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Author(s): Brigitte L. Nacos, Robert Y. Shapiro and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon

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# Donald Trump: Aggressive Rhetoric and Political Violence

by Brigitte L. Nacos, Robert Y. Shapiro, and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon

## Abstract

*During Donald Trump's presidential candidacy and presidency political discourse in the United States became more hateful and divisive. Threats and actual violence against groups and individuals singled out and demonized by Trump increased. The targets of his verbal attacks were most of all racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, the news media collectively and individual journalists, and well-known politicians, mostly Democrats. There was a rise in bullying incidents in schools against minority students. Assuming that aggressive rhetoric by influential political leaders affect their supporters' words and deeds, we examined Trump's online and offline hate speech, the rhetorical reactions of his followers, and the violent consequences suffered by their declared enemies. We found that contrary to an old children's rhyme ("Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me") Trump's aggressive, divisive, and dehumanizing language was seconded by his followers and inflicted directly or indirectly psychological and physical harm to Trump's declared enemies.*

**Keywords:** violent speech, leaders, political violence, demagoguery, bullying, media

## Introduction

On September 29, 2019, with his impeachment looming, President Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump) retweeted a warning by the Evangelical Pastor Robert Jeffress, "If the Democrats are successful in removing the President from office it will cause a Civil War like fracture in this Nation from which our Country will never heal." Two days later, U.S. Representative Louie Gohmert, a Republican of Texas, warned Democrats that their "coup" was "pushing America into a civil war." [1] On far-right websites Trump supporters suggested drastic and even violent actions against the "enemy" within. Some warned that they may need to exercise their Second Amendment rights—in other words, take up arms against the traitors. Responding to one of Trump's daily Twitter attacks on Adam Schiff, the leading U.S. Representative in the impeachment inquiry, his followers seconded the President's rhetorical assaults. One male commenter attacked Schiff as "a co-conspirator [sic] in a coup attempt. This is treason." That same day, a 52-year old man in Tucson, Arizona, left a death threat on Schiff's voice mail. "I'm gonna f\_ing blow your brains out," he warned. [2] The would-be attacker told police officers that "he watches Fox News and likely was upset at something that he saw on the news." He also stated that "he strongly dislikes the Democrats, and feels they are to blame for the country's political issues." [3] In his residence, the police found an AR-15 assault rifle, two pistols, and 700 rounds of ammunition. [4]

Although these examples of hate speech and threats of violence seemed shocking, they were merely iterations of Trumpian rhetoric and signposts for significant increases in right-extreme violence and school bullying in the United States. Our research found that Trump's online and off-line hate speech corresponded with his followers' aggressive rhetoric, violent threats, and actual violence against Trump's declared "enemies," most of all, minorities, the news media, and oppositional politicians.

## Trump's Divisive and Violent Demagoguery

Donald Trump has been characterized and criticized as populist and autocrat. He certainly is first of all a demagogue who, like all demagogues, has distinguished between his loyal ingroup on the one hand and the disloyal outgroup(s) on the other hand. This polarization allows demagogues to stir "hatred of the outgroup(s)...through scapegoating." [5] Trump has proven a master in scapegoating others for all kinds of political, social, and cultural problems with Barack Obama, Democrats, the liberal "deep state", immigrants and refugees high on his lists of scapegoats. For example, when asked whether he would take responsibility for his

administration's failure to provide an efficient COVID-19 system, he first blamed his predecessor Obama and a set of circumstances. Then he said emphatically, "I don't take responsibility at all." [6]

According to one expert in the field, "demagoguery may be described as the process whereby skilled speakers and writers seek to influence public opinion by employing the traditional tools of rhetoric with complete indifference to truth." [7] This supports Patricia Robert-Miller's suggestion that "demagoguery is a subset of propaganda." [8] While demagogues love mass rallies to unleash their usually divisive rants and relish the waves of applause of "their" people, they also utilize the most effective communication technologies to carry their propaganda.

