop attracted public attention in 2010 after they were reported for spray painting the skull on the houses in Afghanistan of individuals, they suspected of being members of the Taliban (Macfarlan, 2015).

[41] There has been much criticism on the usefulness of designating attacks like these as hate crimes. For a thorough examination of this see; (Alsultany, 2021).

In 2013 Chris Kyle and his friend Chad Littlefield were killed in a shooting by a veteran with PTSD. His death was memorialized in countless articles online, leading to an additional ending scene in the film commemorating him. The final scene of the film is a montage of footage from Kyle's funeral, mostly of cell phone videos inside a car as it drove along a rainy highway past crowds of mourners waving American flags. The videos are overlaid with images of him and his family while a rendition of *Taps,* the military funeral song plays throughout.[42] His memorial service was held at the Cowboys Stadium in Arlington, TX. In online content mourning his loss Kyle was depicted as a Christ figure who'd died defending a godly nation. The manner of his death was wrapped up into the war effort, positioning him as a soldier that had died on the battle for the nation. In 2016 Odessa Texas, the city where Chris Kyle was born, unveiled a memorial that they had built in honor of his legacy.



Figure 7 Chris Kyle Memorial in Odessa Texas

[42] In 2012 Congress voted to recognize Taps as the "National Song of Remembrance." Another example of how military culture and emblems come to represent the nation.

The sculpture of Kyle, cast in bronze, holds a gun in one hand and an American flag in the other. On his chest is a military vest with a massive Punisher skull sits in the center. The plaque below the statue reads, “Chris Kyle - “American Sniper” - Father/Husband - Soldier - Humanitarian.” Through his death Kyle had become a national hero and that was made eternal through his memoir, the film, and the cultural icon that he had created in the Punisher skull. Kyle’s character can only exist through its violence and his willingness to bring death. The icon Kyle has been made into has only enough personal identity that it remains marketable but is also empty enough that consumers are able to recreate this image for themselves. Unlike Rambo or the comic book Punisher, who cannot die and therefore cannot be fully lionized as a nationalist hero, Kyle became a martyr. In life a hero is limited, as their failure to die a heroic death lessens their iconic status. It was only in death that he gained fascist Superman status, and was remade in the nationalist imagination, thus becoming immortal in the process through the vehicle of the Punisher icon.

2.4 Selling a Fascist Icon and the Thin Blue Line

As explored in Chapter One, the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the United States Capitol showcased a host of various far-right organizations as well as many other individuals who were motivated by a toxic mix of Trump populism, disinformation, and rabid nationalism. Amidst a cacophony of flags, slogans, and images the Punisher Skull stood out in the photographs and videos collected that day. For five years the skull had proliferated online and off through memes shared over Facebook and more fringe social media sites and through merchandise sold on ecommerce sites like Amazon and Etsy. The commodification of fascist

symbols is not new, and as Chapter Three details, is integral in maintaining the image of banality for U.S. fascist ideals. In its memetic form the skull has been layered with other images to create added meaning. The American flag is a common addition, leaning into the skull as a 'patriotic' emblem for a nationalist base. AS participants prepared for the Trump rally and march on the Capitol, they chose emblems that represented their politics, group memberships, social ideals, and their political heroes. Memefied images of Trump were prominent, as were others like Rambo, Jesus, and the Punisher



Figure 8 Punisher flag at the Capitol insurrection

Limor Shifman (2014) defines memes as "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the internet by many users" (pg. 41). The Punisher skull was a meme at an early stage in its development, but unlike other

memes it became more static. Rather than acting as simply a communication device the Punisher skull has become iconic for a particular set of ideologies. Figure 8 shows a black background with the Punisher skull overlaid by the stripes and stars of the American flag. Guns stand in as crossbones with the words "Liberty or Death" above and "2nd Amendment 1789" below. The date is a reference to the ratification of the right to bear arms. Behind this flag is another showing Donald Trump as John Rambo, with the words "Make America Great Again" to the side. Both flags are available for purchase on Amazon. While Trump-styled Punisher content is common, the most prominent addition to the skull is the Thin Blue Line.

The term 'Thin Blue Line' has a complicated and uneven history of use. It was derived from the British military formation of 1854 that called itself the 'thin red line' in the Crimean War but became more popular after a 1952 police drama called *The Thin Blue Line* (Chammah & Aspinwall, 2020).[43] The show was created by a notoriously racist police chief named William H. Parker, who used Hollywood to push his career forward and offered up his department's files as source material for the show Dragnet (1951-1959). Parker's tenure as chief was marked by a significant rise in the militarization of his police unit (Chammah & Aspinwall, 2020). And like Parker's time, the Thin Blue Line has come to represent a particular militant ideology prevalent in police forces today, which is being supported by U.S. Military and the federal government in the form of technology, weaponry, and law (Musgrave, at al., 2014).

As the Black Lives Matter movement rose, so too did an opposition movement that depicted police as the victims of violence rather than the perpetrators. Primarily mobilized through branding - a black and white flag with a blue line in the center - the movement evolved, much like the skull, into a meme and merchandise campaign. In 2014 a white college student,

[43] There have been other shows by the same name including in the UK and Sweden.

Andrew Jacabo was inspired to create a campaign to support the police after he watched protests the police murders of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice (Chammah & Aspinwall, 2020). In response he created Thin Blue Line USA, the largest online retailer for pro-police flags, apparel, and other merchandise. While this ecommerce shop doesn't sell Punisher content, it helped propagate the Thin Blue Line emblems alongside a reactionary and anti-Black movement over the years.

On July 10, 2019, the union head of the St. Louis police force, Ed Clark posted on Facebook a call for officers to change their profile pictures to the Thin Blue Line Punisher. Those that posted this image indicated support for a group of officers recently placed under internal investigation for incendiary Facebook posts. The officers in question had been discovered by The Plain View Project, which was formed in 2016 by a team of attorneys in Philadelphia who created a database to record explicitly racist, xenophobic, and sexist posts by retired and active police (Plain View Project, n.d.). The officers found to have posted bigoted content were put on leave while an internal investigation took place (Jons, 2019). In response to this administrative action, Clark began using the St. Louis Police Officers' Association (SLPOA) Facebook page to encourage others to signal their support of those under investigation via the use of the Punisher skull as a profile picture.

This call to arms spoke to a clear connotation in those officers' minds between the icon and the right of the officers to post racist and misogynistic content. Clark attempted to obfuscate the reason for the investigation, claiming that it was based off the officers' use of the skull, rather than the Facebook content itself, and claimed,

> The Blue Line symbol and the Blue Line Punisher symbol have been widely embraced by the law enforcement community as a symbol for the war against those who hate law

> enforcement. It's how we show the world that we hold the line between good and evil. (Ed Clark, Facebook, July 10, 2019)

This argument, that the icon acts as a symbol of warfare, (law enforcement against "those that hate law enforcement") speaks to the broader ideologies behind the usage of the skull icon as well as the culture-war that police units, like those represented by Clark and the SLPOA, see themselves as taking part in. Rather than seeing themselves as civil servants of their community, Clark represents here the contentious relationship between a police force and those they supposedly are employed by and for. This framing is in no way new. Police have a long and violent history of opposition towards their communities as both an arm of 'law and order' state oppression, and as a tool of white supremacy. They arose as a function of slavery and have actively worked alongside and among vigilante and mob violence for decades.[44] It's not surprising then that they feel well represented by an image that denotes vigilantism and violent opposition to the legal system.[45]

[44] There is a long history of scholarship that directly speaks to police and racialized violence, as well as their complicity with vigilante acts. A few that I have found particularly useful are Camp and Heatherton (2016), Navarro (2009), Miller (2019), Wendt (2019), Schrader (2019), Balko (2013), Belew (2018).

[45] Schrader, in his book, *Badges Without Borders*, argues that "[p]olice enforced both legal and extralegal racial rule directly, unaccountable to those at their mercy. Discretionary despotism defined policing." (34). This, paired with the many works that show the overlap in police and KKK membership (see MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry)* is why I feel comfortable stating that this phenomenon is "not surprising."



Figure 9 Fascist skulls. The Nazi Totenkopf (left) Thin Blue Line Punisher skull (right)

The Punisher skull is masculine, it represents the willingness to engage in violence and death, it denotes whiteness, U.S. nationalism and the empire. The use of a skull is common in fascist movements such as the Nazi skull known as the SS-Totenkopfverbände which was used by elite Nazi forces (Sydnor, 1990).[46] The use of the death's head skull for the SS-Totenkopfverbände began in the concentration camps in pre-war Germany.[47] The units' members were taught to hate and fear the "enemies behind the wire" and were encouraged to see themselves as a bastion of protection for their race against an encroaching enemy (Syndor, pg. 315). Following the war neo-Nazi groups adopted the symbol as a nod to the original Nazi units and as an effective signifier for their death-centered ideologies. While these ideals exist in the banal fascist spaces as well, they are articulated differently per group and individual. For more codified fascists in the United States the classic fascist enemies of Jews, communists, and

[46] This is not to say that the skull is always an indication of violence or force. An excellent example to the contrary is the use of the skull during Día de los Muertos celebrations.
[47] Screenshot of the Blue Line Punisher" Profile Picture on the St. Louis Police Officers Association Public. https://www.facebook.com/stlouispolice.officersassociation/photos/a.337137539825055/1026869934185142.

socialists remain, but the U.S. provides a toxic mix of other forms of racism, xenophobia, and male supremacism for fascist ideation to draw from, and one of the more classic forms is found in anti-Blackness.



Figure 10 Catlettsburg, KY Police. Image by Fernando Alfonso III

Stuart Schrader (2019) in *Badges Without Borders* argues that policing in the United States arose out of anti-Blackness as a strategy for maintaining enslavement and grew through two specific static reifications "crime and race" which became mutually exclusive. The inclusion of racialized bodies into the police fraternity was intended not to undo that stratification, but to expand it via a neoliberal construct that assumes racial bodies are best controlled by representatives within a white supremacist framework for the sake of "global" white power. Police forces are certainly not the first to use the skull, nor is their use of it particularly exceptional in comparison to some of the other instances of its adoption in recent years.

However, the choice to include the image on their uniforms and vehicles as a reaction to activism around Black lives, places them even more squarely as the antagonists in the movement and showcases their inclination to invoke vigilante violence within their communities. As police increased their militarization, their identities grew as militant figures, molding themselves into the fascist Superman that Kyle represented. In doing so citizens in the communities they patrolled take the place of the Iraqi insurgent, viewed as sub-human, evil, and deserving of death.

The use of the skull by police forces has spread. Kentucky, New York, Wisconsin, Missouri, Texas, and now Michigan has all had cases of police units, often in small towns, applying the Thin Blue Line Punisher to vehicles and uniforms (Schladebeck, 2018). The use of the skull by police forces is also meant to act as spectacle, one that hopes and expects to elicit a strong reaction by those it's meant to oppose. Like how white supremacist groups utilize shock value to engage in reactionary violence, the police position the skull prominently on social media spaces or using large car decals to position themselves both as an insurgent force within their communities, and to signal to the type of vigilante violence that was historically indicated through the burning cross or white hood. Historian Nancy MacLean (2018) explores this style of fascist control. She argues that vigilante violence was (and is) enacted both to thwart individual actions, and to impose on the larger society a system of fear and reprisal. These actions required cultural sanctions, even if they were often antithetical to federal or state laws. The local control of the social order, MacLean argues, intended to maintain an older, patriarchal system of control. The Punisher skull, linked to extrajudicial forms of military violence, places U.S. citizens as the foreign other, as the body that can be harmed or disposed of without repercussions. Specifically, when the icon is layered with the 'Thin Blue Line' imagery, it's read in direct opposition to the Black Lives Matter movement, and more broadly, Black bodies.

If one were to type ‘Punisher’ into the search engine of Etsy, an independent ecommerce site that sells handmade and local seller goods, they would receive over 18,500 results, the majority of which include car decals, stickers, key chains, mugs, and apparel depicting not the Marvel character but the fascist military icon. After many police adopted this skull, the Thin Blue Line version provided an opportunity for consumers to take on a variation of the fascist Superman persona by representing not only a military figure, but also a police figure. This has fed into the myth of the civilian warrior, who has the right to police and kill suspected outsiders. From volunteer slave patrols, the KKK, to the Stand Your Ground laws of today, the U.S. has long benefited from a symbiotic relationship between the state and citizens in the fabrication and defense of the white state. More recent examples speak to this lineage like Kyle Rittenhouse, whose obsession with cop culture led him to travel to Kenosha Wisconsin in August 2020 and confront protestors with an assault style rifle, leading to him shooting and killing two people. A shirt for sale as of July 2023 depicts Rittenhouse holding the gun he shot and killed two with, in front of the Punisher skull, with the world “Kyle Rittenhouse is The Punisher” over top.

Alongside police and military adaptations, the skull found an easy home with white supremacist and antigovernment groups including militias and fascist organizations like the Proud Boys. With the rise in active recruitment to far-right paramilitary groups from military bases, and the growing liberal-distrust of the police, there has been a shift in how traditionally antigovernment groups engage with military and police forces, some like the Proud Boys actively supporting the Blue Lives Matter movement (Shane, 2022). The imperial project utilizes nationalistic rhetoric and displays of patriotism, while actively benefiting from and strengthening networks of fascist ideologies. Rhetoric and patriotism are shifting and expanding categories,

which mobilizes gender and whiteness to reimagine the masculine patriotic body. U.S. fascism therefore incorporates patriotism into its fold, rather than rejecting it as a symbol of democracy or the federal government.

In its history of white supremacy, American patriotism holds enough fascist traits that the adaptation of patriotic imagery is often done with ease. Whiteness, and the continued reconstruction and upholding of white supremacy provides an easy scaffold for both actors of the state that want to engage in state sanctioned violence, and antagonists of the state who want to reclaim power they see as under threat. Lipsitz calls the intersections of these dynamics, and the eventual patriotic rhetoric used to combat progressiveness in society, "the new patriotism" which conflates whiteness, heterosexuality, and masculinity to reaffirm the need for the patriarchal structure (pg. 14). This, he argues, allows for a nostalgia of pre-civil rights era social structure, and acts as a form of myth making. In doing so it creates real-world implications, including, but not limited to, the rise in fascism.



Figure 11 Three Percenter (left) Proud Boys (right)

The ideological and physical networks between the military, police, and far-right groups are expressed through their use of shared icons, and in their overlapping membership and antagonism towards their enemies. As well as anti-Blackness, and xenophobia (especially towards immigrants) Islamophobia remains a constant in these fascist networks. The Punisher's origin as a fascist symbol was early on coded as anti-Muslim through the book and film *American Sniper* and continues to be rearticulated through Islamophobic memes and other social media content. Likewise, prominent far-right media figures have at times adopted this symbol to claim a quiet loyalty to the MAGA movement after Trump's electoral loss. Early in 2020, Sean Hannity, a Fox News host, added to his collection of lapel pins, a Blue Lives Matter Punisher skull. He began wearing it just as the George Floyd protests were beginning to grow nationally and as Trump made a clear distinction between his values and those of the protestors.

Hannity, like others on Fox, are spokespersons for a populist movement that wraps pro-police and anti-Civil Rights rhetoric into a shifting political ideology, eventually resolved into a fascism base when Trump's second bid for presidency failed. The Punisher flag was flown in defense of Trump when he mobilized his followers to storm the Capitol and retake it before the vote could be ratified. In support of an authoritarian leader, and representing the fascist Superman that insurrectionists saw themselves as that day, the Punisher skull was an apt image, and it continues to remain a powerful icon for the ongoing struggle for the national being.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter provided a theory of a United States fascist Superman as a representation of key fascist tenets and as a mobilizing force for a fascist base. It explored a uniquely American version of the nationalist figure in the form of Chris Kyle, the U.S. SEAL and sniper renowned

for the most kills ever during his time in the Iraq War. His fame and eventual death led to a hero-myth of the nationalist soldier figure, remade under martyrdom as a fascist hero. His use of Marvel's Punisher skull as an icon for his unit and for himself led to the proliferation of the skull as an icon that took on a life of its own.

This chapter traced the history of Hollywood's relationship with U.S. nationalism and the curation of nationalist heroes and showed how post-Vietnam War the soldier figure changed Hollywood and the public's mind, becoming more complex and violent within the context of the nation itself. Chris Kyle's memoir and film *American Sniper* grew out of that lineage and expressed pleasure in depictions of murder and a rejection of more classic American hero ideals. Fascist heroes likewise reject anything beyond the glorification of war, strength, and death. Umberto Eco argues that the fascist hero desires a hero's death, and in doing so more often brings death to many others instead. This chapter then examines the rise of the Punisher skull as an emblem for police forces and the far-right, including extremist groups, in reaction to the Black Lives Matter movement.

J. A. Mangan (1999) argues that for the fascist society, the body of the male warrior is an articulation of the perfected race and emblematic of state power. And this power is born out of and retained through the constant repetition of hero myths that represent the fascist movement. Chris Kyle and the Punisher skull have become myths and icons for a growing fascist movement, and while less banal than other objects explored in this dissertation, their origin as soldier and comic book hero respectively, allows for a certain plausibility for those that adopt the icon. Likewise, as the fascist symbol was popularized via a patriotic figure - Chris Kyle as a soldier - it is made banal by centering patriotism as its root value. And yet, patriotism is likewise code for ultranationalism and fascism in this context. The Punisher skull is just one more opportunity for

fascism to remain hidden but impactful in American society and provide a rhetorical tool to spread banal, but never benign, fascist ideals.

Chapter 3 'Relentlessly Patriotic': The Commodification of Banal Fascism

"Fascism [is] inseparable from militarism. For the Fascist, war [is] a divine commandment and a spiritual experience" J. A. Mangan, 1999

3.1 Introduction

On January 6th, 2021, insurrectionists stormed the U.S. Capitol while journalists and participants alike documented the event, providing evidence of the wide ranging political and social allegiances in attendance. One of the most widely shared images of that day has colloquially been labeled "the zip-tie guy." The photograph depicts Eric Munchel and his mother, Lisa Eisenhart. Munchel is in head-to-toe tactical gear and carrying zip ties, presumably to restrain individuals he hopes to find. On his chest he wears a camera phone to film his excursion into enemy territory. Above that is an American flag patch overlaid by the punisher skull, which is linked to military culture, extremist groups, and the Thin Blue Line campaign. His hat, however, garnered the most attention, as an example of militant branding that has become popular in far-right and mainstream spaces. The hat is made by Black Rifle Coffee Company, who is known for trafficking in controversy and commodifying the image of a civilian warrior, which Munchel embodied that day.

Munchel and others were inspired to storm the Capitol that day by many social and political factors, but a key element of the radicalization of individuals like Munchel is how militarization, patriotism, and nationalism have been merged to form a particular style of fascist

branding.[48] Munchel is not connected directly to any military unit, but he positioned himself as a soldier in a political war, choosing patches and insignias that link him to in-groups much like a soldier's patches show connections to units and social membership. What's clear from the images, social media posts, and videos collected that day is that individuals like Munchel saw themselves as warriors engaged in an insurrectionist style battle against a corrupt and powerful enemy.

These brands construct the consumer as a political agent for the support and reconstruction of a fascist project. And part of that project is to embody if not active violence, the threat of violence. Their products support gun culture, the glorification of wartime, militarism, and shows-of-strength, and they network with an array of media content that propagates these values. They offer consumers an ideal of what it is to be an 'American patriot', which means to hold a set of shared socio-political beliefs and to consume specific products, and thus take on the mantle of these values. And of these values, the most prominent is the white hero-myth, or what scholar of fascism J. A. Mangan (1999) calls the *fascist Superman*. Hyper-militarization is the primary goal of the fascist state and within more banal fascist communities, the icon of the soldier remains vital to community and personal identity. In codified fascist regimes the fascist masculine ideal can be branded outside of consumer culture, through statues, state-sponsored art, and other avenues. However, in the banal form it requires an asymmetric deployment through branded goods, sold to and consumed by an audience. Whereas Chapter Two considered the ways that Hollywood supports this ideological project, this chapter looks at

[48] A note on terms: this essay uses the term *brand/branding* to refer to the relationship formed between the product, the company, and the consumer. Brands, in this context, help to construct personal identities and act as a reflection on the consumer's understanding of the larger culture they fit within. *Commodification,* however, is the transformation of an item or concept into a commodity. Commodification is an important element in the process of branding, but not the whole.

branded goods and how they provide a consumable identity for audiences engaged, knowingly or not, in the construction of the fascist icon.

