The Economist explains

**What is “White Nationalism”?**

Governments have underestimated a growing, and murderous, threat.

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THE SURGE in terrorist attacks by white nationalists includes, this year, the massacres in Christchurch (51 dead) and El Paso (22 dead). Often the killers cite fears of white “replacement” and draw inspiration from other, similar atrocities, especially Anders Breivik’s slaughter in 2011 of 77 people in Oslo and a nearby island. But what is white nationalism, and where did it come from?

The phenomenon is hard to define because of its ideological and geographical fractiousness. Broadly, white nationalists want to achieve an ethno-state of, and for, whites. Some do their best to avoid overtly claiming that any race is inferior, arguing that each should have its own ethno-state. The majority, however, are white supremacists, who also believe that races form a normative hierarchy with whiteness at the top. They demand policies ranging from stricter controls on immigration to wholesale ethnic cleansing, or even genocide. All this is often tied to the fear of “white genocide”, or white “replacement”, ie, the notion that the “white race” is being squeezed out of existence through its own low birth rate, miscegenation and more prolific reproduction by non-white people.

Modern white nationalism, which has spread across the world, first emerged in America after the civil war. With the end of slavery, states took action to preserve the privileged position of American Protestants of western European heritage, including “Jim Crow” laws that enforced segregation. Others took to paramilitary violence and lynchings. The fixation with being white grew with increased immigration, especially of Chinese people, Irish Catholics, southern Europeans and Jews. New immigration acts were designed to restrict the number of new arrivals. Madison Grant’s “The Passing of the Great Race”, published in 1916, melded nativist sentiment with **eugenics** to produce a theory of white supremacy and “race suicide”. Adolf Hitler reportedly wrote to Grant, stating that the book was “his bible”.

Though discredited by the war against Nazism and later by the civil-rights struggles of the 1950s and 60s, white nationalism experienced a resurgence towards the end of the 20th century, leading to a number of violent attacks in America and Europe.

In 1988 David Lane wrote “The White Genocide Manifesto”, giving a new name to Grant’s theory of “race suicide”. This text introduced the world to white nationalism’s rallying cry: “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children”, a phrase canonised by white nationalists as “the 14 words”. Beyond a core belief in white superiority, white nationalists vary widely in their views. Some share the deep suspicion of the federal government found in militia groups; some embrace a revisionist history of the civil war that glorifies the Confederacy; some believe in anti-Semitic conspiracies about global Jewish control, including the theory that an internationalist Jewish elite is responsible for encouraging immigration. “The Turner Diaries”, a white-nationalist dystopic fantasy published in 1978 by William Luther Pierce, told the story of an armed insurrection against the federal government by defenders of the white race. It influenced both Lane and Timothy McVeigh, a disenchanted army veteran and gun-rights enthusiast who carried out the Oklahoma City bombing, killing 168 people in 1995.

White nationalism evolved rapidly with the advent of the internet. It has picked up the irony-tinged discourse of the darker corners of cyberspace to couch political views in a humour that never reveals whether the writer is serious or not. This allows white nationalists to use non-believers, just in it “for the lulz [laughs]”, to spread their message to a wider audience. In Europe, meanwhile, white nationalists agonised about a supposed Islamic invasion, particularly after 9/11 and the rise of global jihadism. In “The Great Replacement”, Renaud Camus claimed true Frenchmen were being supplanted by immigrants from Africa and the Middle East, encouraged by a “replacist” elite. American white nationalists have incorporated Muslims into their taxonomy of invading races but remain mostly focused on Latinos, blacks and Jews.

Donald Trump’s critics accuse him of being a white nationalist. That goes beyond the evidence. However, his words do play into the supremacist ideology. For example, in 2017 he described a “Unite the Right” march in Charlottesville, Virginia, as “people protesting very quietly the taking down the statue of Robert E. Lee”, a surprisingly gentle way of describing self-proclaimed Nazis marching with tiki torches and chanting “Jews will not replace us”. Last year right-wing extremists killed more people in America than in any year since 1995, the year of the Oklahoma City bombing. The vast majority of these were by white supremacists. It is a threat that authorities in the West have taken too lightly.