Media scholars distinguish between communication-as-transmission, the technical dimension devoted to disseminate information farther and faster, and communication-as-ritual, the most persuasive content of media. According to James Carey, ritual communication refers to the "sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and communality." [9] This assumes that at particular times, especially, during natural or human-caused disasters, whole communities, whole nations, can be drawn together by ritual communication, such as invoking shared values, patriotic sentiments, showing of the flag. It is telling that the U.S. flag was by far the most often (33.2%) posted emoji in President Trump's tweets and his followers' responses (29%). [10]

However, as Carey noted, there are also "rituals of excommunication" that pit groups against each other. [11] Trump has used his spoken and tweeted words ceaselessly to draw his loyal followers together in perceived communality while excluding outgroups from those representing "we, the people." During the 2016 presidential campaign he said, "the only important thing is unification of the people - because the other people don't mean anything." [12] In June 2020, he gave a televised speech in Tulsa, Oklahoma, that was labeled as the opening salvo of his reelection campaign. The following excerpts from this speech demonstrate how Trump celebrated his base as good Americans while simultaneously excommunicating evil "others" from the community of real patriots:

You are warriors, thank you.

We had some very bad people outside; they were doing bad things. They got rid of a lot of bad people that were there for a long time [they were in fact peaceful "Black Lives Matter" protesters]. Sort of like me in Washington, draining the swamp. I never knew it was so deep. But it's happening. It's happening, I never knew it was so deep. It's deep and thick and a lot of bad characters.

I stand before you today to declare the silent majority is stronger than ever before.

They want to demolish our heritage.

And when you see those lunatics all over the streets, it's damn nice to have arms. Damn nice. ... The right to keep and bear arms, we'll protect your second amendment. Above all, we will never stop fighting for the sacred values that bind us together as one America, we will support, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States.

Our incredible success in rebuilding America stands in stark contrast to the extremism and destruction and violence of the radical left.

We are one movement, one people, one family, and one glorious nation under God... Together we will make America wealthy again, we will make America strong again, we will make America proud again, we will make America safe again, and we will make America great again. [13]

This was textbook demagoguery. By bringing up the right to bear arms Trump issued a thinly veiled call to arms against the enemy within. As one student of rhetoric noted, "violence manifests itself in pinning labels on others and marking political, ethnic, racial, confessional, subcultural, sexist words. Violent speech emphasizes alienating differences between persons, social groups, or communities. Violent speech demarcates." [14]

An old children's rhyme claims, "sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me!" The

rhyme's message is misleading because certain spoken and written words can have psychological and physical effects. As Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. wrote in a Supreme Court opinion about 100 years ago, "falsely shouting fire in a theater and causing a panic" would not be covered by free speech rights.[15] Sociologist Mary R. Jackman concluded that "verbal and written actions that derogate, defame, or humiliate an individual or group may inflict substantial psychological, social, or material injuries without being as conspicuous or flagrant as physical violence." [16] Legal scholar Mari Matsuda speaks of "violence of the word" that in the extreme can inflict physical injury in that "victims of vicious hate propaganda have experienced physiological symptoms and emotional distress ranging from fear in the gut, rapid pulse rate and difficulty in breathing, nightmares, post-traumatic stress disorder, hypertension, psychosis, and suicide." [17]

One form of such aggressive behavior is bullying which is committed so often in American schools, workplaces, homes, and elsewhere that experts more recently began to warn of a bullying epidemic.[18] Bullying occurs in real and virtual spaces. Perpetrators and victims of verbal (and sometimes physical) bullying are children, adolescents, and adults with the bully typically targeting weaker victims. When influential persons, such as political and religious leaders, engage in demagoguery that vilifies political opponents, ethnic, racial, and religious groups, journalists and whole news organizations, the consequences transcend by far the hate speech of the bully next door and on social media platforms. It is ironic that Donald Trump inspired bullying, whereas First Lady Melania Trump championed an anti-bullying campaign. Targets of hate speech are particularly vulnerable, when the aggressive rhetoricians are powerful individuals in the public sphere with fanatical followers. As one scholar noted, "The linguistic violence executed by power is particularly dangerous and is manifested in purposeful confusion and temptation based on supremacy and predominance." [19]