This chapter uses the term *militant communities* to refer to a range of community spaces, some more gated than others, that have three core signifiers, militarism, male supremacy, and the white hero-myth, and which are tied into the more clearly defined 'far-right' spaces but remain branded as mainstream. Militant communities operate in the nexus between politics, consumerism, and media to create networked brands through the merchandise they sell, the media content they create, and the influencers they deploy. Their content, while problematic on its own, is also a vehicle for their actual product, marketable fascism. Black Rifle Coffee Company and Nine Line Apparel are key brands that hold communicable power over militant audiences. These two examples were selected because they represent some of the most prominent brands that have garnered media attention, and outside of a codified fascist regime, media attention - or spectacle - is the primary vehicle for brand impact.

Coded in the language of patriotism and fealty to the homeland, shops like Black Rifle Coffee Company are selling a form of 'banal fascism', an extension of 'banal nationalism', which describes the ways that nationalism is constantly reproduced in banal, but not necessarily benign ways. Likewise, banal fascism describes the processes by which fascistic ideals and strategies have been integrated seamlessly into the national framework. While Billig understands the banality of nationalism as arising from the everyday-ness of the national project, scholars of nationalist branding, Zala Volcic and Mark Andrejevic (2021) extend Billig's theory to explore the nationalization of commercial culture, going so far as to argue that nationalism is the Ur-form of branding and, "a means of channeling affective sentiment around a floating signifier" (pg. 2). Although these brands do feed into the project of banal nationalism, they take it further into the

realm of banal fascism by centering themselves within reactionary and extremist rhetoric and politics. As such, they traffic in far-right ideologies while remaining palatable to a wide consumer base.

These companies use a mixture of self-generated media content, branded goods, and social media influencers to plug into a system already primed by the 'affective information warfare' used by the far right.[49] The function of social media is to network individuals and information. Far-right brands, like those in militant communities, regularly utilize emotional manipulation in marketing their content, which is then offered up to an audience already primed by a media ecosystem designed around that tactic. Fascism requires ultra-nationalism, and both are predicated on fear of outsiders, fear of the loss of power, and anger towards those they see as undermining that power. This is the rhetoric the U.S. right-wing has trafficked in for years, and it has created an audience primed for radicalizing ideologies. The internet has become a playground for the propagation of white nationalism, and memefied fascism is being sold in the form of campy t-shirts under the banner of patriotism.

While companies like Black Rifle Coffee Company maintain a cautious distance from events like the Capitol insurrection, by connecting their brand to reactionary politics, including the refusal to recognize the legitimacy of Biden's electoral victory, they have helped their communities shift the culture war waged online to the actual battlefield. This chapter asks how militant communities have constructed a set of identities that feeds into the ideal of the fascist warrior for an American public, including how they have presented themselves as a right-wing alternative to brands who engage in politics around civil rights. Through an analysis of social

[49] Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davis describe *affective information warfare* as, "the weaponization of emotions through communications technologies to exploit, incite, and target emotions for profit and political gain." They highlight the Cambridge Analytica scandal as a key example of this newer tactic and argue that it helps to spread and radicalize audiences already primed to be most motivated by fear and misinformation (Boler & Davis, 2021).

media content, branded goods, and political commentary, this chapter considers two brands in this ideological project and the ways they've commodified fascist traits for a consumer audience.



Figure 12 Eric Munchel and Lisa Eisenhart Jan 6, 2021. Getty Images

3.2 Branded Nationalism and Rebranding Fascism

All branding is inherently political, and thus, all consumption of branded goods ultimately becomes a political act. As a multimodal site of commerce, community, education, labor, and play, the internet hosts most of the United States' political engagement. In an era of rising reactionary politics and a crisis economy, brands have found an easy home on social media to marry their goods with political movements. The technological affordances of networked platforms allow for strategic marketing of their products and their political content. This allows consumers to become political agents using brands. Militant communities utilize a wide range of

platforms to grow and maintain their community networks, however this chapter focuses on three distinct spaces: YouTube, Instagram, and company websites. These platforms were chosen specifically because they represent three distinct elements in the maintenance of these ideological networks. YouTube is often the space that many of these brands form an identity before they branch out into merchandising and other forms of media. They cultivate a following through videos detailing their aesthetic, values, and personal myths. From there they tend to create their personal branded websites, offering a range of commodities and opening new channels of knowledge production.

In fascist tradition the "cult of heroism" is a key element in the growth of a fascist movement. Umberto Eco (1995) describes this phenomenon by saying,

> In every mythology the hero is an exceptional being, but in [F]ascist ideology heroism is the norm. This cult of heroism is strictly linked with the cult of death...the [F]ascist hero is impatient to die. In his impatience, he more frequently sends other people to death.

To be a hero in this context is to fashion yourself after the fascist superman figure, one that represents the nation and the political ideals of the movement. Mangan (1999) argues that the appeal of the fascist superman is that the ritual and symbolism of this icon offer a promise of brutal political action. The ingredients, he claims, appeal to an emotional audience through myth making and idealism, who desire to play out a fantasy of violent masculinity. This is spurred on by the third tenet of *Ur*-fascism 'action for action's sake' also called *irrationalism,* which views logic and reason as a form of emasculation.

Fascism requires a dichotomy between the identities of *victor* and *victim*. Fascists are always victims of an 'other' either liberal, communist, or foreign the fascist body must be under constant perceived threat, (Eco, 1995). Likewise, as militant warriors, the fascist body are always

imagined as victors, either in the present or the future, leading to a constant struggle to maintain the urgency for war and the ability to achieve victory in a never-ending struggle. Brands engage in this struggle by positioning themselves against a more powerful "mainstream" other such as Starbucks or Nike, who have engaged in political branding themselves.

In her work on banal nationalism Sociologist Lisa Wade argues that nationalism is a "sense of patriotism that goes beyond love of country, extending to a belief in the superiority of one's own nation and a willingness to harm other countries in its service" (2011). In the U.S. context, fascism requires patriotism (i.e. nationalism) as well as exclusionary politics like white and male supremacy. An early scholar of nationalism, Benedict Anderson (2016) claims that the nation is imagined as a community, one that cannot know all its members, but easily conceives of a shared identity or comradeship. Although this is a useful praxis in understanding the nationalist project, it's limited in that it doesn't consider who gets to construct and maintain the identity of said community, and lacks a nuanced gender, race, and class critique.[50]

However, Anderson's use of nationalism does fit well within militant communities' construction of the nation, which relies on myth-making and collective forgetting.[51] Anderson's claim that the nation becomes a "fraternity" that makes many "willing to die for such limited imaginings," is likewise useful in this context (pg. 7). An obvious missing element in his analysis is the ways that the military industrial complex coerces participants into service to attain necessities like steady income, education, health care, etc., none of which indicates patriotic

[50] There have been some well-deserved criticisms of Anderson's work including Linda McDowell's critique (1999) on the gendered designation of Anderson's use of "horizontal comradeship" in describing nationalism. Certainly, Anderson's use of the masculine self is problematic throughout, but it is useful while applying it to militant communities' conceptualization of the nation. While there are problems with Anderson's lack of gender analysis his general framework is useful in the context of militant communities.

[51] Billig argues that every nation requires a collective memory, which insists on continuous collective forgetting. Often the construction of the memory and the refusal of narratives outside of the national myth are forged through violence, which are then reimagined as heroic acts for the national audience (Billig pg. 38).

martyrdom. This likewise misses the class and racial components of who is most inclined to need these securities. However, there remains a proponent of individuals that enter military service to engage in a nationalistic and even fascistic project.

Events such as January 6th are visual spectacles that can be read by scholars versed in the iconography of the groups in attendance. Alongside the images of violence, and clear references to Nazism and the Confederacy, there was a wealth of visual objects, such as flags, banners, and symbols, which can be used to trace the growing fascist, ethnonationalist, and populist movements that make up the complicated network of socio-political groups in attendance that day. The commercialization of the far-right dates back as far as 1930s Germany with products depicting Hitler's likeness, swastikas, and Fascist slogans, with the U.S. and Britain sharing in this history (Miller-Idriss, 2017). Today, this consumer ecosystem is alive and well in neo-Nazi culture, as well as by white and male supremacist groups like the Proud Boys.[52] White supremacism, an organized form of white supremacy, as argued by Kathleen Blee (2017) and Amy Cooter (2011), can be understood as a social movement. However, approaching white supremacism primarily as a social movement overlooks the deeply entrenched histories of white supremacy in western nations such as the United States, and separates articulations of white supremacism from institutionalized and structural realities.[53]

[52] The Proud Boys are a prominent example of the fascist groups that have grown in the wake of the Trump era. The SPLC has designated them as a hate group and extremist.

[53] Blee (2017) uses the term 'white supremacism' to mean, "extreme rightist groups and networks that advance explicit goals of white superiority and white power" like how 'far right' is used as an umbrella term throughout this dissertation, or Kathleen Belew (2018) uses "white power movement." However, 'white supremacism' is an older term, one that is distinct from 'white supremacy' in strategic ways. To simplify, this dissertation distinguishes between the two by using supremacy to refer the historical and current reality that privileges whiteness over non-whiteness, in discriminatory and violent ways - while supremacism refers to the historical and current infrastructures, networks, and institutions that structure and maintain this supremacy.

A nation like the United States, founded on ethnic genocide and grown and supported through chattel slavery is inherently white supremacist, and any ideological framework that draws from these histories and seeks to reinvigorate this power structure is white supremacist and white nationalist in nature. The construction and maintenance of this historic and current nationalist project has always relied heavily on an ever-expanding military force to be mobilized both at home and abroad. The military since WWII has been presented as an American nationalist icon, a powerful masculine icon, and a pure representation of patriotism. To be part of the military is to be part of the nation in a way that citizenship alone cannot suffice. Like the U.S. military, fascism satisfies both the desire for rugged individualism and the need to belong to a powerful fraternal collectivity. This is not to say that the military and fascism are one in the same, but that because fascism is based in 'permanent warfare' they will share similar qualities that can be exploited by those seeking to grow a fascist militant base, especially in moments of political crises.

President Donald Trump ran on a platform of crises. The border, globalism, the feminization of America, and the 'renewal' of American global dominance (Make America Great Again), are all issues Trump mobilized to activate the populist movement supporting him. Through 'strong man' tactics and blatantly violent rhetoric he encouraged the growth of an already primed fascist base. The crisis narrative within fascist tradition is constructed around the loss of 'tradition' and 'nation' - a threat to the ethnic and cultural makeup of the social order. This mythology was used in fascist regimes to mobilize different class groups, including the labor class that treated increased immigration and ethnic minority populations with deep-seated suspicion and outright hostility and violence.

While there were overt fascist movements and groups within the U.S., using 'fascism' as a term becomes more complicated when only applied to those most obviously connected codified regimes and those that self-describe as separatists, Nazis, or whit nationalists. As explored in earlier chapters banal fascism is not fascism-lite nor proto-fascism, but it describes fascist tenets, ideals, and strategies that have become woven into the fabric on the nation and can remain hidden even as they coalesce into personal or group ideation during moments of heightened political upheaval.

A key component to the crisis narrative in these militant communities is the myth that 'liberals' are 'coming for their guns'.[54] Second amendment fundamentalism is a common political identity in right-wing American culture and is particularly significant to far right identities. Brands catering to militant communities weaponize this rhetoric and merge gun content throughout all their merchandise, media productions, and expressed politics. Gun culture requires constant crises-narratives and rearticulations of imagined enemies. Those that are participants in militant communities fully encapsulate the most fervent side of gun culture which insists outsider threats can only be held off with a show of strength, positioning this community as potential warriors and heroes. In the American context gun culture has become so wrapped up into the right-wing's notion of patriotism that it amounts to a religious fervor around the issue.

The myth of the peasant warrior or white hero is a constant in fascist ideologies, and militant communities commodify both the fantasy of the warrior and the gear needed to maintain that fantasy. They sell products that construct a marketable identity around an imagined crisis in which consumers become active participants by taking up arms and accessories, consuming coffee and content. Whiteness, while often unspoken in this marketing strategy, plays a key role.

[54] According to Pew study the majority of gun owners are still white and male and 89% of gun owners see owning a gun as important to their overall identity (Parker, et al., 2017).

George Lipsitz claims that whiteness never works in isolation, but operates within a network of intersecting power dynamics, class, race, sexuality, and gender.

As Lipsitz argues, the Reagan era renewed American nationalism through displays of patriotism and loaded political rhetoric designed to shift all national concerns to outside antagonists, arguing that,

> "Reagan succeeded in using the possessive investment in whiteness with other psychic and material investments -- especially in heterosexual masculinity, patriarchy, and patriotism. The intersecting identity he offered gave new meanings to white male patriarchal identities by establishing patriotism as the site where class antagonisms between white men could be reconciled through masculine bonding and through channeling nationalist antagonisms against foreign foes and internal enemies" (pg. 82)

In American heteronormative culture, masculine bonding is often seen as dangerous, but it remains key to the construction and maintenance of nationalism and fascism. This bonding requires a renegotiation with hetero-patriarchal whiteness in each era. Understanding how whiteness and masculinity is articulated in this is key to understanding the construction of these identities and communities.

Marxist scholar Cedric J Robinson (1983) argued that capitalism did not emerge as a negation of the feudal order, as white Marxists have claimed in the past, but grew out of it and has therefore evolved from the older oppressive system into a modern racialized power structure, dependent on slavery, imperialism, settler-colonialism, and ethnic genocide. Bertolt Brecht (1935), a German playwright and scholar, described fascism as, "a historic phase of capitalism...the nakedest, most shameless, most oppressive, and most treacherous form of

capitalism" (pg. 137). Capitalism, therefore, is both dependent on racial oppression (whiteness), and concomitant with fascism. Rather than acting as a distraction from the ideological center of these militant communities, capitalism blends seamlessly with the cultural-political goals that are both spoken and quiet.

Brands have always been political actors just as consumerism has always been a political act. In our current era, however, brands have taken a particularly overt stance in national politics that, while not new, is more evident to the lay person than in prior years. In their work, *Commercial Nationalism,* Volcic and Andjrejevic connect banal nationalism to the commercialization of the political and argue that marketing has become the default mode in governance and promotion of political actors and ideals. They claim, "[i]n the period of global neoliberalism, the political shifts toward the commercial where both the state and market become reference points for national identification" (pg. 3).

Larger brands have a global reach, and much like media corporations, they have attempted to shed national signifiers to become global entities, while still co-opting national discourse to feed into the consumers' patriotism. Similarly, nation-states have 'marketized' forms of governance and commercialized nationalist iconography. This has caused a blurring of branded politics and political brands, and in the United States in particular, nationalism is so profuse it is inescapable. This is not relegated only to right-wing brands. Companies like Nike, Starbucks, and Ben & Jerry's have all waded into national political discourse over the past decade, with culture wars being waged behind branded lines. These battles are fought over social media platforms, personal websites, and in public news media.

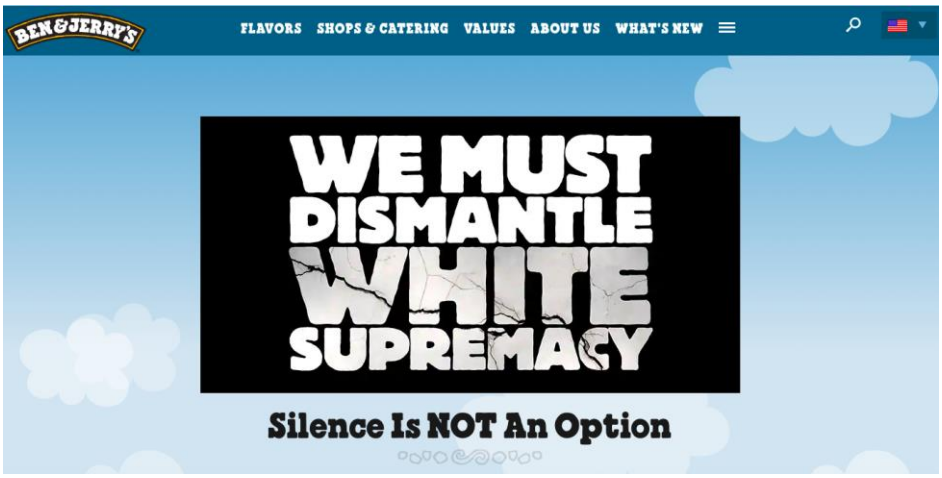


Figure 13 Front page of Ben & Jerry's website Feb. 28, 2021

Ben & Jerry's has been particularly vocal about anti-Black racism and violence, even going so far as to take a stance on volatile political issues, including supporting the Defund the Police movement and as well as calling for federal reparations for slavery (Ben & Jerry's, 2021). They likewise supported one of the largest political controversies of the past few years, the Black Lives Matter movement (Knoebel, 2018). As a brand they have become known by the right-wing sphere as synonymous with liberal/leftist political agendas, however it's brands that have a larger global reach like Starbucks and Nike that have become flashpoints for battles fought in the cultural sphere. In recent years Nike took a calculated risk by associating with protests police brutality through their partnership with Colin Kaepernick after he became synonymous with kneeling at games (Ciment, 2020). That risk eventually paid off as their stocks reached an all-time high after the advertisement went viral (Berr, 2018).

Brands on the right often market themselves as political alternatives, or in direct battle against those they place 'on the left.' This provides political authenticity to those who control the brand, and the active political actors that connect themselves to the brand to promote their

campaigns and agendas. The primary goal of these right-wing brands is to marry the authenticity of political ideologies with the conservative ideals of consumerism. Fascist branding is centered on the dehumanization of an 'other.' Although anti-leftism or anti-liberalism is a core element in their antagonism against the internal other (internal meaning within the national context), another key ideological motivation for this is male supremacism or misogyny.

Philosopher Kate Manne (2017) argues that "the mistreatment of historically subordinated people who are perceived as threatening the status quo often needs no special psychological story, such as dehumanization, to account for it" (pg. 156). Manne argues that this is a form of aggrieved entitlement, which is an important element, although not the sole motivator for these groups, as it ignores the active engagement of women in these communities and in the structural support for white and male supremacism, even when it seems to negatively impact them on an individual level.



Figure 14 Colin Kaepernick Nike advertisement, September 2018

Colin Kaepernick's decision to kneel rather than stand for the National Anthem at a football game in 2016 jumpstarted a right-wing backlash alongside a broader racist reaction to

the movement protesting police violence (Streeter, 2020).[55] While this led to significant career loss for Kaepernick, his eventual brand deals with Nike and others let to claims of performance by those on the left and right. According to gender scholar, Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012), individual authenticity has become ambivalent. There is an assumed authentic self that while perhaps not real, still holds real power to the individual who values their experiences and relationships based off a symbolic construct.

In the white nationalist context, authenticity is based on if one is willing to consume and perform key ideological signifiers like militancy, male supremacism, and patriotism. Politics in today's age have become brands unto themselves. In discussing political parties, Volcic and Andrejevic argue that "[c]itizens are addressed not simply as consumers; rather, they are positioned and produced as nationalist(ic) consumers" (pg. 6). In this framing citizens become citizen consumers, which positions consumption as the truest form of national belonging. To imagine the nation and the self requires consumption of a national product.

The term 'branding' came into prominence in the 1990s when an array of market strategies, such as retail and product design, became institutionalized (Moor, 2007). But the brand is much more than a set of practices, it is also according to Banet-Wiser, "the essence of what will be experienced; the brand is a promise as much as a practicality" (pg. 4). The brand's value is more than a simple physical product and she argues that it differs from commodification. Commodification, she argues, is the transformation of things into commodities but branding requires more cognitive work, and interconnected relationships between objects, ideals, and the individual. Fascism is not the brand, but the commodity, but fascism informs and supports the brands by providing an ideological link to a broad and diffuse audience.