An important device in the demagogue's linguistic toolbox blemishes the humanity of groups that do not belong to the ingroup. The goal is to reduce "an entire segment of the population into profligate, pernicious, and dastardly subhumans." [20] Trump called unwelcomed immigrants repeatedly "animals"—not only when he singled out Latinos in the criminal MS-13 gang. Demanding tougher immigration laws President Trump said at one occasion, "We have people coming into the country or trying to come in, we're stopping a lot of them... You wouldn't believe how bad these people are. These aren't people. These are animals." [21] He called "Never Trump" Republicans, Democrats, alleged members of "the deep state," and journalists repeatedly "human scum" or "scum". [22] As Albert Bandura noted, "dehumanized persons are treated much more punitively than persons who have not been divested of their human qualities." Thus, by calling Hillary Clinton "the devil" Trump made it easier for his supporters to join forces in chanting, "Lock Her Up!" "Lock Her Up." By attacking Adam Schiff as "human scum" President Trump disengaged from moral norms and influenced some of his fanatical followers. When Trump unleashed tweet attacks on "Black Lives Matter" protesters and threatened with "law and order" measures, he was echoed by devoted supporters with responses like these:

@realDonaldTrump I don't say this lightly, Mr. President: But, people are acting like wild animals, victimizing whomever they please. And, wild animals only respect strength. It's time to be strong. Send in the military. Anyone being violent, make an example of them, with lead (June 3, 2020).

@realDonaldTrump Please just deploy the military and take control of these animals who are ruining our cities! (June 3, 2020).

@realDonaldTrump Please use the army against these treasonous animals (June 3, 2020).

@realDonaldTrump please Mister kill all that's [sic] animals please (June 4, 2020).

@realDonaldTrump So sad! These animals have no respect for human life and not fooling around (June 4, 2020). [23]

In fall 2020, during a campaign stop in Minnesota, President Trump invoked the pseudo-scientific eugenics saga of white genetic superiority. "You have good genes. A lot of it is about the genes, isn't it, don't you believe? The racehorse theory. You think we're so different? You have good genes in Minnesota," he told his almost all-white audience. He warned his supporters that in case of his rival Joe Biden's election victory their state would

become “a refugee camp” filled with “Islamic extremists”—an insult directed at Minnesota’s more than 50,000 Somali immigrants.[24]

Trump’s branding slogan “Make America Great Again” was a metaphor for a return to White Christian dominance of earlier times and the subjugation of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. This was the ultimate division between “good” and “bad” groups. His promise to build a wall along the U.S. border with Mexico and the rallying screams of his followers, “Build the Wall! Build the Wall!” stood for stopping non-Whites from coming into the country. White Nationalists understood Trump’s dog whistles from the outset. One sure sign was that White Supremacists and Neo-Nazis like David Duke, a former Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard, and Andrew Anglin, the creator of the racist website “Daily Stormer,” endorsed Trump early on in his run for the presidency.

### ***Red Meat for Anti-Semites and Other Racists***

On October 13, 2016, three weeks before Election Day, Trump gave a speech in West Palm Beach that reiterated his major campaign topics. While never mentioning the Republican Party that nominated him, he did invoke the “movement” nine times. Twice he repeated the familiar campaign theme, “We will take back this country for you and we will make America great again.” He attacked “immigration,” “illegal immigration,” and, not surprisingly, the “corrupt” political establishment, the news media in general, the “failing” *New York Times* in particular, and, reminiscent of Joe McCarthy, the State Department for engaging “in a massive coverup of widespread criminal activity.”[25]

But whereas the above was a rehash of earlier campaign rants, at this particular rally Trump threw red meat in the direction of racists as he had not done before in passages as the following:

Hillary Clinton meets in secret with international banks to plot the destruction of U.S. sovereignty in order to enrich these global financial powers, her special-interest friends and her donors.

This election will determine whether we are a free nation or whether we have only the illusion of democracy, but are in fact controlled by a small handful of global special interests rigging the system... The establishment and their media enablers will control over this nation through means that are very well known. Anyone who challenges their control is deemed a sexist, a racist, a xenophobe, and morally deformed.

While many Americans may not have decoded these sentences, the White Supremacy/Neo-Nazi community heard Trump’s messages clearly. After all, his allegations smacked of these circles’ doctrine, namely, that global banking and media elites, both controlled by Jews, are in cahoots with non-patriotic liberals like Hillary Clinton to destroy White American and Western civilization under the guise of multiculturalism. The *Daily Stormer’s* Andrew Anglin, whose website signals its racist content with dashboard categories like “Jewish Problem” and “Race War,” was euphoric. After announcing in the headline of his post that “Donald Trump is literally Hitler,” he ended with a one sentence summary of Trump’s speech, “He said a lot of bad things about globalism, the media, the banks, and lobbyists, and those are all very J---Sheeeit.”[26] The responses by readers reflected Anglin’s racism. A female commenter wrote, “They’ve tried and tried to break the bonds of white unity all over the globe, and they had us cornered for a few decades, but we see, every day, signs that our racial solidarity is coming back with a vengeance.” Posting a swastika under his comment one man rejoiced, “I was like, literally, tearing my eyes out watching Trump’s speech! I literally exploded. It was like literally 1933. He’s literally Hitler!”[27]

School bullies picked up on the rise of White Supremacy voices and slogans. A teacher in Colorado reported that after Trump’s election victory “seventh-grade white boys [were] yelling, ‘Heil Trump.’” Another teacher witnessed for the first time in fifteen years of teaching that swastikas were “appearing all over school furniture.”[28] These incidents did not fade away during Trump’s presidency. In the fall of 2018, a teacher in the state of Washington reported, “Student taped a piece of paper with a swastika on my classroom wall. This was a couple of days after

the shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue, and I am Jewish.” An elementary student in New York said, “I’m a fan of Hitler! God sent Hitler down to kill the Jews because they nailed Jesus to the cross.”[29] In the days, months, and years following Trump’s election victory, the words school bullies used most often were according to one report, “the ‘n-word,’ various versions of ‘build the wall’ and ‘go back to [insert foreign country name here, usually Mexico].’ The most common hate symbol: swastikas.”[30]

In August 2017, White nationalist leaders organized a two-day “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in an effort to amalgamate various right-extreme groups under a strong Alt-Right umbrella. Bearing arms, waving confederate flags, and displaying Nazi symbols, the marchers chanted “Jews will not replace us!” and “blood and soil” (the translation of the racist Nazi slogan “Blut und Boden”). In his speech, David Duke summarized American Neo-Nazis’ core belief. “The truth is,” he said, “the American media, and the American political system, and the American Federal Reserve, is dominated by a tiny minority: the Jewish Zionist cause.”[31]

After clashes between “Unite the Right” crowds and counter-protesters, among them Antifa [for anti-fascist] members, one White Supremacist drove his car deliberately in high speed into a crowd of peaceful protesters killing one woman and injuring 19 other persons. Two days later, reading from a teleprompter President Trump condemned racism as evil and called out the KKK, neo-Nazis, and White Supremacists. But a day later, during a press conference, he said unscripted, “You had some very bad people in that group, but you also had people that were very fine people, on both sides.”[32] He added that “there was a group on one side that was bad, and you had a group on the other side that was also very violent.” Alt-Right leaders and followers liked what they heard.

For Neo-Nazis the American billionaire investor and philanthropist George Soros exemplified members of the alleged Jewish cabal poised to dominate U.S and global financial and political interests. Soros’s generous donations to liberal causes at home and pro-democracy forces abroad put him center stage in numerous conspiracy theories. In the weeks before the 2018 mid-term elections, when President Trump warned voters of [non-existent] huge caravans of Central American migrants moving toward America’s Southern border, conspiracy theorists claimed that Soros’s Open Society Foundation paid migrants to join the caravans. During a reception for young Black conservatives in the White House, Trump attacked globalists for “cheating American workers.” When his guests shouted “Soros” and “lock him up,” the President responded, “lock him up!”[33] And at the heights of the 2020 “Black Lives Matter” protests that demanded the defunding of police departments, online conspiracy theories accused Soros once again of financing the mass protests—again without any evidence.

President Trump retweeted anti-Soros claims, among them this item published originally by Breitbart.com:

RT [@BreitbartNews](#) REVEALED: An anti-deportation group partnering with George Soros’s Open Society Foundation is one of the groups behind the “defund the police” movement.

Trump’s followers seconded the allegation with a multitude of tweet responses, such as:

#AntifaAreFascist #AntifaTerrorists #SorosForPrison #NoPurpleRevolution #noNWO #SorosForPrison #NoPurpleRevolution #noNWO

Is the call for the arrest of George Soros and freezing of all his assets coming up next?