[55] Kaepernick began kneeling multiple games before the media took notice, and continued until he was eventually removed from his team for his actions (Streeter, 2020).

The individual brands make up a network of militant communities that have a shared investment in constructing the 'civilian warrior.' Branding in militant communities walks a fine line between authenticity and ambiguity. The authenticity stems primarily from the hero aesthetic and is pushed constantly through stories that are told over podcasts, interviews, Instagram posts, and YouTube videos. However, the ambiguity is an important element in the allowances afforded to them both by their audiences and the platforms they market themselves on.

3.3 Fascist Brands and Militant Communities

Black Rifle Coffee Company (BRCC) presents itself as a conservative veteran-owned coffee and gear company. It was formed in 2014 by ex-Green Beret and CIA-contractor, Evan Hafer, and ex-Army ranger and CIA-contractor, Mat Best. Best was brought on alongside his business partner Jarred Taylor because of their earlier success of their brand, Article-19 Clothing, as well as Best's experience as a social media personality on YouTube (BenZvi, 2019). As a company they have become known as the go-to right-wing coffee brand, not because they provide a unique product, but because they provide an ideological home for their customers through their layering of militant and hyper-masculine content over their merchandise, which ranges from coffee, mugs, and t-shirts and more. Rife with gun images, their brand centers around a consumable militaristic identity, with even their insignia meant to look like the view through a gun scope. With coffee styles like "AK-47 Espresso Blend" (a nod to the style of gun), "Silencer Smooth Roast," and "Liberty Roast" gun culture and patriotism are wrapped up

together in their products' branding. Beyond physical merchandise what they create and promote the most is media content.[56]



Figure 15 Black Rifle Coffee advertisements

In 2017, then President Donald Trump signed the executive order known as the 'Muslim Ban,' which restricted the number of refugees coming from Syria, Yemen, Iran, Iraq, Somalia, and Sudan (Trump, 2017). In response the global coffee company, Starbucks promised to hire 10,000 refugees over the following five years (Vaughan & Rushe, 2017). Political moves like this have become more frequent in recent years and less of a risk for major companies as Trump's presidency created a social rift with consumers allowing brands both on the left and right to profit from taking a clear stand. For Starbucks, it made fiscal sense to outwardly oppose such an unpopular political move and capitalize off consumers' desire to take a stand, even one so meaningless as carrying a Starbucks mug.

[56] The product description of the Liberty Roast includes, "LIBERTY Noun 1. the state of being free within society from oppressive restrictions imposed by authority on one's way of life, behavior, or political views." This signals to the us-versus-them political rhetoric that the far right engages in what they consider to be government overreach under President Biden's administration.

Black Rifle Coffee Company had a similar motivation when it reacted to Starbucks by claiming that they, in turn, would hire 10,000 veterans. Because of this, Black Rifle Coffee was endorsed by Fox News' Sean Hannity and Donald Trump Jr (Breland & Helenowski, 2021). BRCC's claims were not achievable, and likely they were not meant to be. Unlike Starbucks which has made strides to meet their goals, Black Rifle Coffee by early 2023 has just under one thousand employees with their growth stagnating as they struggle financially, Yahoo! Finance, 2023). As much as they'd like their customers to believe otherwise, the goal for Black Rifle Coffee Company was never the mass hiring of veterans. Rather, it was the endorsement of Trump and the MAGA populist party which, while smaller than the consumer base of Starbucks, was looking for branded ideological homes where they could wage battles in the ongoing culture war.

Mat Best is one the more prominent faces of BRCC and has written a New York Times best-selling personal memoir, *Thank You for My Service* (2019). An early content influencer, Best has curated a brand of a caustically comedic, overtly misogynistic he-man character. In videos for the company, he is often paired with women in bikinis, making sexist jokes and presenting over-the-top 'patriotic' content, that while meant to be comedy, still pushes a fascist narrative that is true to the actual brand. The object of this humor is often a "terrorist" figure, or more often an effeminate 'liberal' character. In a YouTube video that has over four and a half million views titled "How to be American," Best enters the screen loading an assault rifle exclaiming, "Are you tired of the pussification of the American male, who's too tired to defend themselves?" The camera then pans over to a man dressed as a "nerd" who states, "violence shouldn't exist" followed by Best responding "Yeah right, tell that to this guy!" followed by Best walking into a new room with a 'terrorist" (coded as a non-descript Muslim fighter) yelling

"Death to America!" as Best kicks him in the head. The rest of the video is a continuous list of the things he sees as patriotic and manly including supporting the Blue Lives Matter movement, buying guns, and enjoying women (Black Rifle Coffee Company, *YouTube*, 2016). This video exemplifies the ways that male supremacy, militancy, and far-right political ideals are layered in their media content to push a consumer product as well as a fascist ideal of masculinity and American manhood.

Black Rifle Coffee Company has been at the center of a few controversies that has created internal fighting in these communities, even leading to breaks in loyalty to their brand. The most significant altercation came on November 20, 2020, when Elijah Schaffer, a reporter and podcaster for The Blaze, a neo-conservative media company, tweeted an image of Kyle Rittenhouse wearing a BRCC shirt, with the tagline "Kyle Rittenhouse drinks the best coffee!" and included a promo code for BRCC below the image (Johnson, 2021). Rittenhouse became notorious for shooting and killing two protestors and injuring a third at a Kenosha Wisconsin Black Lives Matter rally. Rittenhouse, seventeen at the time, had traveled with friends to join others to protect local businesses armed with an AR-15 style gun. During the trial his defense argued that he had shot them in self-defense. Rittenhouse quickly became a polarizing figure, with the far right positioning him as a child (victim) who was defending himself and as a man and warrior (victor) who had risked death to protect the nation.



Figure 16 Twitter screenshot of Kyle Rittenhouse, Nov. 20, 2020

Rittenhouse posted a two-million-dollar bail with the support of far-right figures like Mike Lindell, the founder of My Pillow and major Trump figure. While on bail Rittenhouse was filmed at a bar flashing the "OK" white power sign and being serenaded to by a crowd of Proud Boys. While there was public outcry about this event, it was a much more innocuous image that led to a rift in militant communities. In the picture Rittenhouse stands between his lawyer John Peirce and actor Ricky Schroder wearing a black t-shirt with the Black Rifle Coffee logo across the front, (fig. 16). The image was tweeted by far-right attorney Lin Woods stating "FREE AT LAST!!!...Thank you, All Donors. Thank you, All Patriots. Thank you God Almighty. #FightBack" (Twitter, November 20, 2020). Hashtags like #FreeKyle went viral on multiple platforms and Rittenhouse's name trended for weeks on Twitter.

The far-right saw Rittenhouse as an icon in the white supremacist opposition to the protests over police brutality and systemic racism. Black Rifle Coffee, a darling of the far-right at the time, worried that a connection to a murder trial could damage their brand and financial backers. CEO Evan Hafer released a video and public statement claiming they have no connection to Rittenhouse officially nor unofficially, nor have they offered a sponsorship to him. And while they do have a partnership with Blaze media who reposted the tweet, they asked that the promo code be removed, and the tweet deleted.

The backlash to the brand was immediate with many on the far right cutting subscriptions to their magazine and coffee orders and publicly decrying them as "liberals" "RINOs" (Republicans in name only), and "traitors."[57] Hafer speculated that the company lost between 3000 to 6000 subscriptions in total (Zengerle, 2021). BRCC's audience had understood the brand to be in line with their identities as political active participants in a growing fascist movement. This assessment was borne out of clear and concise branding that supported this identity, and political statements backing the MAGA base who were evolving into more radical ideations at that time. BRCC's backtracking for financial stability damaged that brand rather than protecting the banal veneer Hafer was careful to maintain. Fascist branding requires a populist base to remain loyal and help in the constant reconstruction of the ideals and iconography vital to its maintenance. Hafer made a bad calculation in where that base stood on extrajudicial killings and in doing so damaged that careful link they had cultivated.

In November 2021, after a highly polarizing trial Kyle Rittenhouse was acquitted on all counts (Bosman, 2021). Immediately after Even Hafer once again went on the defensive

[57] Some of their customers took to social media and claimed they'd be switching coffee brands to Stocking Mills Coffee, also a military focused coffee brand, but one that leans into fascism as a key element to their branding and which has been endorsed by neo-fascist groups like the Proud Boys.
https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2021/02/black-rifle-coffee-company/

claiming they never rejected Rittenhouse and was only rejecting the claim that they'd sponsored him, striving to regain their place in their political ecosystem as their growth became stagnated (Valuetainment, 2022). In November 2021, Black Rifle Coffee Company merged with the SilverBox Engaged Merger Corporation in an effort to go public. The merger was completed in February 2022 at which time they entered the stock exchange. At the time of the merger the company was valued at approximately $1.7 billion (Ramkumar, 2021). The path to go public it seems was not easy. According to Even Hafer financial backers were reluctant to support BRCC due to how contentious their brand was.

After going public Hafer joined Senator Rick Scott (R-FL) to write an op-ed for FOX News, claiming that Wall Street had gone "woke" and was "in for a reckoning" (2021). The article calls Wallstreet's use of 'ESG' (Environmental, Social and Governance)[58] as socialist cult, claiming,

> Wall Street tried to make Black Rifle's veteran founders go woke. They told them to 'tone down' their gun-themed branding and delete shooting videos from their YouTube channel because it might offend snowflakes…We're not afraid to say what everyone is thinking – ESG is the slippery slope to a Chinese-style social credit system…Nothing could be more un-American.

Evan's dislike of ESG is obvious, his brand's politics made BRCC a significant risk even in the era of Trump's presidency, but it is the willingness of politicians like Senator Scott to connect themselves to Hafer's rhetoric that is worth analysis.

[58] ESG is a system of valuation that started officially in 2005 after the UN commissioned a report, finding it legally viable and ethical to apply standards that include the environmental, governmental, and social standards to investment analysis. The GOP backlash to these standards in the U.S. has ramped up in recent years under the Biden administration after regulatory standards increased (Davies & Hanna, 2023).

The use of 'woke' here is very practical. Wokeness is a rhetorical dog whistle for many topics and is weaponized to attack opponents of the far right by creating a linguistic tool to skirt around confronting exclusionary and violent political positions. Since going public BRCC has struggled, decreasing in valuation over the past two years (Yahoo! Finance, 2023). Banal fascism is in constant limbo between seeking more power under the current system and working to undo that system from within. BRCC's failure is in recognizing where the asymmetric power currently resides. In Ur-fascism disagreement is treason (tenet four) and to remain part of the movement brands must cater first and foremost to a selective populist base (tenet thirteen), which BRCC failed to follow. Other brands have been better at navigating political spectacle and articulating a battle against mainstream brands.

Nine Line Apparel (NLA) formed in 2013 by veteran Tyler Merritt, his brother, Daniel and wife, Angela, claims that it is a brand created "by patriots for patriots." The brand sells tactical gear, clothing. and random items such as keychains, traveler mugs, and ornaments.[59] Removed from insignias, slogans, and other political rhetoric their products become nondescript and ordinary. However, by layering the objects with meaning through phrases, images, and the media content they regularly produce, their sold items become loaded ideological signifiers. And like with BRCC when these signifiers are placed on bodies the individuals become political objects themselves.

A key element of NLA's branding is an antagonistic relationship with Nike. Nine Line Apparel uses Nike's politicized content to situate their own brand as the hetero-masculine right-wing alternative. After Colin Kaepernick was removed from his NFL team, Nike offered him a brand campaign that would include his own branded shoes and apparel (Gregory, 2018).

[59] The term nine line refers to a medevac request by a soldier who has been injured in wartime conflict.

Released in 2019 Nike's Air Force 1 shoes feature Kaepernick's face and the date he first kneeled, leading to both furious reactions on the right and massive support by liberal consumers. Nine Line Apparel, in an attempt to cash in on the spectacle created by the protests and Kaepernick's popularity, claimed to be a right-wing 'patriotic' to Nike.



Figure 17 Ads Nine Line Apparel (left) Amazon (right) March 1, 2021

After being rejected for a commercial slot by the Super Bowl, Nine Line Apparel launched their "Just Stand" campaign in reaction to Kaepernick's brand deal. The right-wing in America views certain institutions as integral to their community and political identities, seeing them as 'theirs' and therefore any indication that they've been 'taken over' by antithetical political values as an attack on their community. Like the military, the NFL is one of the spaces the right-wing claims, and Kaepernick's protest was viewed as an attack on a space they see as a sacred nationalist emblem. Nine Line understood this and sought to feed into that emotional response.

The products offered by this campaign are loaded with language meant to imply (or outright state) that to kneel in protest is not masculine, using misogynistic and anti-LGBTQ+

language like when they wrote about the description of the Air Force 1 shoe saying, “when you bend your right knee in protest, the fateful date is visible. Of course, you don’t have to be on your knees in protest to reveal the sole. Anything one does on one’s knees will work” (Nine Line Apparel, 2019). NLA’s presentation of the fascist Superman figure is patriotic, hypermasculine, and politically conservative. The masculinity presented and sold by the brand values war above all else. It is also positioned so that the enemy is equally found aboard (ISIS) as it is at home (Black Lives Matter protests) both of which are presented as threats to the nation and to their national identity.

Another key symbol used by most of these brands including Black Rifle and Nine Line is ‘1776’, the year the Declaration of Independence was signed. Wrapped up in other symbols and ideologies, including Christian nationalism, it has become a core emblem for fascism to be coded as patriotic and banal. At the storming of the capitol there were hundreds of references to 1776, with groups like Proud Boys claiming it as an important rhetorical signifier in their branding (Glaser, 2019). However, it was Trump that prompted an uptick in the visibility and use of the term with the formation of the 1776 Commission in September 2020. The commission supported what he called “patriotic education” and followed with an executive order banning the federal funding of “critical race theory” (Schwartz, 2020). Both these moves and the subsequent 2021 release of “The 1776 Report” were in direct retaliation to the 1619 Project, an ongoing initiative of the New York Times to address the often-ignored aspect of slavery in the construction of the US as a nation (Hannah-Jones, 2019).

While 1776 was a signifier for militant communities prior to initiatives like the 1619 report, there was a startling spike of ‘keyword squatting’ in far right and right-wing media surrounding terms like ‘1619’ and ‘critical race theory’ in the past few years. The term ‘keyword

squatting, as defined by the Media Manipulation Casebook is, “the tactic of creating online content - including social media accounts - around a specific search-engine-optimized term so as to determine the search results of that term” (2020).

Scholars Joan Donovan and John Friedberg (2019) used Media Cloud to analyze strategic keyword squatting mobilized against these terms by right-wing media celebrities and influences. In their study they found that this strategy was highly effective in centering white nationalist narratives algorithmically linked to these core terms. Like the Thin Blue Line/Blue Lives Matter campaign reacting to Black Lives Matter, 1776 has become a war-cry against 1619 and so-called Critical Race Theory in the public sphere helping to reshape public opinion to an us-versus-them framework that pushes claims of patriotism, masculinity, and heroism as the antithesis of blackness, liberalness, and leftism. While keyword squatting helped propagate and disseminate these ideological signifiers, brands like Nine Line Apparel, Tactical Baby Gear, and Black Rifle Coffee Company absorb and commodify the signifiers, which are then donned by the civilian warriors they have helped to create.

Like the more outwardly far right communities, militant communities engage in subversion tactics to nod to bigoted or violent meanings, while insisting on a layer of irony, humor, or removal (DeCook, 2020). This chapter’s title, “relentlessly patriotic” comes from a blurb ‘about’ section on Nine Line Apparel’s website. The blurb states,

> It’s much more than getting dressed every day, *it’s about being proud of who you are*, what you wear, and how you walk through life. We are *relentlessly patriotic*. We hold no punches, we don’t apologize for our love of country, we are America's *next greatest generation*. (Emphasis theirs)

The phrase “next greatest generation” is meant as an extension on the concept of “the greatest generation” which represent those born between 1901-1927, who were shaped by the Great Depression, and were active participants in WWII. Participants of the greatest generation are imagined to be wartime heroes, who struggled through a national failure to rise above it. When NLA claims to be participants of the “next greatest generation” they are linking their identities to the last “good war” and a time of assumed nuclear families, institutional white supremacy, and collective militancy.

As with other fascist brands, Nine Line Apparel traffics in the dehumanization of an enemy ‘other’ as part of their branding, often centered on anti-Muslim/Arab rhetoric, as well as ‘internal’ enemies like millennials, liberals, communists, leftists, feminazis, etc. The outside enemy other stems from an antagonism against Islam and the ‘middle east’ that has become a mainstay in the U.S. imagination post-9/11 (Alsultany, 2012). NLA products are rife with this rhetoric, with a particular focus on ISIS as a signifier for anti-American threats (fig, 17). A NLA shirt states, “share a round with ISIS " alongside a massive bullet. It’s referencing a Coca Cola advertisement using wordplay to encourage shooting “ISIS,” a rhetorical stand-in for Islam as a whole. The Coke symbology could just be used as a marketing tactic, but it also has a distinctly Americanized look, that situates the anti-Muslim rhetoric more squarely in the nationalist framework and allows for a banal lens of playfulness that helps mask the inherently bigoted and violent message the image carries.

Nine Line positions itself as a reasonable, mainstream brand in many of their interviews, but it regularly traffic in and supports violence through their social and political networking. Like Black Rifle Coffee, Nine Line Apparel has an internal and external network of brands and micro-celebrity figures they draw from. Salty Frog Gear is a subcategory of their brand, started

by Eddy Gallagher, the ex-Navy SEAL and platoon chief of SEAL Team 7 who was accused by his fellow platoon mates of shooting civilians and brutally murdering a captive Iraqi teenager (Philipps, 2019a). Gallagher was acquitted in 2019 by a military jury of all but a single minor charge. Following a massive campaign by Nine Line Apparel and other military communities, then-President Trump cleared Gallagher of all punishments by upending the military code of justice (Philipps, 2019b).

Leading up to the trial, Tyler Merritt discussed Gallagher's case with other brands and militant community members, actively working to garner public support for his acquittal. Merritt's rhetoric largely focused on excusing Gallagher's violence as a necessity of war by claiming Islamic militants were animalistic, dangerous, rapists, and sub-human. Merritt argues the necessity of this by first claiming any violence done to the captive was under the orders of the Iraqi military who Gallagher's platoon was there to assist. He then claims any, and all violence is inevitably to keep Americans safe and free because, "they will come here" and that citizens can sleep soundly knowing that, "there's Eddie Gallaghers out there who will go do bad things to bad people" (Brodie, 2019). At this stage of Merritt's media campaign in support of Gallagher he accepted the charges as likely true (at least in part) and argued that not only were they justified, but they should be understood as normalized, masculine, patriotic, and good (Creitz, 2019). After internal and external pressure and threats toward the accusing platoon members, one soldier admitted that he'd been the one to actually do the killing, not Gallagher (many believe this confession to be false and coerced). After this admission, Merritt's rhetoric shifted to humanizing Gallagher as a noble soldier, a good leader, and a fatherly, masculine ideal.



Figure 18 Eddie Gallagher's official website, July 10, 2023

The image taken from Gallagher's official website is a collage of photographs with him alongside his wife, his family, and President Trump. The interplay of images is meant to show him in a familial role, thus allowing him to become an emblem of the nation, or a soldier figure that fights not for himself but for those he seeks to protect. It legitimizes him and refrains his violent actions as necessary and good. The quote, which is not attributed to anyone, appears to be attempting to allude to famous translated quotes from Sun Tzu's, *The Art of War*. His personal brand, still connected to Nine Line, uses an emblem with skull and crossbones at the forefront, framed by the words "Seek Battle - FAFO," with crossbones made up of combat knives and hatchets at the foreground.[60] Gallagher now sells guns, shooter training, tactical gear, apparel, and other merchandise from his websites and through affiliates like Nine Line Apparel.

Through Nine Line's media campaign and the support of the populist leader and President of the United States, Gallagher had been remade into the fascist Superman figure. The fascist body - or hero's body - is not merely physical but transcends those limitations to become an eternal emblem that is kept alive through constant reinterpretation and repetition. Gallagher is both martyr and immortal, and his vitality in the fascist movement only remains while he

[60] FAFO is a popular acronym in military spaces that means 'Fuck Around and Find Out' and usually is used as a promise of violence.

remains iconic to the desire for unfettered violence and ultranationalism. However, under fascism everyone is "educated to be a hero" (Eco, 1995). While Gallagher serves a specific purpose in the making of a fascist icon, branding, including in these companies' use of influencers, provides an avenue for consumers to take on the mantle of the hero and become fascist superman as well.

3.4 Fascist Women and Brand Influencers

Women play a vital role in militant communities both. As wives or daughters, they can be used to subvert claims of extremism such as in the case of Gallagher who used images of his wife and children to shift the public narrative away from a sadistic killer to that of protective husband and father. Women can also be key in brands marketing strategies, both in advertisements and media backdrop (as with Black Rifle videos) but also in more active roles as brand influencers. The women in these communities are used either as marketing props, or to promote a gender binary that upholds the masculine tradition against an exaggerated femininity. While Nine Line Apparel is male dominated it has recently taken steps to dissuade their audiences from believing this about the brand.[61]

In 2019 the company released a YouTube video titled "Who Really Runs Nine Line Apparel" (Nine Line Apparel, 2019b). The video is an awkward compilation of female employees claiming that "There's a lot of women in leadership here. I think a lot more than men.... people assume it's dominated by men...it's dominated by some pretty strong, alpha,

[61] Nine Line Apparel has one female co-founder, Angela Merritt, the wife of CEO, Tyler Merritt. She tends to be used as a model, and promotional prop more than a member who adds to the dialogue like the other co-founders.

badass women." The video is followed by a link to their women's merchandise line and a series of hashtags including #meetoo, #womensrights, and #equality.

The first of the hashtags is meant to be read as the global meme turned movement #MeToo but has been slightly altered to render it relatively meaningless.[62] This video was created after a lawsuit against the company by a former female employee was made public that claimed there existed an environment of sexual and gender discrimination, (Mojica, 2019). Controversies like this lawsuit are not uncommon in these spaces which privileges hyper-masculine identities and environment and uses femininity or womanhood as a slur or rhetorical device against their perceived enemies. Women are therefore valued in limited roles, with very little agency (at least at the surface) outside of how they can support the brand and community. Latif, at al. (2020) argues that on the far-right white supremacist organizations adopt three basic archetypes for women: the Mother, Whore, and Fighter. In these more extremist spaces these categories can overlap based on need and the utility of the woman to their group.

While militant communities are likewise rife with male and white supremacy like organizations on the fringe, the archetypes are much less rigid in these spaces. However, influencers in these communities use these archetypes to engage a primarily male audience. While they are less limited by their categories, often adopting them as a public persona or as performance, they still exist as a form of meaning making for the larger community, both in how they provide guidance on gender rules, and in how they support a form of white nationalist branding. As chapter four discusses in more detail, the Mother archetype on the far right includes

[62] I have no way to prove that this was an intentional misspelling, but I am inclined to read it that way considering the context of the video and the brand's general animosity towards everything they see as connected to "liberalism" and "feminism."

bearing/raising children and acting as a mother for the broader movement, or a mother figure for the nation.

However, for influencers in militant communities, this is the least performed character type, even as it remains a vital element of their online identities. Whore and Fighter however, are more prominent here than in other far-right women's spaces discussed in this dissertation such as the mothers' movement in Chapter Four.[63] The Whore archetype is less a practice than an aesthetic in these spaces, meant not to signal to sexual availability, as it is in more gated white power spaces, but to represent an idealized femininity much in the way the fascist Superman signals to the ideal masculine body. Likewise, women's sexuality is often placed in contrast to the phallic form of the gun, with the woman as a stand-in for the nation, and the gun the representation of fascist masculinity.

Women's engagement in militant communities are situated in two distinct forms; 'female-warriors' and 'warrior-wives' within which the tropes of mother and whore are interspersed. Most members of these communities primarily take on one or the other, with the distinction based on whether they are classified primarily as a wife and/or mother or as a soldier and/or veteran. In an interview with "Military Spouse Magazine," which claims a spouse's mission is to "heal heroes one family at a time" Angela Merritt discussed putting off finishing her degree to run the business while her husband was deployed (Military Spouse, 2019). In the major growth stage of the company, she had a third child, finished her undergraduate and her Master's degree while becoming a competitive bodybuilder to lose weight. In podcasts and interviews with Tyler Merritt, he places the success of the company upon himself, while referring to Angela's labor as part of the necessary collective sacrifice of the brand. Warrior-

[63] My use of the term Whore here is not meant as a derogatory comment on women's appearance or practices, nor a slight on sex work as a category, but rather as a nod to the archetype provided by scholars of these spaces.

wives like Angela Merritt are often lifestyle brand ambassadors, but their identities must remain supplemental to the core brand which must remain male-centric to be seen as authentic and to be accepted to a fascist base.

Women in these spaces gain personal authenticity through expressing a relationship to the military either through being ex-military themselves, or by articulating a relationship through a male family member. Brand ambassadors are usually married with children, and whose jobs are to uphold the companies their husbands own, maintain the family, and spread the ideological framework that informs women's place in their social order. They are expected to exemplify the values of this community through marital support, product consumption, and to help run the company, like the wives of BRCC and NLA. However, even in cases where women take on prominent roles in the company, they have limited access to outward authority, which would undermine the carefully constructed gender roles these companies traffic in. Fertility is one of the qualities that is encouraged by these communities and the women who work to maintain these community expectations.

Influencers and brand ambassadors are not placed under the same restrictions as companies on these platforms, and may as individual users, promote gun culture in a wider fashion (Tiffany, 2017). Digital influencers are a type of microcelebrity, and influencer culture is dependent on the idea that individuals can affect consumers' buying practices as well as their values as long as their attention is maintained on the individual (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2015). This attention is maintained in part by entertainment, but an equally important element is the assumed authenticity of the influencers personal brand, which offers shared authenticity to the company's brand they interact with (Duffy, 2015). As with all social media, digital influencer culture requires community engagement through feedback. And while many scholars have

argued that influencers often 'game the system' to maintain their platform in a highly competitive realm, digital studies scholar, Cotter argues that 'playing the visibility game' is a more viable framework, as it resituates the blame from individual actors to a critical analysis of the systematic normalization of visibility politics and the algorithms that encourage such 'games' (Cotter, 2019). Visibility in this context, becomes its own reward, and for militant communities whose audience exist in the murky spaces between the mainstream and the extreme, white nationalism must be always made visible (Bucher, 2018).

Instagram and YouTube are perfect platforms for this specific type of gender politics. YouTube allows for videos like those produced by Mat Best, which glorify misogyny and xenophobia through an ironic or humor-laced lens, and the content that is most controversial often drives the most profit (Lewis, 2018). Likewise, Instagram benefits directly from micro-celebrities and individuals like Casey Currey who understand the algorithms and audience and work within the affordances of the platform to boost their personal brand as well as promote the larger militant communities they act as ambassadors for. Tarleton Gillespie (2010) argues that,

> YouTube and others stage themselves for these constituencies, allowing them to make a broadly progressive sales pitch while also eliding the tensions inherent in their service: between user-generated and commercially-produced content, between cultivating community and serving up advertising, between intervening in the delivery of content and remaining neutral. (pg. 348)

Instagram and YouTube have become key in the spread and maintenance of militant communities, and are the primary platforms used by these brands to promote their content. These brands work within the allowances and affordances of the platforms but find ways to bypass

content regulations such as the gun advertisement restrictions placed on companies through Facebook, Instagram and to a lesser extent, YouTube.

Both men and women in this community have taken the language, and at times the material of warfare, and repackaged it for a civilian consumer market. To provide an urgency to the consumption of their products they frame the culture war, which the right-wing has long engaged in, as a potential physical war - loosely construed as a national project, in which the individual must ready themselves physically and mentally for the labor of "Mak(ing) America Great Again." Alongside this claim there is an underlying assumed threat of outside invaders, which helps support their emphasis on physical and weapons training. The consumable objects and icons they offer act as conduits from the subjects to the ideological center.

Images become agents of radicalization as much, or perhaps more so, than individuals themselves. They signal to membership, to values, and act as less-than-subtle nods to brother warriors in accelerated contexts. Through these merchandise lines you can become a self-styled militia member, or a branded army, by positioning happy white families alongside imagery of gun training and rhetoric about protecting land and country. Women participate in this by situating themselves as first mothers and Christians, then as sexualized objects alongside their merchandise, and finally as warriors struggling to work towards their goal of rebuilding their nation. This is done through advertisements and videos placed on the men's websites, and by creating their own content and platforms on Instagram, in blogs, and other creative content.

Casey Currey, known by her Instagram handle buff_cookie, runs a gun emporium in Utah with her husband Neal Currey, a former Army Ranger. While Neal Currey is the prominent head of their shop Ready Gunner, Casey is well known in the larger community with over 330K

followers on Instagram.[64] She acts as a model and endorser for BRCC and is the connection between her company and theirs. She exemplifies the 'warrior wife' trope that is so often trafficked within these communities. She dresses up as a soldier but maintains a clear distance from the masculinity these communities insist marks the true warrior.

Casey is a mother of six (two biological and four from her husband's prior marriage) and mixes imagery of perfected white-motherhood with sexualized gun-fetish content, speaking directly to two important fantasies these communities market in. Casey is a perfect example of the imagined fascist woman, but through a layering of patriotic, nationalistic content, the fascism remains coded and banal. She presents a world-view in which militant white femininity is seen as the ultimate good, something to strive for as a woman, and something to consume, as a man. Part of this narrative is centered around the concept of fertility, both literally and figuratively. As a fascist model for womanhood, her ability to bear children, and her stand-in for the national (sexually available) mother figure is central to her brand.



Figure 19 Casey Currey, Instagram, September 2021

[64] Neal Currey died of suicide in 2022, after the completion of this draft. As his death is not relevant to the analysis of his or Casey's content, I did not change anything to reflect this in the body of the chapter.

Currey's toned and slim body, usually on display alongside guns and patriotic-themed items, is interspersed with images of the perfect smiling white family, creating a narrative link between the two elements. Fertility isn't simply about procreation but is an extension of nationalist and fascist concepts of land ownership, the nuclear family, the health and maintenance of the race, and white beauty. Bertolt Brect (1935) compared the relationship between fascism and women to the relationship between a protector or pimp and his whores. Similarly, Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi argues that womanhood under fascism is caught in the "iron ring of an internal mother image" and that the economic mechanism of capitalism "draws the highest rate of surplus value from women, contrary to all their material interests" (Macciocchi, 1979). This argument can be afforded to nationalism as well, but there is a key element that this analysis misses. While it's true that women are subjected under these frameworks, often violently so, women also willingly support these violent infrastructures for their assumed mutual benefit. Within the context of the U.S. (as well as Germany and other historical examples) the support and expansion of white supremacy is a core motivator for women participants.

3.5 Conclusion

Men and women work collectively, if unevenly in militant communities to market a fascist body for a militant community. Through branded goods, political commentary, and the use of platform affordances including influencer campaigns, companies like Black Rifle and Nine Line have created a consumer base that can be mobilized into political action during times of unrest. By mobilizing around political spectacle and gun culture they have been able to graft

onto a cultural base that already existed and have helped in the radicalization process even as their negotiation with a growing overtly fascist audience has been complicated at times. Their goals, while likely self-serving like other brands, still have supported the growth of the civilian warrior who seeks to be remade into the fascist Superman.

This chapter has worked to define banal fascism and analyze the ways nationalism and white supremacy have been embedded in military and gun culture in the United States, leading to an easy transition into radical politics in the Trump era. This chapter likewise had engaged in a close analysis of the social media content, branded goods, and platforms used by these groups to engage with their members and grow their brand. Finally, this chapter looked at how women are situated in a male-centric space, and how they work to support the fascist community they are part of. Like with the other chapters in this dissertation, this chapter makes the argument that the ideological and cultural structure that supports these groups have existed for generations and can only be understood through an analysis of how the United States has risen as a white supremacist, nationalist, and male supremacist project.

Chapter 4 “They’re Coming for Your Kids": The U.S. Mothers’ Movement and Banal Fascism

“Go back home and tell the women I need births, many births” Benito Mussolini, 1927

“The most important commandment is to honor your father and mother because tyranny begins when you undermine parental authority” Dennis Prager, 2023

4.1 Introduction

The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, commonly known as COVID-19, disrupted societal norms and closed major institutions, including the public-school systems as educators and support staff shifted to virtual learning to protect the safety and wellbeing of adults and children alike. The height of the pandemic landed during a contentious presidential election, with widespread mis and disinformation swirling about medical and safety regulations, among many other topics. Public schools in the United States began shifting to virtual education in February of 2020, with most shut down by mid-March. Most public schools would remain closed for the rest of the school year. Although Donald Trump was president throughout this time period, his political base took issue with the closures, blaming the CDC, Former Chief Medical Advisor to the President of the United States, Anthony Fauci, and school boards and teachers’ unions for what they perceived as an unnecessary disruption to their lives. Following a wave of harassment and death threats directed at election officials during the 2020 presidential election, the MAGA political base shifted its animosity towards the education sector. Social media was awash with

disinformation over masking and vaccination regulations, leading to harassment and protests at the local and state levels.

Masking for school children became a litmus for political ideation, with the vocal far right steering the controversy in the media. As many school boards continued to err on the side of health and safety, choosing to remain in compliance with CDC guidelines, right-wing mothers' organizations began forming in response. Like election officials, school board members became targets, with members receiving violent threats at their homes and places of business (Borter, et al, 2022). An investigation by Reuters found 15 states had reported incidents of threats, with over 220 such messages obtained in the report by public records.[65] Moms for Liberty, a nonprofit organization founded in 2021, became a leader in this effort. Following a disinformation campaign by far-right influencers, including Moms for Liberty, the harassment of school boards became so significant that U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland released a memorandum calling on the FBI to work with local authorities to address the threats and harassment (Garland, Oct. 2021).

On March 23, 2023, in a congressional hearing titled, "'Free Speech: The Biden Administration's Chilling of Parents' Fundamental Rights'" co-founder of Moms for Liberty Tiffany Justice was invited to speak on parental concerns in education. In her testimony she claimed parents were horrified by teacher unions' choice to keep in-person schooling closed during the height of the pandemic. Arguing that school closures caused irreparable harm to students, risking their education and safety, and claimed that due to her stance as a concerned

[65] In just this small sampling messages contained racist, antisemitic, and misogynistic language. In a Pennsylvania district one message stated, "[t]his why hitler threw you c--ts in a gas chamber," another, directed at the children of a female board member said, "[i]t is too bad that your mother is an ugly communist whore…If she doesn't quit or resign before the end of the year, we will kill her, but first, we will kill you!" (Borter, et al., 2022).

mother, she and others in her organization had experienced persecution at the hands of the Biden administration. Offering as example a mother in her organization who she claimed had been equated with domestic terrorism by the FBI.[66] In the hearing Justice expounded upon this saying,

> One minute you're making peanut butter and jelly and the next minute the FBI is calling you…Did the Biden administration chill the free speech parents, yes. There is no doubt…And what did this mom do wrong? She disagreed with her school board. (2023)

What was once a local issue, school board decisions have become a national battleground in the fight for control over public education.

This framing positions mothers as both political activists who have been victimized by an overreaching federal government, and as patriotic figures, whose motherhood is central to their identity. The rhetorical strategy used in her speech is powerful. She ended her session calling for repercussions to those she deemed a threat to her rights and who, "thought to use their position of power to subvert 'we the parents.'" While the founders of Moms for Liberty claim they have no direct connection to the threats sent to school boards members, they have acted as public influencers in the campaign to target and wrest control of local and state education, regularly trafficking in online rhetoric that pushes dangerous misinformation to support their cause.

In 2021 the president of the National Education Association (NEA) wrote an open letter calling on social media companies to take responsibility for their role in allowing this violence to percolate on their platforms (Pringle, 2021). Like the racist and misogynistic attacks on spaces of community and education over the COVID-19 pandemic in the form of racist zoombombing,[67] cyber-attacks on schools have continued, as well as an increase in organized violence against

[66] The language of "domestic terrorism" is a rhetorical choice promoted by supporters of Moms for Liberty, not terminology found in the memorandum itself. See; (Office of the Attorney General, 2021).

[67] Zoombombing is a form of organized online harassment that uses audio and visuals, often misogynistic and racist in nature, to disrupt Zoom meetings. For more on this phenomenon see; (Nakamura, et. al., 2021).

school boards, teachers, and administrators. The dangerous escalation in harassment and hate speech is directly linked to the way far-right parents' organizations and influencers frame children as under threat, and motherhood as a necessary force in an increasingly violent culture war. Moms for Liberty, in many ways, acts as a networking hub not only for ideologies that center on education and children, but also for far-right figures that coalesce around shared goals.

In a 1995 speech given to Howard University, Toni Morrison argued that the genius of fascism is that "any political structure can become a suitable home. Fascism talks ideology, but it is really just marketing…for power." She goes on to say that fascism, "changes parenting into panicking-so that we vote against the interests of our own children; against their health care, their education, their safety from weapons" (Morrison, 1995). This has become increasingly true of late, with many democratic institutions under attack by far-right influencers and political leaders. However, to assume that this is an emergent threat ignores the long history of fascist organizing in the United States that has used education and healthcare as a banal veneer for fascist ideologies and policies to be implemented in the mainstream. As with the other chapters this will focus on the ways fascism has been marked banal by its subjects, drawing primarily from Umberto Eco's list of eternal fascist traits to make this case. However, unlike the others, this chapter focuses on the role of women's activism in advancing banal fascism.

This chapter is working toward two goals: first, to explore the strategies used by mothers' movements to push fascist legislation, policies, and rhetoric into the public sphere under the guise of child protection and parental rights, and second, to examine the use of social and media networks to broaden their fields of influence. In broad strokes, this chapter considers how far-right women have weaponized their positions as mothers to curate and maintain white supremacy and fascism through asymmetric activism both online and off. Through the application of

discourse and social media analysis this chapter argues that within the United States there is a precedent for white motherhood to be weaponized by the far right to push a white supremacist, nationalist, and antidemocratic agenda, ushering in fascist rhetoric, policies, and legislation. Likewise, it argues that white motherhood acts as a mechanism for fascism writ large to be marked as banal, providing a strategic veneer for illiberal and exclusionary politics, and acting as a central hub for moving public sentiment in support of exclusionary laws.

The first part of this chapter theorizes fascist motherhood, giving a short literature review of early scholarship on mothers' movements of the first half of the twentieth century, as well as considering fascist regimes conceptualization of motherhood as a comparison to women's activism that has helped curate banal fascism in the United States. This section is followed by a close reading of Anita Bryant, a key figure in the anti-LGBTQ+ movement of the 1960s to 1980s. Her "Save Our Children" campaign became notorious for rhetorical and political tactics that continue to have impact today. Through close readings of archival materials, including campaign fliers, newsletters, and interviews this portion situates Bryant as an early social influencer for a fascist campaign that weaponized antidemocratic white motherhood to push for Christofascist policies. The chapter then shifts to an analysis of the under-analyzed contemporary mothers' movement, primarily focusing on the far-right organizations Moms for Liberty and No Left Turn in Education. Both organizations, as well as many smaller groups with less influence, have been effective at leveraging a political network that connects via social media, most prominently Facebook and Twitter, using memes, disinformation, and other social media content to support rapidly growing fascist legislation targeting LGBTQ+ rights, civil rights, and public education.

4.2 What is Fascist Motherhood?

Far-right parental rights groups are structured in a way that appears democratic from the outside, and yet they have provided a useful outlet for fascism to seep into mainstream society through the application of discriminatory and hierarchical policies in public institutions. Any style of fascism must include a belief in a rigid social hierarchy, which is primarily enforced through military strength, violent patriarchy, and war. However, social hierarchies are also supported in more banal ways, through community engagement, local policy, and parenting norms. This is a space where women can engage at the national, state, and local levels, while maintaining a semblance of the gender hierarchy inherent to fascism. Taking up the thread of the prior chapters this will consider the ways political organizing exists through networking and social media platforms, and how fascism is made banal, in part, through the affordances of the platforms these groups use.