No mercy for terrorists! #Antifaterrorists #ArrestGeorgeSoros

Neo-Nazi and White Supremacy dogma were openly at home on the U.S. president’s Twitter page. Around the same time, Trump posted a video of supporters in Florida shouting “White Power!” with the approving comment, “Thank you to the great people of The Villages. The Radical Left Do Nothing Democrats will Fall in the Fall. Corrupt Joe is shot. See you soon!!!”[34]

### *Vilifying President Obama and Other Blacks*

After Barack Obama won the presidential election in 2008, White Supremacists were devastated. A Black man in the Oval Office meant for them the end of “their” America. The Aryan Nation’s website displayed a tombstone with the inscription: United States of America. Born: July 4, 1776. Died: Nov. 4, 2008. During Obama’s two terms in office and thereafter White Supremacists’ racist attacks against the first Black American president never subsided; they vilified and dehumanized him. And nobody poured publicly more oil onto the flames of racist hate against Blacks than Donald Trump. First, he became the public face of the so-called birther conspiracy theory that depicted Obama as illegitimate president because he was allegedly not born in the United States but in Kenya; secondly, as presidential candidate and president, he accused Obama to be in bed with Islamic terrorists—an allusion to many birthers’ belief that Obama was not a Christian but a Muslim.

The fact that a Black man was the president of the United States of America was unacceptable for racists and motivated them to invent reasons to attack and dehumanize him as illegitimate imposter. White Nationalists’ rhetorical assaults against President Obama were also metaphorical bouts against the Black race in general. And Donald Trump led the public charge as the head birther conspiracy theorist.

From late 2011, when he began to question Obama’s birthplace, through mid-September 2015, when he was a declared presidential candidate, Trump devoted 116 tweets to promote the absurd birther conspiracy theory. In addition to his tweet wave he made this accusation in numerous appearances on cable television. Along the way, he also indicated that President Obama was a Muslim by calling him Barack Hussein Obama or tweeting, “When I was 18, people called me Donald Trump. When he was 18, @BarackObama was Barry Soweto.” In another tweet @realDonaldTrump wrote, “Attention all hackers: You are hacking everything else so please hack Obama’s college records (destroyed?) and check “place of birth.” The indication was that Obama had applied to college and law school as a foreign student. Trump’s followers responded with tweeted comments like, “we all know he’s hiding from the truth! He’s a communist,” “This Barry is one shady individual,” or worse. In late 2015, when on the campaign trail in New Hampshire, Trump said, “right,” when a supporter screamed “We have a problem in this country. It’s called Muslims. We know our current president is one.”[35] And during a campaign stop in the summer of 2016, Trump told the crowd, “In many respects, you know, they [terrorists] honor President Obama. He is the founder of ISIS.”[36]

After the death of Anthony Scalia in 2015, President Obama and the First Lady attended a memorial service for the Supreme Court judge but not his funeral. For Trump, it was an opportunity to once again question Obama’s religion. “I wonder whether President Obama would have attended the funeral of Justice Scalia if it were held in a Mosque?” he tweeted. One of his followers answered his question, “Yes he would have attended if Judge Scalia’s name was Mohammad Scalia.”

Trump’s obsession with attacking and denigrating Obama as president and ex-president is documented in his tweet history. Before Trump announced his candidacy, 10 percent of his tweets were about or mentioned Obama; during his presidency (up to May 1, 2020) 2.7 percent were of the anti-Obama variety. Even during the presidential campaign, when Hillary Clinton was his rival and targeted in 2.8 percent of all his tweets, Obama remained Trump’s number one personal target with 3 percent of all his tweets. In the spring of 2020, when polls signaled growing public dissatisfaction with Trump as the nation faced a deadly COVID-19 pandemic and a looming great recession the President invented a fake Obamagate scandal in an effort to distract the masses. The sitting president accused his predecessor of criminal wrongdoing. “OBAMAGATE makes Watergate look small time!” he tweeted. Trump-supporting #Obamagate tweeted a video showing America’s first Black president being arrested by a smiling U.S. Attorney General William Barr with President Trump walking along as Obama is led to jail.