While often positioning itself as antithetical to socialism, communism, and Marxism, fascism is more correctly a refusal of representative democracy, pluralism, and liberalism. Scholar of fascism Robert Paxton argues that fascist movements rarely look similar, but they do share similar "mobilizing passions." He claims, "disparate in their symbols, decor, and even in their political tactics, fascist movements resemble each other mainly in their functions…Their only moral yardstick is the prowess of the race, of the nation, of the community" (Paxton, 1998). White motherhood is utilitarian in the construction of white nationhood. Fascism relies heavily on nationalism, and nationalism must be constructed and maintained at the community level. Motherhood provides an inroad and a system of networking for that project.

Historically, a particular form of white, middle-class motherhood has mobilized to push fascist, nationalist, and Christofascist ideologies in support of controlling the public sector and

maintaining a white supremacist hierarchy. Whereas fascism, writ large, is an exaggerated form of militaristic patriarchy, women's fascism by nature must look different. As a top-down formation, codified fascism is inherently misogynistic and hierarchical in its gendered allowances, but the banal form is decentralized and asymmetrical in its power distribution.

Early twentieth century Europe was gripped with fear over the supposed decline of their nations and the so-called "superior races" (Mazower, 1998). With internal crises brought about by WWI these fears only grew. Amidst a rise in nationalism and a perceived crisis of national patriarchy, states like Germany, Italy, and France began to take more active roles in parenting. In defense of the Italian race, Mussolini called on his Fascist troops to, "Go back home and tell the women I need births, many births" (Grazia 1993, pg. 41). Mussolini's agenda was driven by a desire to increase Italy's population from 40 million to 60 million people by mid-century to strengthen the nation's workforce and military strength (Grazia, 42). The "battle for births" took place prior to WWII between 1925 and 1938, primarily targeting the working class to increase the birth rates for the larger society, and to view maternity as the role of women in increasing the glory of the fascist state.

It was a failed experiment, with most working-class Italian women rejecting this role, but it highlights the way women's roles are framed under a codified Fascist project, compared to banal fascist motherhood, which is directed by the people, but supported by the state. The distinction between codified fascist motherhood, like that found under Mussolini, is the power to implement at the national level. Formal fascism holds its power securely and openly, whereas the banal form is more subtle, often unnoticed even by those pushing its agenda. As mentioned in the introduction, many of the figures in this chapter would not recognize themselves as fascist, and instead purport to be conservative, libertarian, or another adjacent political designation. The goal

of this chapter is not to disprove the labels for these figures, but to argue that their values and policies support a fascist framing, that through strategic branding have been made banal.

A theory of motherhood cannot be universal, as white middle class motherhood, for example, will look significantly different than working class Black or Brown motherhood. This chapter is only interested in right-wing white motherhood, and the ways it supports fascist rhetoric, policies and legislation. The United States in the early twentieth century was dealing with its own outwardly fascist movement, albeit one organized (or disorganized in some circumstances) from the ground. Scholars of mothers' movements have offered useful frameworks to understand how participants' political identities were formed. Historian Kirsten Marie Delegard (2012) argues that 'antiradical' white women of the 1920s used domesticity and motherhood to frame their political activism, pushing back on feminist activists of the time (Delegard, 57).

Elizabeth Dilling was one of the most influential women of the mothers' movement in this era, and a major proponent of participatory politics in children's education. Historian Glen Jeansonne (1996), in his comprehensive study of WWII white women's movements, claimed she was, "the most important woman to emerge on the far right in the 1930s" (p. 10). Branding herself a "professional patriot" she began her political activism in revolt of the New Deal, and what she believed was an encroaching threat of socialism and communism in the United States.[68] Figures like Dillig provided a key focal point for women desiring to become politically active in a notoriously male-centric arena. For right-wing women's movements of this era, motherhood was the primary device through which they engaged politically. While women's labor under

[68] The New Deal was a series of domestic policies, reforms, and financial programs enacted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt between 1933-1939, meant to boost the economy in the aftermath of the American Great Depression. Conservative and fascist groups labeled the programs as socialist and/or communist in a rejection of them and the President.

fascism ultimately feeds its male-supremacist framework, it is also empowering for those engaged. It strengthens and supports classism and white supremacy, and in doing so, provides a system of power and control that participants can exploit.

The women of the mothers' movements this chapter engages with are not always white (although the majority are in every circumstance), but they are always working in support of white supremacy. Mothers' movements of post-WWII retained many of the same strategies and goals of the prior era but began focusing more locally rather than nationally. Prominent figures like Nell Battle Lewis led white mothers in a new era of political activism. In the white supremacist fight to retain segregation of schools, white mothers claimed their struggle was for the protection of white children and for the sanctity of their nation. Historian Elizabeth Gillespie McRae, who has written extensively on this era of women's movements, argues that Lewis and other prominent supporters of segregation derived their political strategies from their identities as white mothers (McRae, 2004).

White women's prominence in the education sector, and their use of local social networks, worked together to form a powerful reconfiguration of the national narrative during a time of political and civil rights upheaval. McRae argues that in this era, "white women built these political networks - locally and nationally - making it white women's duty to be Jim Crow's gardeners, public housekeepers, and guardians of public schools," (McRae, 105). In much the same way that LGBTQ+ materials and public acknowledgements of queerness are framed as lewd and a danger to children's purity in the contemporary era, Blackness and desegregation were framed as threatening, amoral, and unclean in Lewis's time. McRae argues that Lewis's postwar politics showcase how McCarthyism and the Red Scare both reinforced women's traditional roles while also providing an opportunity for many white women to become

politically active through the lens of motherhood and the home.[69] Sociologists Simi, et.al. (2016) argue that within white power movements parenting can be viewed and practiced as a form of activism.

While the subjects of this chapter do not fit within the 'white power' category, their goals are similar concerning control over their children's education, and both groups approach white motherhood as central to their political identity. Women in these social spaces are seen as holding certain important human values in greater quantity than men, what Delegard (2012) calls 'maternalism', such as purity, compassion, sensitivity, and morality, that make them particularly effective at changing political hearts and minds. Education, children's welfare, the family, and the poor were all seen as social spaces women naturally excelled in within mainstream mother's movements. Maria Mies (2014) famously used the term *housewifization* to describe the late stage of the subjugation of women and colonialism, a practice that helped usher in *luxury capitalism* and distinguish between the 'less-than-human' colonized peoples and the white race. A prominent influencer of the 1970s and 80s, Phyllis Schlafly was a paleoconservative anti-feminist who successfully campaigned against the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the U.S. Constitution. The amendment stipulated that sex (gender) could not determine the legal rights for men or women, which would invalidate many discriminatory federal and state laws.[70] Her efforts, while broad in scope, revolved around a worldview of traditional white womanhood that saw conservative, Christian motherhood as core to women's identities (Ribieras, 2021).

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[69] The home, in this sense, is not only the physical structure of the family, but also embodies the nation, with white women becoming stewards of the national being. The anticommunist rhetoric of this post-war era was wrapped into the white supremacist reaction to the civil rights era, linking these ideologies to a rejection of interracial sex and marriage (McRae, 2004, p. 274).

[70] The amendment has remained politically contentious and has yet to be ratified. For more on the history of this issue see; (Ribieras, 2021)

The history of the United States is as much a history of the construction of whiteness as it is of a negotiated democracy. Democracy here is a fluid and malleable term that has been used to incorporate some into the fold of citizenship and to simultaneously reject others in often violent ways. For the subjects of this chapter, their notion of democracy means a white, middle to upper class "democracy," even as many struggle to be incorporated into full civic participation as women who were historically disenfranchised. While white liberalism will never be able to claim the United States as a democratic union, those on the right have historically had different goals, their aims being active repression and exclusion. By using 'antidemocratic' this chapter is not claiming democracy as something that has been attained but pointing out how these subjects have actively worked to undermine it within the national project. American Studies scholar George Lipsitz (2018) labels this proclivity to work towards an exclusionary form of citizenship as a "possessive investment in whiteness," which describes the ways that public policy and private prejudice combine to maintain racialized hierarchies. As scholars of democracy have pointed out, this framing of democracy is rife with contradictions, including but not limited to its weak construction of "the people" in both the national sense, and within the ruling body (Dahl, 1989). If democracy means a form of government that represents all people, democracy has never left its conceptual state.

Historically fascism grew as a reaction to pluralism, democracy, and liberalism, and while that is true in the U.S. context, it is often difficult to see U.S. fascism, as they are often wrapped in the banner of patriotism. In the U.S. banal fascism is rebranded "Red, White, and Blue" rather than "blood and soil" as in the past. Mothers' movements have helped in the project of rebranding fascist ideologies as democracy for "we the people," by acting as housewives for their national home, and stewards for national childhood. The type of motherhood described in

this chapter is perhaps best understood under the umbrella of *patriarchal motherhood*, coined by O'Reilly (2019), which, "must be distinguished from the possibility or potentiality of empowered mothering…whereas motherhood operates as a patriarchal institution to constrain, regulate, and dominate women and their mothering, mothers' own experiences of mothering can, nonetheless, be a site of empowerment" (O'Reilly, 2019).

This framing theorizes motherhood not as a biological function, but a social construct that is malleable per time and place. The motherhood described in this chapter certainly fits under this category, as it is produced under patriarchal control, but it also takes on the element of fascist whiteness, which is an undertheorized element of these groups. Like in prior eras, the notion of *social mothering* remained central to white women's political activism leading into the Civil Rights era of the 1950s and beyond. This created an impetus for some right-wing white mothers to protect the purity of the white race through the maintenance of the family and home. In an examination of white supremacist group dynamics Latif, et. al. argues that racist groups position women in three archetypical roles, the Mother, Whore, and Fighter (2020).

The mother figure in these groups serves a very overt purpose, to expand the white race, while the other two archetypes function to serve the groups' sexual and social needs. They argue, "[t]he (white) Mother (a family-centered role, based on and subsuming the initial role of wife) is the predominant archetype for white supremacist women, highly promoted in movement propaganda and central to the mission of maintaining white numerical superiority through high white birth rates" (Latif, et al, 2020). Similarly, a study on 'trad wives' explores how illiberalism and extremism in these socio-political groups is supported through rigid gender structures, within which the mother figure plays an outsized role (Stern, 2022 & Darby 2020). These objects of

study are an acute version of what exists in more mainstream society, but the mother figure serves the same conceptual and practical purpose in both examples.

Drawing from Foucault, Simon Bohn claims that one of the ways women regain power under patriarchy is to "enter" the state, using their motherhood as a tool. Bohn states that, "[m]others, in turn, have reacted to this "microphysics of power" (Foucault) by becoming formidable social activists who…exercise a fundamental role in transmitting values, norms, attitudes, and behaviors to the next generation" (Bohn, 2019). In *Cruelty as Citizenship* (2020) Cristina Beltrán claims that the United States' history with race makes a pluralist democracy impossible, and yet it simultaneously supports a contested form of white democracy. Drawing from sociologist Pierre L. van der Berghe, Beltrán argues that the U.S. historically could be characterized as a "Herrenvolk democracy—a regime that is 'democratic for the master race but tyrannical for the subordinate groups'" (Beltrán, 14). According to Beltrán and der Berghe, in Herrenvolk society a white majority maintains superiority through the cultivation of tribalism with other white factions in society, incorporating in new ethnic groups to the category of "whiteness" and allowing certain privileges for the lower classes, through the subjugation of minority groups.

While neither Beltrán nor der Berghe consider the ways white women are both subjugated and supported under this formation, as a political entity they play an important part in the maintenance of a Herrenvolk society, both through its production (procreation, story/myth making, etc.), and through its structural support, (domestic labor, political activism, etc.). As Beltrán goes on to say, Herrenvolk democracy is not a true democracy, in that it doesn't necessarily promise social equality and representation even for those included in the white race, but instead offers the ability to take part in the domination of those not included. By providing

white citizens, "the material, psychological, and political satisfaction of being subjects protected by individual rights and the rule of law, while simultaneously allowing them the freedom to deny those same protections to those deemed nonwhite" (16) white democracy creates a racial hierarchy in which fascist traits can flourish.

4.3 Rebranding the Family: Anita Bryant and the Anti-LGBTQ+ Movement

Education remained central to the stratagems of the mothers' movement in the early to mid-twentieth century. From the mothers' movements of WWII era, which focused primarily on anti-liberalism, race, and pro-war politics,[71] to the early civil rights' movement of the 1950s in which leaders like Lewis fought to retain racial segregation and overtly white supremacist power, far-right mothers' movements have used their familial and gendered positions as an effective rhetorical tool to claim moral authority for both the "family" and the nation. Alongside activists like Phyllis Schlafly, who was instrumental in the death of the Equal Rights Amendment, there arose a fight against gender and sexuality that paralleled their racist activism in many ways.[72] In the era of Civil Rights activism around racial and sexual freedom, motherhood stood as an ideological pillar for the right-wing to organize around. While race continued to play an outsized role in this social struggle, gender and sexuality began to take center stage alongside ongoing desegregation efforts.

The gay rights movement has a longer and more complicated history than simply emerging in a flash with the 1969 Stonewall Uprising. However, that date did create a notable

[71] The anti-war activism of this era conducted by the mothers' movement was not out of a distaste of war itself, but in response to a support of fascist regimes in Germany, Spain, and Italy.

[72] Schlafly, a far-right leader in the fight to stop civil rights progress, has been covered extensively in scholarly works. For more on her see, (Petchesky, 1981) and (Critchlow, 2005)

shift in the larger public's awareness around LGBTQ+-activism, drawing both positive and negative attention, and ultimately creating momentum for changes at the local, state, and national level. In 1977, Miami-Dade County, Florida passed a human rights ordinance to include discrimination on the basis of sexuality to its previous prohibitions. The passing of this ordinance proved to be a "wake up call" for one prominent white woman in that district.

Anita Bryant, a former Miss Oklahoma, pop singer, and spokesperson for the Florida Citrus Commission, rebranded herself as the face of the anti-gay crusade in the 1970s.[73] In 1977 she began her "Save Our Children" campaign to repeal a local ordinance in Miami-Dade County, Florida that disallowed discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Bryant argued that the ordinance would give "special privileges" to gay citizens, allowing them undue access to propagandize children in schools and community spaces. Making education her focus, she claimed the added human rights language would allow openly gay teachers to spread their "sexual ideologies" to students, even in Christian schools, ultimately undermining the Christian household and parental rights. This early success of Bryant's campaign energized the Christian right, galvanizing a national anti-LGBTQ+ movement. As with Dade County, this movement was successful in undoing legislative and policy progress made in the 1970s, leading to a roll back in rights through the 1980s. Bryant became known for her bigoted rhetoric and activism, leading to the successful repeal of the ordinance.

While some of her targets saw her vocal attacks as a positive due to the media coverage she brought to their community's issues, her impact was considerable both in her era and beyond. In her labor for a christofascist world, Bryant strove to protect a form of nationhood that

[73] Bryant had also represented Coca-Cola, Holiday Inn, and Kraft at different points in her career. She traveled for six years on Bob Hope's U.S.O. tours and published nine books that emphasized her views on marriage, motherhood, and religion.

she saw as existing in an imagined past, a key tenant to fascist thinking, and towards an imagined future. The Save Our Children campaign later renamed Protect America's Children[74] was legally recognized as an educational organization (Philadelphia Gay News, 1978). This group would serve as her primary mobilizing and networking center throughout her years of activism. Bryant's campaign operated much like contemporary movements by focusing on local and state policy and legislation, as well boycotting organizations or brands sympathetic to LGBTQ+ rights (California-Based Save Our Children Plans Anti-Gay Strategy, 1977).

Bryant fused her identities as conservative, Christian, patriot, and mother into one singular political persona. This identity helped her create and maintain public support, even as she espoused exclusionary and extremist views. She claimed, "according to the word of god, it's an abomination to practice homosexuality," also arguing that "biologically god made mothers so that we could reproduce, homosexuals cannot reproduce biologically, but they have to reproduce by recruiting our children," (Bryant, 1977). Bryant was a prolific author of religious non-fiction that detailed her thoughts on being a godly wife and mother. One of her most prominent books titled, *The Anita Bryant Story: The Survival of Our Nation's Families and the Threat of Militant Homosexuality* (1977) argued that "militant homosexuals," were attacking her and the nation's families, using military language like, "battle ground," and "foot soldier" to describe the political fight she was engaged in with pro-LGTBQ rights activists (Fischli, 1979). Bryant's campaign was largely driven by one of the eternal tenets of Ur-fascism, *fear of difference* (Eco, 1995), which situates those outside the controlled group identity as threats to the order and power of the fascist state.

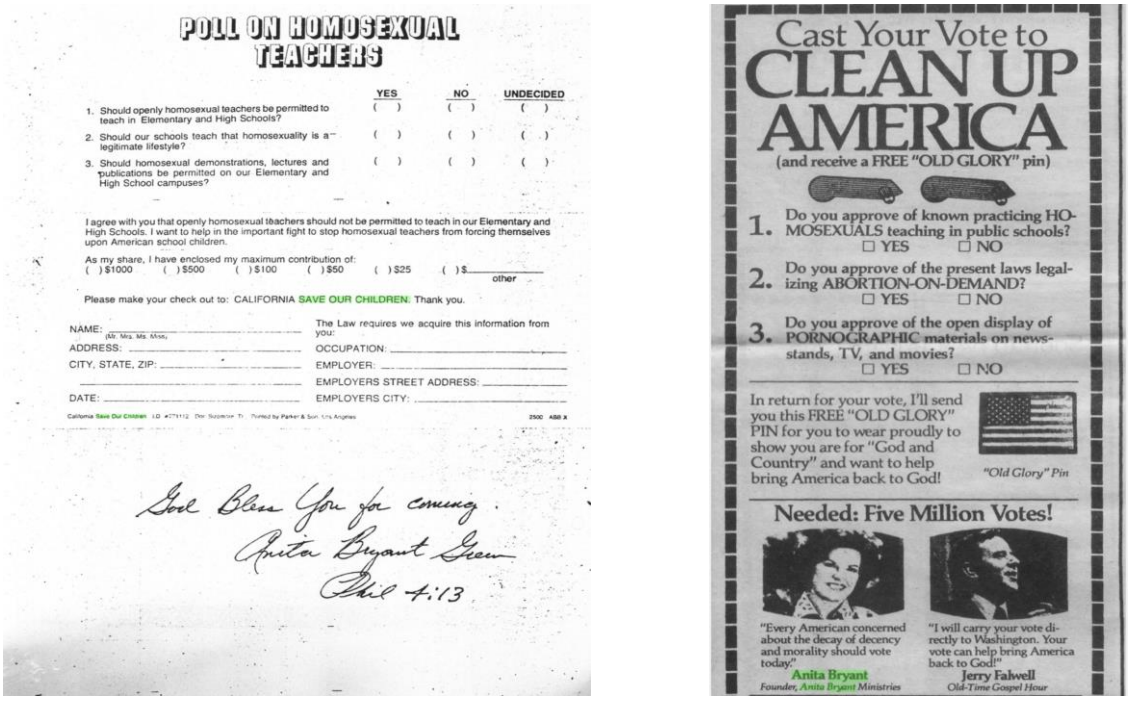
[74] After a similarly named group "Save the Children" sued Byrant for loss of earnings, a judge ruled that their name must be changed. See: Judge Nixes Bryant Group Name. (1977). Gaysweek, (25), 3. https://link-gale-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/apps/doc/CJRXGD903144952/AHSI?u=umuser&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=53c5ecda

Bryant pushed the narrative that because queer men and women supposedly could not reproduce, they instead sought to "recruit" children into their community, part of an insidious "gay agenda" to harm the nations' children. This was often framed as the antithesis of the godly family structure that she preached, presenting the LGBTQ+ community as predators and pedophiles (The National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce, 1977). Even as she expanded her anti-gay campaigning, education remained central to her goals. Her organization and those that supported its causes fundraised through fear mongering around the issue of gay rights and education, often framing the "militant homosexual" agenda as an attempt to take over public education, and place gay teachers in classrooms (The National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce, 1977). In fliers and interviews she honed in on the deviancy she saw as central to queer identities, arguing that gay men and women sought to manipulate children through, "publications, which anyone can pick up at a local hotel, and which show that they can do what they want with kids of whatever age they want, and even what kind of sex they can have" (Playboy, 1978).

Bryant presented heterosexuality as a godly ritual in which women are valued only by their ability to reproduce, saying,

> That's why homosexuality is an abomination of God, because life is so precious to God and it is such a sacred thing when man and woman come together in one flesh and the seed is fertilized…the relationship between a man and a woman should embody oneness with God—the most natural thing is the reproducing of life and having the first fruits from that oneness together" (Playboy, 1978).

This paired with her support for a religious authoritarianism in which homosexuality would be punished by a police state lands her campaigns' views in the realm of christofascism, and by positioning women in the role of reproducers and mothers of the nation, her rhetoric mirrors overtly fascist propaganda of the past.



POLL ON HOMOSEXUAL TEACHERS

	YES	NO	UNDECIDED
1. Should openly homosexual teachers be permitted to teach in Elementary and High Schools?	( )	( )	( )
2. Should our schools teach that homosexuality is a legitimate lifestyle?	( )	( )	( )
3. Should homosexual demonstrations, lectures and publications be permitted on our Elementary and High School campuses?	( )	( )	( )

I agree with you that openly homosexual teachers should not be permitted to teach in our Elementary and High Schools. I want to help in the important fight to stop homosexual teachers from forcing themselves upon American school children.

As my share, I have enclosed my maximum contribution of:
( ) $1000 ( ) $500 ( ) $100 ( ) $50 ( ) $25 ( ) $_____ other

Please make your check out to: CALIFORNIA SAVE OUR CHILDREN. Thank you.

NAME: _____ (Mr. Mrs. Ms. Miss)
ADDRESS: _____
CITY, STATE, ZIP: _____
DATE: _____

The Law requires we acquire this information from you:
OCCUPATION: _____
EMPLOYER: _____
EMPLOYERS STREET ADDRESS: _____
EMPLOYERS CITY: _____

California Save Our Children I.D. #77112 Dist. Supervisor Th... Printed by Parker & Son, Los Angeles 2500 ABB X

God Bless You for coming.
Anita Bryant Green
Phil 4:13

Cast Your Vote to
CLEAN UP AMERICA
(and receive a FREE "OLD GLORY" pin)

1. Do you approve of known practicing HOMOSEXUALS teaching in public schools?
☐ YES ☐ NO

2. Do you approve of the present laws legalizing ABORTION-ON-DEMAND?
☐ YES ☐ NO

3. Do you approve of the open display of PORNOGRAPHIC materials on newsstands, TV, and movies?
☐ YES ☐ NO

In return for your vote, I'll send you this FREE "OLD GLORY" PIN for you to wear proudly to show you are for "God and Country" and want to help bring America back to God!

"Old Glory" Pin

Needed: Five Million Votes!

"Every American concerned about the decay of decency and morality should vote today."
Anita Bryant
Founder, Anita Bryant Ministries

"I will carry your vote directly to Washington. Your vote can help bring America back to God!"
Jerry Falwell
Old-Time Gospel Hour

Figure 20 Fliers for fundraising sent by Anita Bryant's campaign.

Bryant was convinced that homosexuality was a gateway to other "sins and abominations" that could lead to social depravity and degradation, citing "wives and former homosexuals" as sources for this belief. In her campaign materials, as shown above, she promotes scare tactics in her language like "stop homosexual teachers from forcing themselves on American schoolchildren." This language is meant to infer that by allowing children access to gay teachers, parents are putting them at risk of sexual assault. Likewise, the second flier layers homosexuality with abortion and pornographic materials, positioning the issues as

interconnected and under the umbrella of mothers' concerns. Bryant regularly equates homosexuality with evil, arguing, "I believe that, more than ever before, that there are evil forces, roundabout, even perhaps disguised as something good. And that wants to tear down the very foundation of the family unit that holds America together" (Bryant, 1977). In this framing, Bryant is utilizing her position as a mother to speak for the role of motherhood, becoming an avatar for the nation.

The threat she sees in the LGBTQ+ movement is not localized to her or her community's children, it is towards the national being, and she, as a mother figure, stands in as a national Madonna. Of course, the nation that she is protecting is narrow in who it represents. Not just Christian, middle-class, and heterosexual, it is also coded as white. Even as Bryant continued to lose speaking engagements because of her anti-gay rhetoric, she remained a popular mother figure in the public. For three consecutive years in the late 1970s she won the "Most Admired Woman in America," poll by Good Housekeeping magazine (Ervin, 2014). Bryant's political activism ultimately ruined her on a personal level, her support dissolving as public opinion shifted in favor of LGBTQ+ rights, ending after her own granddaughter came out as gay, and publicly condemned Bryant as homophobic. However, the legacy she created remains in effect to this day, with a resurgence of anti-LGBTQ+ activism by the far-right and increasingly fascistic legislations and policies being enacted at the local, state, and federal levels.

4.4 The Contemporary Mothers' Movement and the Anti-LGBTQ+ Campaign

On July 2, 2021, the San Francisco Gay Men's Choir posted a song on their YouTube channel titled, "A Message from the Gay Community." Meant as a tongue-in-cheek response to the so-called "gay agenda" the song featured lyrics like, "There's really no escaping it, 'cause

even grandma likes RuPaul… we'll convert your children, someone's gotta teach them not to hate…Your children will care about fairness and justice for others," followed by a chorus of "We're coming for them! We're coming for your children." The outcry on the right was immediate. Prominent far-right media personalities like Matt Walsh claimed this as proof that the so-called left was attempting to convert children to a nefarious LGBTQ+ agenda. Alex Jones, a far-right radio host, ranted about the video on his *Infowars* podcast, jump-starting a furious online assault through YouTube and on members of the Choir (Casey, 2021). The phrase "we're coming for your children," and its subverted form "they're coming for your kids," became a viral phrase used by the far right on social media.[75]



Figure 21 Tim Pool YouTube video (left). Rev. Franklin Graham Facebook (right)

The members of the Gay Men's Choir were inundated with online hate and threats, including harassment and accusations being sent to their homes and places of work. Edited versions of the song began circulating, creating an ominous misrepresentation of the original content. The choir was forced to turn off the comment section on the video, eventually removing

[75] Different versions like "they're coming for *our* kids" or "they're coming for your *children*" were also part of the viral content.

the video from YouTube. As of early 2023 the original video had garnered over 1.2 million views. This incident is part of a longer history of anti-LGBTQ+ harassment campaigns and showcases the speed in which dangerous content can spread over the Internet. However, the incident itself is less pivotal than the sentiment behind "they're coming for your kids," which connects with the longer history of claiming the LGBTQ+ community poses a danger to children.

The distinction between anti-LGBTQ+ campaigns of the past and present is how social media provides an outlet for rhetoric to spread farther and faster than in earlier eras. This content is linked to other popular trends in misinformation and anti-LGBTQ+ slurs such as the "groomer" narrative, which is used against supporters of LGBTQ+ rights, and situates queerness with pedophilia and the sexual exploitation of children. Like Anita Bryant's claim that gay men and women "recruit" children to their sexually-deviant lifestyle, the current iteration of the anti-LGBTQ+ movement utilizes the same rhetorical strategies. And like past versions, motherhood remains central to the organizing strategies of the far right.

The groomer narrative is the newest in a long line of anti-LGBTQ+ attacks that equates queerness in its many forms with pedophilia and the sexual assault of children. The first two decades of the 21st century saw countries around the world pass laws that increased the LGBTQ+ community's fundamental human rights. The contemporary anti-LGBTQ+ movement is a direct reaction to that progress and has benefited significantly from access to social media platforms. According to a Media Matters investigation, Meta, the parent company of Facebook, Instagram, and other subsidiary platforms, has earned at least $12,700 in revenue from ads that use the anti-LGBTQ+ slur "groomer" (Carter, 2023). Even as Facebook and Instagram have both stated that the use of this slur goes against Meta's hate speech policies (Meta, 2023), Media Matters has so far identified 130 ads that use this language.

For regular users of both mainstream platforms and alt-social platforms like 4chan, Telegram, or Truth Social, social media networking spaces have provided a breeding ground for fascism to propagate alongside conspiracy theories, extremist movements, and harassment campaigns against the LGBTQ+ community. Since 2017 there has been a targeted attack on drag queen community spaces including Drag Queen Story Hour events, often hosted in bookstores, public libraries, and other spaces intended to be child-friendly, as well as an increase in anti-trans focused legislation, policy, and public rhetoric.[76] Alongside overtly fascist groups like neo-Nazis and the Proud Boys, the mothers' movement plays an important role in propagating these harassment campaigns.

The contemporary mothers' movement is a loosely organized network of organizations and influencers who congregate around shared ideals and political talking points. This network traffic in political dog-whistles like "parental rights," to push for illiberal educational policies. So-called 'critical race theory' and trans inclusion are their current primary focus.[77] The most prominent and impactful voice in this new era is Moms for Liberty. Recently designated as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC, 2023), Moms for Liberty is a nonprofit organization founded in January 2021, with 275 chapters in 44 states as of April 2023. According to Tiffany Justice, she and co-founders Tina Descovich and Bridget Ziegler began the organization after school closures brought about by COVID-19. Their primary goals are centered around a Christian nationalist philosophy that views a white evangelical belief system as central

[76] While this chapter focuses on the far right, anti-trans rhetoric is a bipartisan issue. Prominent figures like the author of the Harry Potter franchise, J.K. Rowling has also become a recognizable voice in the anti-trans campaign. Often framed as a T.E.R.F (trans exclusionary radical feminist) Rowling has become a figure that links more liberal voices to the right-wing over this issue.

[77] Critical race theory is an academic and legal framework that argues systemic racism is a part of American society and is used by scholars and legal experts to laws and social precedents shape individuals' access to equal rights. The public outcry against CRT is more accurately an outcry on educational materials dealing with systemic racism and equal rights, as the legal theory is deeply misunderstood by the majority of those that claim to oppose it. For more on the academic theory; Crenshaw & Gotanda (1995).

to national identity and seeks to implement exclusionary and prohibitive policies at the federal, state, and local levels. By targeting the public education system, they join a long lineage of fascist and conservative figures that sought to wrest control away from the broader public in lieu of a privatization framework that situates a narrow worldview into curriculum and policy.

Tiffany Justice and Bridget Ziegler stated they began organizing around this issue after they were angered by the closures and subsequent masking mandates in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Justice claims Moms for Liberty is purely a grassroots organization, funded through small donations and t-shirt sales, but an investigation by Media Matters, a left-wing media- watchdog nonprofit, has shown otherwise, finding significant ties to prominent GOP leaders and far-right think tanks like the Koch-funded Heritage Foundation (Little, 2021). Moms for Liberty positions itself as a network of concerned parents who organize for "parental rights," in education. However, their content, material, and public rhetoric tell a different story. Much like the mothers' movement of the WWII era, Moms for Liberty is an organizing wing of the far-right that provides a useful veneer to extremist ideologies under the guise of parental rights and concerned motherhood. Their primary political concerns are most often centered on ending trans-inclusive policies, curtailing school-based sex-education, attacking so-called "critical race theory" (CRT), and placing like-minded administrators on local and state school boards and in other places of authority within the public school system. This strategy allows them to attack educational materials and policies focused on LGBTQ+ history as well as the history of race in the United States.

The strategy of groups like Moms for Liberty is multi-pronged. They provide an organizing force to drum up support for right-wing local, state, and federal politicians. They offer training manuals for astroturfed campaigns to overthrow local representation on school

boards.[78] They likewise offer strategic language when engaging with voters over key issues both online and off. These strategies have impacted political careers, administrator positions, school curriculum, and federal, state, and local laws. Other groups like Moms for America also take part in the broader network, but none have been as effective nor had as much of an impact as Moms for Liberty. Their primary form of ideological and social networking takes place on social media sites, most prominently on Facebook and Twitter. On July 25, 2022, the main Moms for Liberty twitter account was suspended for violating Twitter's rule against hateful conduct (Downey, 2022). The post that spurred this was in response to California's "gender affirming healthcare" bill (SB 107), which took effect in January 2023. The tweet read,

> Gender dysphoria is a mental health disorder that is being normalized by predators across the USA. California kids are at extreme risk from predatory adults. Now they want to 'liberate' children all over the country. Does a double mastectomy on a preteen sound like progress? (Moms for Liberty, Twitter)

The suspension was lifted twelve hours after the tweet was deleted. This was not the first time the organization was found in violation of social media sites' rules of ethics. In January 2022 Facebook flagged twenty-two chapter accounts for content that created a potential threat to school board members (Downey, 2022). After writing a letter to Facebook CEO and founder, Mark Zuckerberg these bans were lifted, and they were able to resume with their regular content. Social media sites provide vital organizing opportunities for a small, but motivated influencer pool to spread far-right rhetoric and to mobilize followers. While social media rules around discriminatory or hateful content plays an important role in mitigating certain overtly extremist

[78] The difference between 'astroturf' and 'grassroot' is astroturfing is intended to look like grassroot organizing while it is funded and controlled by behind-the-scenes partners.

posts, it often fails to damper the flood of more banal, yet dangerous content that drives these viral campaigns.

Their anti-LGBTQ+ organizing provides an ideological network for these more overtly extremist groups to link their values to the mainstream policies. Drag events are protested by members of Moms for Liberty as well as neo-Nazi organizations like the Blood Tribe, and male supremacist groups like the Proud Boys (Filby, 2023). This movement is supported by a larger network of conspiracy theorists like proponents of the QAnon movement that have organized around conspiracy theories like PizzaGate and the #SaveTheChildren movement, both of which claim to uncover a democratic-led child trafficking conspiracy or push a rebranded form of the antisemitic theory of 'blood libel' that claims 'global elites', a dog whistle for Jewish persons) are ritualistically murdering babies and consuming their blood (Lavin, 2023). According to the LGBTQ+ advocacy group, GLAAD there have been over 160 protests and significant threats at drag events since 2022 (GLAAD, 2023).

As this term continues to inspire targeted harassment, it has likewise become broadly used by both mainstream and fringe actors as an umbrella slur to depict anyone they see as in support of LGBTQ+ communities (often framed as Marxists, communists, socialists, or globalist) as attempting to sexually groom and/or exploit children through exposure to explicit material. The groomer slur began as a collusion between multiple social sectors reacting to public engagement with gender-inclusive language and policies. Public figures, often called 'trans-exclusionary radical feminists' (TERFS), jump started a larger movement, offering a pseudo-feminist framework to anti-trans rhetoric under the guise of "protecting women." This slur has become interwoven with organizing around anti-LGBTQ+ local policies, state legislation, and a call for book bans in school and public libraries. Both images below showcase the rhetoric used by the contemporary mothers' movement. Moms for Liberty's post was in response to an article detailing the harassment and stress many librarians face under the targeted

harassment by the far right. Their use of "groom" here implicates LGBTQ+ educators as complicit in sexually deviant behavior and potential threats to their children.

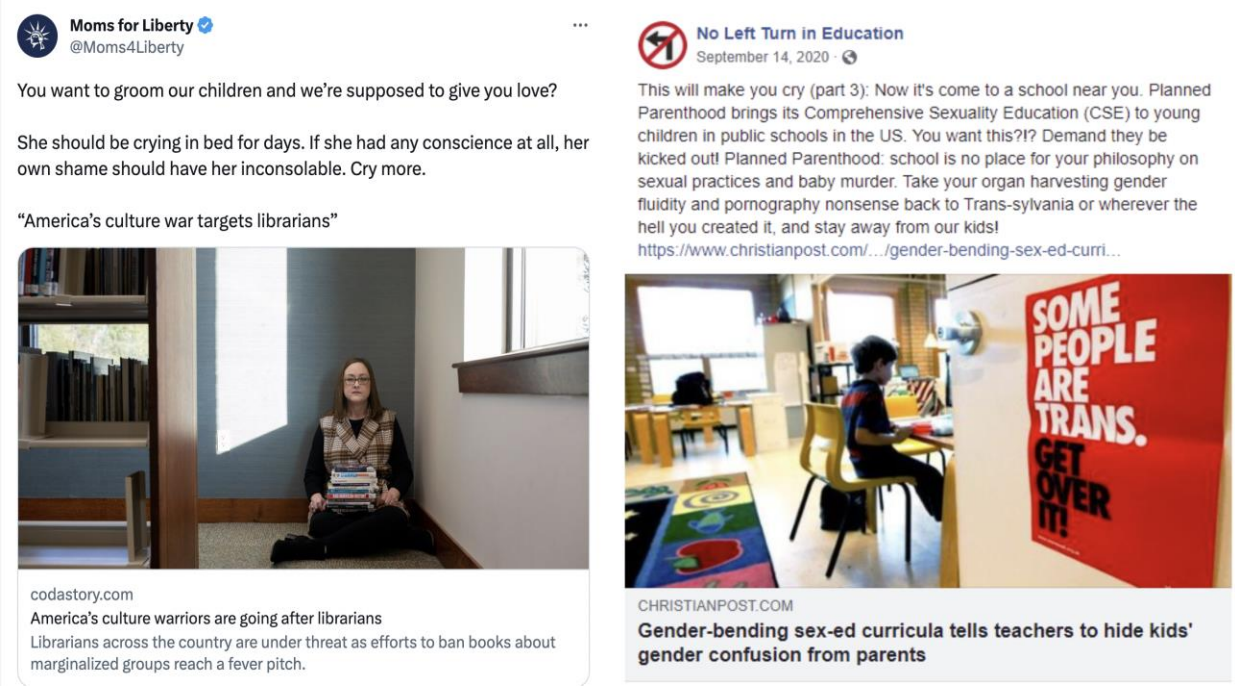


Figure 22 Moms for Liberty Twitter (left) No Left Turn in Education Facebook (right)

The 2022 Moms for Liberty summit in Florida hosted a session called Gender Ideology in Our Schools, where multiple speakers used the term "rapid-onset gender dysphoria" (Butler, 2022). The session presenter cited a former Brown University researcher, Lisa Littman, who has been roundly discredited due to an article she published in 2018 that argued gender identity, in youth today is a result of peer networks which spread their ideology, resulting in greater numbers of trans-identifying children (Littman, 2018).[79] Littman's study went viral, with prominent

[79] As Butler (2022) reports Littman's study was roundly debunked by social scientists, who took issue with, among other things, Littman's methodology, which used interviews with parents of trans kids as opposed to transgender

figures like Tucker Carlson citing it as proof that gender identities, often called 'gender ideology' or 'gender dysphoria' by far-right figures, amounted to an infectious medical crisis in today's youth. Far-right figures and groups like Moms for Liberty have used disinformation like this study to push for book bans and parental control over curriculum, stripping back state and federal regulations.

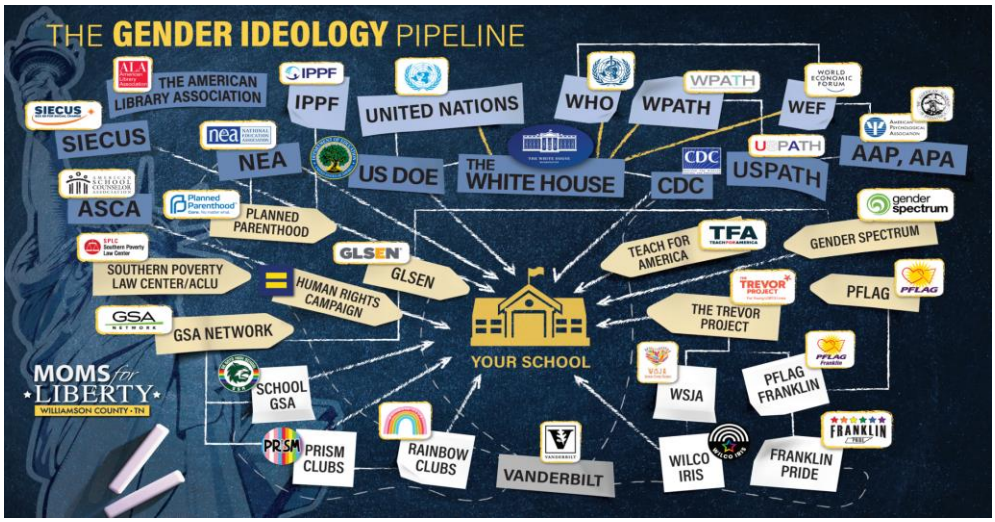


Figure 23 Moms for Liberty slide Williamson County, Tennessee website

One of the more active Moms for Liberty chapters, Williamson County, Tennessee, has created a resource guide for those engaged in this anti-public-school activism. Providing instructional videos on topics like Marxism, Critical Race Theory, library books, comprehensive sex education, and gender ideology. In a Moms for Liberty video titled "There is No Such Thing as a Transgender Child," co-founder Tiffany Justice speaks with guest, notorious anti-trans influencer Billboard Chris (actual name Chris Elston) about combating 'gender ideology,'

children themselves. Likewise, she drew participants for her study from communities known to be unsupportive of transgender people. Prominent medical organizations like the American Psychological Association and the Society of Behavioral Medicine, as well as the World Professional Association for Transgender Health have all rejected the theory of 'rapid onset gender dysphoria'.

arguing that transgenderism is a passing phase that parents and teachers should never encourage (Moms for Liberty, 2023). Gender ideology is a sweeping term used by far-right figures to describe any topic dealing with pronouns, trans or nonbinary identity, or more broadly LGBTQ+ concerns.

The image above is taken from the Williamson County, Tennessee chapter's website, and shows organizations and entities that have supported trans-inclusive policies, showcasing a supposed network of "gender ideology" that targets the public school system and children. Listed are government and global agencies like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), World Health Organization (CDC), the United Nations, as well as national educational agencies like the American Library Association (NLA), and the National Education Association (NEA). This framing pushes into conspiratorial thinking, creating a narrative where global and federal agencies are working together with "leftists," "Marxists," and a nefarious elite force to push a violent ideology and dismantle the nationalist familial structure. While gender ideology is a popular concept in Moms for Liberty materials, their social media accounts often traffic in another vitriolic term that has become synonymous with LGBTQ+, groomer.

Moms for Liberty and their broader network are most active on platforms like Facebook and Twitter, however individual engagement around the groomer narrative happens across all platforms, with TikTok serving as a mainstream hub in the past few years. Videos of drag story hours being disrupted have become common. Hashtags like #ProtectTheChildren and #SaveTheChildren are paired with #Groomers, #Trans, and #Pedophile. In a TikTok video posted on March 24, 2023, a man filmed a drag story hour hosted at what appeared to be a public library. The room was filled with young children and their mothers, with a drag performer sitting at the front reading from a children's book. The video begins with a woman asking the man

filming to mask, to which he declines and asks, “who brought the pedophile?” He continues to shout at the participants and organizers who attempt to get him to leave. The drag performer leaves the room as he shouts, “get out of here you pedophile! You’re not safe here!” and follows this by screaming at the mothers “this is sick! You godless whores!” as they attempt to take their toddlers out of the room. He continues to use derogatory language and slurs, scream curses at the mothers, all the while claiming he is there to “protect the children.”[80] Videos like this are inspired by a network of anti-LGBTQ+ influencers, with organizations like Moms for Liberty providing a veneer of professionalism and banality to vitriolic rhetoric that pushes for increasingly violent public response. Examples such as these are becoming increasingly frequent and are then legitimized by prominent politicians and far right influencers that laud confrontations as “concerned parents” protecting children.

Anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric has skyrocketed on social media in the past two years. A report by the Human Rights Campaign and the Center for Countering Digital Hate found that the average number of tweets per day that used slurs like “groomer” and “pedophile” in connection to LGBTQ+ people rose by 406% the month after DeSantis passed the ‘Don’t Say Gay’ bill, HB 1557 (officially titled the “Parental Rights in Education,” bill) which prohibits classroom instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity. The report likewise found that this content was mostly driven by a small group of far-right influencers and politicians like Representatives Marjorie Taylor Green and Lauren Boebert. In only a month's time 10 people produced 66% of impressions for the 500 most highly influential “groomer” tweets, reaching 48 million views

[80] For hateful content I am intentionally choosing to not share the original source material, including the user’s handle, so as to not further promote the damage this content has created. The exception is with accounts that are so prominent in the media that a mention in this dissertation will have no effect.

from this small group alone. Likewise, Facebook and Instagram had 59 paid ads that promoted the same content (Digital Hate Report, 2022).

Fascist networking does not rely on a central ideological or organizational point, even as they might congeal around various issues. Instead, fascism in the era of the Internet spreads through transmission across points of ideological and rhetorical contact. Becca Lewis calls this an "Alternative Influence Network" in which right-wing ideals spread asymmetrically across decentralized media points, connecting over ideas, goals, and content (Lewis, 2018). This influence network has been leveraged and expanded by the organizing tactics of Moms for Liberty and promoted by politicians like Florida Governor Ron DeSantis. As the key politician Moms for Liberty stumps for in his bid for the 2024 presidency, DeSantis has become a champion for this organization's causes.[81]



Figure 24 Lauren Boebert Twitter (left) Marjorie Taylor Green Twitter (right)

DeSantis signed into law HB 1557, popularly known as the "Don't Say Gay" bill (National Education Association, 2022). H.B. 1557 outlaws "classroom instruction" about "sexual orientation or gender identity" in kindergarten through third grade, and uses broad, purposefully-

[81] In 2022 Gov. Ron DeSantis began a vocal campaign against the Florida College Board and high school AP classes focused on race. Calling for an end to CRT indoctrination, DeSantis was eventually successful when the College Board released a revised official curriculum, divorced of much of the content that DeSantis and other far-right supporters were critical of (Hartocollis & Fawcett, 2023).

unclear language to create fear and confusion around what could be considered "not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate" in fourth grade and beyond. The law took effect July 1, 2022, and was subsequently expanded to include all K-12 grades in April 2023. H.B 1557 likewise empowers parents to file lawsuits against schools that don't comply, and win cash payouts, creating a litigious environment that encourages civilian backlash. This law draws from strategies used in the anti-abortion Texas Abortion Ban, that similarly relies on civic backlash and financial ruin for those not in compliance.

Bills like HB 1557 argue for these sweeping restrictions under the guise of "parental rights," and are often paired with increased state regulation in opposition to parental rights over gender affirming care.[82] On May 4, 2023, the Florida Senate passed CS/SB 254, likely to be signed by Gov. Ron DeSantis, that would allow the state to take custody of a child who was undergoing gender-affirming care (Yarborough, 2023). The text of the bill calls gender-affirming care, "sex-reassignment prescriptions or procedures," which would include puberty blockers and hormonal treatments like testosterone and qualifies this medical care as a form of "physical harm." This bill is unlikely to hold up as legal scholars have argued it's unconstitutional (Feldmen, 2023), but bills like these are applauded by the far-right and used to reframe and organize around anti-LGBTQ+ issues in more effective ways.

According to Human Rights Campaign, a nonprofit that tracks anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, the year 2023 has been a record for anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, with over 540 bills introduced, 220 of which target transgender and non-binary specifically, with 45 anti-LGBTQ+ bills enacted since May (Peele, 2023). While most of these bills will never pass, and were likely never

[82] Beyond education, state bills like ones being passed in Florida and Texas are restricting gender-transition medical care, utilizing the same political rhetoric and organizing networks to expand outside of education, to impact other social sectors in the process (Izagurirre & Farrington, 2023).

intended to, the language used in them is an effective attempt to increase public acceptance of anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment. A federal bill currently in process known as the Parent's Bill of Rights. Titled H.R.5, this bill is currently being read by the Senate, having passed the House.[83]

Its language states, "[t]his bill establishes various rights of parents and guardians regarding the public elementary or secondary school education (including secondary career and technical education) of their children." It likewise stipulates those schools and local educational agency (ELA), i.e., school boards, must comply in order to receive federal education funds. Among more mundane stipulations such as requiring parents to be informed as to the amount of school counselors that are employed by the school, it imposes sweeping changes such as requiring schools to allow parents to "review the budget, including all revenues and expenditures, of their child's school" and to "inspect the books and other reading materials in the library of their child's school" (Cicilline, 2021).

While on the surface this seems practical, it comes out of an attempt to shift the control of school curriculum and materials away from the state and into the individual parents' control. Drawing from earlier protestations by this movement around vaccine and masking mandates, the bill also restricts schools from vaccinating children without full parental consent. H.R.5 likewise stipulates that parents will be allowed to "know if their child's school operates, sponsors, or facilitates athletic programs or activities that permit an individual whose biological sex is male to participate in an athletic program or activity that is designed for individuals whose biological sex

[83] Either by design or by pure irony, H.R.5 of the previous Congress (#117) was the Equality Act, which prohibits, "discrimination based on sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity in areas including public accommodations and facilities, education, federal funding, employment, housing, credit, and the jury system. Specifically, the bill defines and includes sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity among the prohibited categories of discrimination or segregation," including denying a person access to locker rooms and restrooms based on gender identity. (H.R.5 - 117th Congress, 2021-2022)

is female" and to "know if their child's school allows an individual whose biological sex is male to use restrooms or changing rooms designated for individuals whose biological sex is female," providing individual parents the ability to police trans-inclusive policies and restrict them from their local communities.

Paired with the litigious environment curated by many new state laws, the passing of this or a similar federal bill would effectively criminalize children's ability to be outwardly transgendered in school. This is a rollback of individual parental and human rights, weaponizing the state for authoritarian and fascist ends, under the guise of limiting federal control.
On their main website, Moms for Liberty offers a pledge that individuals or politicians can partake in. It states,

> I pledge to honor the fundamental rights of parents including, but not limited to the right to direct the education, medical care, and moral upbringing of their children. I pledge to advance policies that strengthen parental involvement and decision-making, increase transparency, defend against government overreach, and secure parental rights at all levels of government" (Moms for Liberty Pledge).

The direction of education is not only an attack on trans students but covers a broad swath of "liberal" educational content that mothers of this movement take issue with. Like with LGBTQ+ inclusivity, racial equity is another core issue that mothers' groups of the current era are invested in curtailing. Republican controlled states are introducing policies and legislation meant to curtail diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) educational programs, essentially providing new language to old forms of segregated schooling. This has resulted in states such as Florida, Oklahoma, Texas and others passing legislation that rolls back gender-inclusive bathroom policies, curriculum on Black history, and opens school libraries up for parental-control over

books and educational materials deemed “inappropriate” leading to many books being banned that mention issues like segregation, queerness, slavery, and more.

The changes in school board regulations that attack so-called ‘CRT’ and ‘gender ideology’ in schools have been increasingly successful as groups like Moms for Liberty and No Left Turn have run local and state campaigns to replace administrators on school boards. In November 2022 the Berkeley County School District in South Carolina swore in newly elected board members, the majority of whom were endorsed by Moms for Liberty. Immediately after the ceremony, the new board fired Deon Jackson, the district's first Black superintendent, banned “critical race theory’, and set up a committee to review and ban books and educational materials they deemed inappropriate (Kingkade, 2022). This was a marked success for Moms for Liberty, who were the driving force behind the leadership changeover.

The takeover of school boards is only one element of the larger goal in taking control of the educational system. Many figures in the larger movement publicly support the dissolution of the Department of Education. The original Department of Education (DE) was founded in 1867, and has changed names over time, with a series of implemented expansions throughout the 20th century, including in how it relegated public services in more equitable ways through the civil rights era of the 1960s-1970s.

Under President Carter on May 4, 1980, the DE became a cabinet-level agency, providing it with more resources, autonomy, and authority.[84] The following year Regan took office, after running on a platform that promised to dissolve the DE as well as the Department of Energy. During his tenure, Regan significantly decreased the agency's authority and funding. Since this time the department has been a site of contention in the political and cultural war around

[84] Republicans and far-right figures often cite this as the origin of the department, ignoring its longer history to feed into the culture war narrative stemming from Regan vrs Carter.

education. On February 14, 2023, Rep. Thomas Massie (KY) introduced bill H.R. 899 *To Terminate the Department of Education* and has argued that "[u]nelected bureaucrats in Washington, D.C. should not be in charge of our children's intellectual and moral development…parents have the right to choose the most appropriate educational opportunity for their children, including home school, public school, or private school" (Massie, 2023).

Bills like this, while unlikely to be successful, are supported by prominent figures like Betsy DeVos, the Secretary of the Department of Education under the Trump administration, who has publicly called for the dissolution of the department she once served under and has been at the center of the push for school voucher programs meant to gut the public school system of financial support (Hutchinson, 2017). Scholars have argued that DeVos is one of the most dogged and effective proponents in the fight to privatize the education system and incorporated a hard-liner Christian nationalist framing to her political ideologies (Barkan, 2017).

At the Moms for Liberty 2022 summit, DeVos was invited to the main stage to speak with Tiffany Justice to discuss her positions on education. Telling the audience, "I personally think the Department of Education should not exist" to thunderous applause and a standing ovation, arguing that her work within the DE ultimately created opportunities for the current movement to make Federal level changes (DeVos, 2022). Speaking to the school voucher programs that she's been a champion for she said, "organizations like this [Moms for Liberty] are so important…as we move to an 'education freedom' environment," arguing that this movement will be vital in the coming years in ensuring the Federal government is no longer in control of the education system.

Both Arizona and Iowa passed bills allowing for "universal school choice" which essentially privatizes the state education system, relying on a neoliberal framework which allows parents the

choice of where to use their federal education funds, but also allows schools the choice of admittance. Analysts that have looked at previous voucher programs say this is a net negative, with drops in state testing scores on par with educational catastrophes like COVID-19, and many students with special needs or minority students losing federal protection as public schools are shuttered and private institutions turn away "undesirable" students (Cowen, 2023). Voucher programs like these become tax subsidies for existing private school families, and incentivize struggling, subpar private institutions to take on the remaining students for the tax bailout, to the detriment of the student's quality of education. These programs ultimately require the public school system to fund the private system, while systematically tearing federal oversight down in the process.

The privatization of the school system does not look inherently fascist as an authoritarian fascist state would have no use for a private system. However, within the United States, capitalist privatizing replaces authoritarian control in the attempt to take over institutions and retain control by a small minority. Alongside Moms for Liberty there are a select few groups leading the anti-CRT charge at the local and state level, the most prominent being No Left Turn in Education. The organization focuses on curtailing materials and curriculum in K-12 education that focuses on the history of race or LGBTQ+ issues. Founded by Elana Yaron Fishbein, whose Twitter handle includes the phrase "I am a Woman," describes herself as a mother who was horrified when in reaction to George Floyd's murder, her children's school increased their curriculum offerings on the history or U.S. racism. In response she withdrew her children from their school and became active in the anti-CRT movement, stating, "progressive indoctrination in the education system is having a devastating impact on our community and our nation," (Fishbein).

Prior to *Tucker Carlson Tonight*'s cancellation in April 2023, No Left Turn was featured on the FOX News show, boosting the group's Facebook followers from 200 to over 30,000. Fishbein credits Tucker Carlson for their success, claiming, "He launched our movements — he doesn't know it, but he did," (Hananoki, 2021). Media Matters has found that as of mid 2021 FOX News mentioned CRT over 1,300 times over the course of three months (Hananoki, 2021). Like anti-LGBTQ+ policies and bills, these groups have used disinformation around "CRT," to attack curriculum that deals with the racial history of the United States, under the guise that teaching about racism could harm white children's sense of wellbeing and self-worth. A proposed expansion of H.B. 7 is H.B. 999, which would prohibit any university or college from teaching "critical race theory" or any American history beyond teaching that the U.S. was "a new nation based on universal principles stated in the Declaration of Independence," (Andrade, 2023). While unlikely to hold up in court, this bill is an expression of what is truly being attacked under the framework of CRT. Fields of study that focus on gender, sexuality, or race, including African American Studies, Jewish Studies, and Ethnic Studies, are all being threatened by bills like this. DeSantis spoke to the conflation between Black studies and LGBTQ+ studies saying, "but we don't believe they should have an agenda imposed on them when you try to use Black history to shoehorn in queer theory, you are clearly trying to use that for political purposes," (Contorno, 2023).

Like many of the organizations and groups this dissertation is invested in, Moms for Liberty and No Left Turn utilizes an array of online platforms to engage with a broad audience and to connect to a network of far-right figures, including more overtly fascist influencers. Launched November 4, 2021, Mom's for Liberty co-founder Tiffany Justice produces in The Joyful Warriors Podcast, where they discuss ideology and strategy for their growing political

base. Aesthetically resembling 1990s evangelical tv series like …. Joyful Warriors hosts an array of men and women from the far-right to discuss topics like “gender ideology” such as Matt Walsh, a far-right figure who on his twitter bio describes himself as a ‘theocratic fascist’.

In January 2022 Walsh was suspended for content deemed hateful towards trans people. Once Elon Musk took over Twitter, Walsh encouraged his followers to harass and misgender trans twitter users claiming, "we have made huge strides against the trans agenda", and that Musk’s takeover will allow them to, "ramp up our efforts even more," (Lavietes, 2021). The podcast is used to network and disseminate narratives that feed the far-rights political goals, while offering an appeasing and consumable framework of traditional parenting and concerned motherhood. With guests like far-right journalist Luke Rosiak, who spread a misleading story that incorrectly reframed a student’s sexual assault as resulting from trans-inclusive bathroom policies, the podcast is another platform to connect Moms for Liberty with a wide array of right-wing anti-LGBTQ+ and CRT influencers.

The UCLA Law School’s CRT Forward Tracking Project has found 567 anti-CRT introduced bills at the local, state, and federal levels (UCLA, 2023). Likewise, the World Population Review has found that there are seven states that have effectively banned CRT, and another 16 states that are currently attempting to ban it (2023). DeSantis has been a leader in the legislative side of this movement, providing a template for other states to follow. In January 2023 he stated, “[w]e are also going to eliminate all DEI and [critical race theory] bureaucracies in the state of Florida. No funding, and that will wither on the vine...And I think that that’s very important because it really serves as an ideological filter, a political filter,” (Karanth, 2023). During the 2022 Mom’s for Liberty Summit in Tampa Florida DeSantis was in attendance with his wife, Casey, who stated, “It’s one thing for us to run a campaign ad, and it’s another thing for us to put some content on social media, which we’ll do…It’s another thing for you guys to be able to talk to your network of friends and say, ‘Here’s why this election is important,’” (Vern,

2022). Moms for Liberty has provided an online and offline organizing arm for politicians like DeSantis as well as pushing fascist rhetoric and policies through the banal veneer of motherhood, linking the extremist and right-wing mainstream sectors through shared goals.

4.5 Conclusion

White women's political movements in the United States have a history of leveraging their identity as a mother figure, both literally and figuratively, to use social media campaigns, memes, tweets, and grassroots or astroturfed organizing to push fascist policies and legislation, under the guise of concerned parenting. Fascism requires *selective populism* and groups like Moms for Liberty support that element though stumping for politicians like Governor Ron DeSantis who has made a name for himself running on a fascist platform. The historic and contemporary mothers' movements have seamlessly blended ideological networking with political activism and stumping to act as an effective tool in the arsenal of rebranding fascism as banal. Their focus on children, education, and motherhood legitimizes even their more overtly extremist content, lending power to their organizing and growing a stronger and more diffuse base. By presenting themselves as concerned mothers (and parents) working towards the goal of parental rights, Moms for Liberty can grow support of leaders of the fascist movement like Ron DeSantis, as well as implementing sweeping changes at the local and state levels through targeting the public school system and local school boards. The anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-CRT organizing of this era has in some ways been more effective than before, due to their access to the affordances of social media platforms.

Education has been and remains a central organizing strategy to push white supremacist, anti-Civil Rights, and anti-LGBTQ+ ideologies into the public mainstream. The old and new

media content, including social media platforms in the contemporary era, served these movements by creating access to a broad network of political and social figures that share in the women's ideological goals. Figures like Elizabeth Dilling served as an early framework for fascist organizing, made banal by her position as a woman and mother figure. Following the WWII era, leaders in the pro-segregation era like Nell Battle Lewis weaponized social mothering for a new era growing on the tactics of earlier decades. With the activism of the Civil Rights era of the 1970s, the mothers' movements grew to include anti-LGBTQ+ activism into their fold, paving the way for the contemporary movement, which combines a racist and anti-trans scope to increasingly significant effect. As white mothers, or women who position themselves as mothering figures for the nation, these women provide a banal veneer for fascist ideologies and a networking center for overtly fascist policies to be implemented. Groups like Moms for Liberty serve as a central hub in the political and ideological network of the rising fascist movement.

Conclusion: Where Are We Now

The United States is a nation of spectacles. The twenty-four-hour media cycle, the proliferation of social media platforms, and even in the way our consumer goods are marketed towards us, has all coalesced into an environment in which spectacles are competing with even larger spectacles for consumers' attention. Politics exist within this reality in which the largest and loudest voice will garner the most attention, and thus hold the most power. Douglas Kellner (2003) writes that, “spectacle itself is becoming one of the organizing principles of the economy, polity, society, and everyday life’ and that the Internet, “deploys spectacle as a means of promotion, reproduction, and the circulation and selling of commodities” (pg. 1). For French philosopher Guy Debord (1994) spectacle involves a relationship between a passivity and activity, between a willing submissive participant and an active producer. Fascism likewise thrives in this state, and utilizes spectacle to maintain its most complex element, *life as permanent warfare*. The United States has been primed to view itself as a martial power and to promote the ever-increasing military industrial complex. But in doing so, we have provided fascism an easy home to plug into a spectacle infused media economy and claim control of the narratives needed to propagate these cultural and real-world wars.

The term “fascism” was coined in 1921, by Italian dictator Benito Mussolini who used it to refer to his political party, the National Fascist Party. Derived from the word *fascio,* meaning to bundle, it represents an inclination towards collectivism and fraternity. The use of the term

represents the fascist desire to return to a fictional male-centric utopia in which strength and power were valued above all other attributes. Women only exist in this fantasy as sites of production for the nation and the male collective body. And because fascism grew in a world in which power is articulated through white supremacy, fascism will always promote and violently sustain that preexisting hierarchy. In many ways *American Patriot: The Social and Political Networks of Banal Fascism in the United States*, has been an exploration of fascism from below, but it has also been concerned with the leaders and influencers who have leveraged a movement already in motion to translate fascist culture into fascist policy. Primarily, this dissertation has been invested in theorizing a newly conceived term *banal fascism* which describes the ways that fascism has seeped unnoticed into American society. It has done this exploring the strategies of the far-right and through an examination of fascism as the organic outgrowth of institutional white and male supremacy in the United States.

This dissertation argues that fascism is both inherent to the United States project, and a result of the intentional breakdown of liberal and progressive politics. Umberto Eco (1995) argued that fascism is not a singular ideology, claiming "is not because fascism contained in itself, so to speak in their quintessential state, all the elements of any later form of totalitarianism. On the contrary, fascism had no quintessence." Eco argues that even articulated fascism, like in Mussolini's time, was "a rigid discombobulation, a structured confusion. Fascism was philosophically out of joint, but emotionally it was firmly fastened to some archetypal foundations." Paxton says much the same by arguing that fascisms are more malleable than other isms because, "they reject any universal value other than the success of chosen peoples in a Darwinian struggle for primacy," (p. 20). In the United States fascism has taken on the identity of God and Country, articulated through rabid patriotism and a cultural militarization that is

supported by Hollywood, the gun industry, and the military industrial complex. Fascist figures are now branded as American patriots who are standing against the tide of amoral progressive politics.

Modern patriotism has its roots in ancient forms of the same. In 1882 French political philosopher Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges argued that ancient patriotism amounted to a religious practice in which the 'Fatherland' or *terra patria* linked the individual to the 'blood and soil' lineage, marking him as part of a sacred space of familial and national worship, (Fustel de Coulanges, 1980). Sociologist Philip Gorski (2019) contends that in recent years religious nationalism has taken on a more metaphoric element compared to the overt blood conquest language of the past, and now relies heavily on loose understandings of the 'Judeo-Christian tradition' to claim blood heritage to 'God's country' and a religious-cultural lineage. White Christian nationalism makes up the foundation for fascism in the United States. Gorski claims the four elements of White Christian nationalism are, "blood purity, blood conquest, bloody apocalypses, and golden age nostalgia" and that they align with Trump populism even as it adds an element of secularism into the mix. In the context of the U.S., 'patriotism' has been used as a discursive tool to play on the affective relationship citizens have with *patriotic modes of being*. The goal being to blend white Christian nationalism and fascism into viewers' identification as a citizen of a fictitious white, Christian nation. It is a strategy that draws heavily on U.S. banal nationalism (Billig, 1995), reaching a national audience who already identifies with nationalistic myths, aesthetics, and values.

Myth here is an important element that holds significant social power. Myths can reveal more about a national being than actual historical accounts. According to McDaniel, Nooruddin, and Shortle (2022) myths should be understood as, "shared stories that shape the culture, politics,

institutions, communication, method of coping, and identity of a community" (p. 4). As Benedict Anderson (2016) argues, the nation is "an imagined political community" (p. 6) and contends that print capitalism and the religious networks of the 18th and 19th centuries helped spread the growth of American nationalism. Cofino (1997), in discussing mythmaking in Nazi Germany uses the term "collective memory" to describe the "experiential history of people's perceptions of the past where social action and symbolic representation commingle," (p. 11). Myth is vital to the political act of imagining and reimagining the nation, and while patriotism in its original form is an amalgamation of nationalistic myths, its current form is better understood as a weapon for the forceful reimagining of an unformed fascist movement.

The reproduction and spread of myths are what binds community identity, and when core myths are threatened it amounts to a threat to that community's being. The biggest myth that supports both patriotism and nationalism is the belief that the United States is the greatest nation on Earth and the purest form of representational democracy (i.e., freedom). Many scholars and activists have rightly argued that the U.S. is in fact not a true democracy, and instead should be recognized as a theocracy (Davidson & Harris, 2009) or an oligarchy (Winters & Page, 2009). In decades past any criticism against the U.S. was seen as treasonous, anti-patriotic, or even communist. However, in recent years those on the broader far-right have begun incorporating dialogue traditionally found in what used to be termed the "radical right," made up of antistatists, separatists, and the like. This rhetoric has seeped into the mainstream, indicating a breakdown in the separate entities on the right-wing.

Since the 1980s there has existed a loose coalition of ideologically like-minded groups under the umbrella of the 'Patriot Movement' (Write, 2007). As earlier scholarship shows, this movement has always had a deep investment in conspiratorial thinking, which is used to confirm

their anti-government beliefs and their sense of aggrievement, all of which is fostered and spread in online spaces, (Nigel, 2000; Belew, 2019). These groups' overlapping ideologies have worked to connect a web of insular movements and communities in shared goals, often circulated and organized in online spaces. The importance of this can be felt in how traditional conservative groups who identified hyper-patriotic and pro-government, are now trafficking in antigovernment conspiracies and rhetoric. The Capitol insurrection, as well as other protests leading up to that day were hotbeds for members of this movement, both in its unorganized and organized forms.

Chapter One discusses a political strategy theorized by Davidson and Harris (2006) which they argue was used by the right-wing to grow their base. It includes, 1. Identify the main enemy, 2. Build counter-theory, 3. Build mass communications, 4. Build base communities, 5. Build the counter-hegemonic bloc, 6. Take power in government, and finally, 7. Radical reconstruction of society (p. 53-54). As has been shown throughout this dissertation, overt fascism rarely progresses in this strategy, failing to garner enough mainstream support to build a counter-hegemonic bloc, and often struggling with the earlier stages like building mass communications. We only must look at earlier neo-Nazi organizations in the contemporary United States to see how poorly their ideas land and how unwilling more established political networks are to work with them. Organizations like the Atomwaffen Division (AWD) a terrorist neo-Nazi group is known for trafficking in overtly fascist rhetoric and symbols and recruiting members primarily through online message boards (SPLC, n.d.). However, their ability to connect to the larger fascist movement has been hampered by their overt displays of Nazi imagery and language, and as of today they have no known chapters.



Figure 25 Patriot Front marches in Washington DC, December 2021 Photograph: Win McNamee/Getty Images

A newer white supremacist and overtly fascist group is known as the Patriot Front. Founded in 2017 after the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, by Thomas Rousseau, a prior member of the neo-Nazi group Vanguard America. Unlike Vanguard America or Atomwaffen Division, Patriot Front rejects Nazi imagery like the Swastika or the Aryan Black Sun, instead using American flags and slogans like "Reclaim America" while still trafficking in the same conspiracy theories and racist rhetoric that other more overt groups use (Ryan, 2022). Like most fascist organizations their content and recruitment happen online, and they readily plug into a media economy that is primed for spectacles like masked men marching on Washington D.C. The Patriot Front are particularly media savvy in comparison to others, providing striking images and video packages that are then circulated on alt-social platforms such as Gab or Telegram. Even though they have adopted strategies from the larger far-right movement, shifting their

rhetoric and images to be read as banal by some, they remain less effective because they have separated themselves from the mainstream. Their ability to influence is hampered by their willingness to engage in radical tactics. However, they do provide an example of how overtly fascist organizations have begun to adopt more banal tactics to garner recruits and gain wider impact. Even with these new tactics, the banal form remains the most impactful and is rapidly working towards taking power in the government, leaving only the final stage, a radical reconstruction of society, left to accomplish.

As this dissertation is being completed there are new strategies, policies, legislation, and hate-filled campaigns that flood social media daily and ooze their way into the halls of Congress. Public education remains a prime target for the far-right with fascist policies being placed at the Federal, State, and local levels in the form of anti-DEI policies and restrictions on trans-inclusivity. Banal fascism describes the everydayness of the fascist project, one that seeps into the national being and constructs a ubiquitous sense of fascist identity that necessitates an insider/outsider construct. The U.S. is a carceral state that encourages militarization of its civic population and maintains white supremacist infrastructures both hidden and not. This is the basis for fascist framing, and yet, the banal also requires more mundane formations such as branding, social communication, and the everydayness of ideologies embedded in personal identity. This dissertation has been an exploration of how that everydayness is constructed, maintained, and how it is then realized in the form of policy and law.

Fascist Christianity

Fascism, like Christian nationalism, seeks to remake the nation in its image. This image is made up of an imagined past that privileges a fictional collective body as supreme. Chapter

One, “Coded Christian Nationalism: Patriots, Influencers, and The American Christofascist Movement” addresses the ways that Christian nationalism has supported religious fascism in the United States. The term Christofascism was coined by liberation theologist Dorothee Sollë (1970) and described an inherent totalitarianism in Christianity and an inclination towards fascist values. She theorized that the ossification of Christian thought stemmed from its infatuation with civil obedience, which she sees as being quintessential to fascism. This chapter explores both historical and contemporary examples of Christofascist influencers that have mobilized an already existing nationalist base to implement fascist ideals at the state and national levels. In the contemporary eras this looks like Facebook live videos of leaders of the ‘Patriot Party’ that defend conspiracy theories about the election and argue for an upcoming holy war in which they are positioned as both warriors and potential martyrs.

Christofascist influencers of the past like Father Coughlin mobilized their base over radio and newsprint medias, while contemporary influencers like Ken Peters and Greg Locke use social media to engage in media spectacles like book burnings or protest outside abortion clinics and frame their narratives around patriotic warfare they are conducting against the ‘liberal elite’. Peters and Locke invoke the visage of the soldier, whose potential death comes alongside promissory violence against one's enemies. Jason Bruner in *Imagining Persecution* argues that the concept of the persecuted church offers authenticity for those willing to face violence for their beliefs (Bruner, 2021). For influencers of a Christian fascist movement “patriot” has replaced “Christian” as the signifier for authenticity, even as it’s married to a religious framework that marks their cause divine. As scholars of Christian nationalism have found, white evangelicals who make up the majority of this movement are inclined towards authoritarianism

(Du Mez, 2020) and thus have an easier ability to evolve into a fascist movement under the proper circumstances.

Fascist Masculinity

Scholar of fascism, J. A. Mangan (1999) uses the term 'fascist Superman' to describe an iconic fascist body that is used as a vehicle for fascist national myth-making and as a representation of the imaginary perfected being. He argues that the body acts as a metaphor for society, especially a society that views the body as emblematic of the supremacist nation. For the fascist society, the body of the male warrior is a perfect representation of state power and national supremacy. As fascism is a religion of war and death, the fascist body must be a soldier. He argues that in codified fascist movements the primary goal is to create a new, supreme form of human, the *homo fascistus*, which is the genesis of the fascist Superman. Chapter Two "They Hate Us for Our Freedom: Warrior Media and the Making of a Fascist Hero" analyzes an American form of the fascist Superman. War and militarism are deeply intertwined in the American identity, both as a nationalist identity, and for many, a personal one. To be American for many means to be patriotic, and to support the military industrial complex's global imperialism. Gender scholar Susan Jeffords (2004) argues that the body of the soldier merges with the spectacle of war and war technology (pg, 13).

Chris Kyle was an American sniper and Navy SEAL. He became known as the most lethal sniper in American history. In 2012 Chris Kyle, an ex-U.S. Navy Seal published the memoir, *American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in the U.S. Military History.* This book was eventually turned into the film *American Sniper* in 2014. Through these two media forms Kyle is offered up as an exemplar of U.S. military strength and white patriotic

masculinity. He has become representative of a new form of fascist soldier for an American audience. Through the spectacle of Hollywood film, which has a history of promoting the military industrial complex as the primary site of nationalist patriotism, Kyle becomes code for the purest form of idealized masculinity. His use of the Marvel comic Punisher skull in the book and film created a space for the skull to become iconic itself. After Kyle's death in 2013 his martyr status codified him as the eternal fascist Superman who died for his nation. The Punisher skull thus became representative of the ideals that Kyle had translated. Vigilantism, war, male supremacy, and white supremacy were all then coded into the Punisher icon, which then became a viral cultural sensation, used by police forces, military servicemembers, militias, and far-right commentators on social media sites. Ultimately, the Punisher skull has been sold and consumed to a nationalistic public as an icon for fascist values that remain banal through the layering of cultural content and patriotic rhetoric.

Fascist Branding

The attempted coup of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2020, created a momentary riff in U.S. society, when what was banal became more overt. Major corporate funders fled many right-wing institutions as they saw it as potentially harmful to their brands. However shortly after the insurrection public critique died down and funders shifted back to the old "normal" with companies like Amazon, Walmart, and Home Depot once again providing millions of dollars to institutions that work to support far-right extremism, including the Republican Attorneys General Association (Marritz, 2021). Corporations and corporate brands have become engaged in political commentary more frequently as of late. With national forms of spectacle becoming more politically polarizing, brands have taken political stances in the public eye to

market towards the larger and more economically powerful political base.

Companies like Nike, Starbucks, and Ben & Jerry's have all waded into national political discourse over the past decade. The Black Lives Matter movement provided an opportunity for these corporations to engage in political content in opposition to the Trump administration's actions (Knoebel, 2018). For the fascist base this meant responding with their own forms of political spectacle, often in the form of burning or shooting merchandise from these companies. However, there also arose a network of fascist brands that positioned themselves as a reaction to the 'unpatriotic' content produced by corporations like Nike and Starbucks. Black Rifle Coffee Company and Nine Line Apparel both arose in response to so-called liberal brands and offered content and merchandise to a right-wing base offering them branded products to consume as a form of political protest. Their social media content, podcasts, and other Internet-based engagement provided an ideological network between them and similar brands. This chapter, "'Relentlessly Patriotic': The Commodification of Banal Fascism" analyzes fascist branded content and traces how this has supported the construction and maintenance of militant communities, including through the rise of the fascist warrior myth. It likewise analyzes these brands' use of social media influencers as mechanisms to push militant content in mainstream spaces and proliferate fascist ideals under the banal guise of patriotism and American exceptionalism.

Fascist Motherhood

Chapter Four "'They're Coming for Your Kids': The U.S. Mothers' Movement and Banal Fascism" provides a history and analysis of fascist mother's movements and considers how race, education, and sexuality acted as political linchpins through which the movements

were able to shift local and state policies towards a fascist framework. An early example of this was Anita Bryant who formed an anti-LGBTQ+ campaign to reverse a 1977 Miami-Dade Florida ordinance that restricted educational discrimination based on one's sexual identity. A mirror reflection of this is happening now. In April 2022 a Miami-Dade Florida school board voted to approve a set of textbooks to support their sexual education program. However, this became controversial after Florida Governor Ron DeSantis passed the 'Don't Say Gay' Law H.B. 1557, (Parental Rights in Education Law).

After an outcry by a group of vocal parents the school board reconvened and reversed their decision, removing the textbooks from the curriculum (Jiménez, 2022). The books covered what they considered to be "prohibited topics" which include 'Comprehensive Health Skills' covering pregnancy prevention, sexually transmitted diseases, human sexuality, as well as drug and alcohol safety issues. Groups like Moms for Liberty, non-profit and major grassroots organizing arm for the far-right, and No Left Turn in Education, the group impacting the majority of the anti-Critical Race Theory policies, are core to the growth and establishment of the fascist movement, and they provide a critical banal veneer to fascist policies.

White women's political movements in the United States have a history of leveraging their identity as mother figures, both literally and figuratively, by uses social media campaigns, memes, tweets, and grassroots or astroturfed organizing to push fascist policies and legislation, under the guise of concerned parenting.

Groups like Moms for Liberty utilize an already mobilized base to grow a form of *selective populism* that politicians they are in support of like Governor Ron DeSantis are then able to be grafted into. Whether or not this will ultimately be effective for DeSantis (he's in a struggle against an already established populist base under Donald Trump) is less important. The

organizing has its greatest impact not in the establishment of a fascist authoritarian leader, which either Trump or DeSantis could easily provide, but in the undermining of state and local infrastructure and the destruction of public institutions like education. By focusing their messaging on children, education, and motherhood they have created a narrative that centers a white national myth and legitimizes even their more overtly extremist content, lending power to their organizing and growing a stronger and more diffuse base. And their use of spectacle through the proliferation of videos, memes, and other content on social media has proven an effective tool for these ends.

Education has been and remains a central organizing strategy to push white supremacist, anti-Civil Rights, and anti-LGBTQ+ ideologies into the public mainstream. The old and new media content, including social media platforms in the contemporary era, served these movements by creating access to a broad network of political and social figures that share in the women's ideological goals. Figures like Elizabeth Dillig served as an early framework for fascist organizing, made banal by her position as a woman and mother figure. Following the WWII era, leaders in the pro-segregation era like Nell Battle Lewis weaponized social mothering for a new era growing on the tactics of earlier decades. With the activism of the Civil Rights era of the 1970s, the mothers' movements grew to include anti-LGBTQ+ activism into their fold, paving the way for the contemporary movement, which combines a racist and anti-trans scope to increasingly significant effect.

As white mothers, or women who position themselves as mothering figures for the nation, these women provide a banal veneer for fascist ideologies and a networking center for overtly fascist policies to be implemented. Groups like Moms for Liberty serve as a central hub in the political and ideological network of the rising fascist movement.

These organizations are prominent examples of how far fascism has merged into the mainstream in recent years, and how they have drawn from a history of similar strategies and rhetoric to make greater impact. Moms for Liberty and No Left Turn have a lineage in organized parental rights movements like the segregationist movement of the 1950s and 1960s as well as the anti-gay movement of the 1970s and 1980s. And none of these organizations have developed in a vacuum. Fascism, especially Chistofascism has informed these groups since the 1930s, and has led to this current moment in which presidential candidates are being supported by white supremacy and Christofascism that has been branded as a parental movement designed to protect their children from an evil leftist educational system. This dissertation has explored the various avenues fascism in the United States has taken in both more overt and banal forms. Alongside early fascist thought leaders like Father Coughlin or contemporary Christian nationalists like Pastor Ken Peters there exists longstanding frameworks that fascism has grafted onto to create an American form of banal fascism. To truly understand and be capable of resistance, scholars of fascism and American culture must be able to recognize fascism in its banal form and the cultural infrastructures that support it, including Christian nationalism, militarization, consumer culture, and fascist motherhood. Fascism thrives in spaces unseen, even when those spaces are wrapped in a flag and a cross. Without acknowledging the banal there is no hope of ending the overt.

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