Perhaps all of this was not surprising since Trump left for years signposts that he equated Blacks with thugs and criminals. In 1989, after five teenagers of color were arrested for the brutal rape of a white woman in New York’s Central Park, the then private businessman Trump took out full-page ads in four New York newspapers demanding the reinstatement of the death penalty. Even when another prison inmate confessed to the crime and the Central Park Five were exonerated, Trump attacked them as guilty. And after a documentary about the

case was aired, the by then birther-in-chief Trump tweeted, “The Central Park Five documentary was a one sided [sic] piece of garbage that didn’t explain the horrific crimes of these young men while in park.”

Several weeks later he upped the ante by claiming that almost all crimes in New York City were committed by Blacks, tweeting, “According to Bill O’Reilly, 80% of all the shootings in New York City are blacks-if you add Hispanics, that figure goes to 98%. 1% white.” A few minutes later, he generalized the “statistics” from New York City, tweeting, “Sadly, the overwhelming amount of violent crime in our major cities is committed by blacks and hispanics-a tough subject-must be discussed.” These false numbers were propagated by White Supremacists who also claimed that most crimes in America were committed by criminals of color and that almost all victims were white. In 2015, when a riot broke out in Baltimore in response to the violent death of a Black man in police custody, Trump tweeted, “Our great African American President hasn’t exactly had a positive impact on the thugs who are so happily and openly destroying Baltimore!”

Nothing changed for the better during Trump’s presidency. In early 2018, a day after he had received the Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg in the White House, President Trump met with Republican and Democratic U.S. Senators to discuss the fate of young undocumented immigrants or so-called dreamers. At this occasion he left no doubt about his distaste for Blacks and other people of color. Referring to Africa and countries like Haiti and El Salvador the President asked, “Why are we having all those people from shitholes coming here? Why couldn’t we just take in immigrants, say, from Norway?”[37]

When cities, towns, and counties all over America and in many other parts of the world experienced “Black Lives Matter” demonstrations, most of them peaceful, President Trump called the protesters killers, terrorists, arsonists, anarchists, thugs, hoodlums, looters, and ANTIFA in his Twitter feeds.

Three years into Donald Trump’s presidency, 65 percent of African Americans told pollsters, “It is a bad time to be a black person in America.”[38] According to the same survey 80 percent of Black Americans believed that Trump is a racist. One poll respondent said, “He has taken hatred against people of color, in general, from the closet to the front porch.”

Even the youngest African Americans suffered from the increase of upfront racism. An elementary school teacher in Georgia recounted her experiences after Trump’s election victory in sorrow. “This is my 21st year of teaching. This is the first time I’ve had a student call another student the n-word, she reported. “This incident occurred the day after a conference with the offender’s mother. During the conference, the mother made her support of Trump known and expressed her hope that ‘the blacks’ would soon ‘know their place again.’”[39]

### ***Hate Speech and Hispanics***

Among the groups that Donald Trump singled out as being existential threats to America’s public safety and to “America as we know it” were Mexican Americans and others of Latino descent. He also badgered Latinos abroad who according to Trump needed to be stopped from “invading” the country. Announcing his candidacy for the U.S. Presidency in June 2016 Trump immediately went on the offensive. Aware that his announcement was reported as “breaking news,” Trump wasted no time to attacking the undesirable “others,” when he intoned:

When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.”[40]

If elected president, he promised, “I would build a great wall, and nobody builds walls better than me, believe me, and I’ll build them very inexpensively, I will build a great, great wall on our southern border. And I will have Mexico pay for that wall.” These words were just the opening salvo in an election campaign and presidency full of vitriolic propaganda against Mexicans and other Latinos, including the people on the island of Puerto Rico who—seemingly unbeknown to Trump—are U.S. citizens.



While aggressive written and spoken words fueled among Hispanics the perception of being ostracized and disrespected, the hateful discourse was accompanied by government actions and policies harmful to Latinos in America and those trying to seek asylum in the United States. After the unspeakable images of little Latino children held in caged areas in camps near the U.S.-Mexican border were reported in the news, President Trump defended his policy of separating asylum-seeking parents from their children as deterrent to further border crossings. When asked by a White House reporter about the fate of “undocumented” children waiting in vain to be reunited with their parents, the president showed no compassion; instead, he warned, “Tell people not to come to our country illegally. That’s the solution...We have laws. We have borders. Don’t come to our country illegally. It’s not a good thing.”[41]

Writing about anti-immigrant rhetoric in Europe at the end of the 20th century, one scholar of violent discourse explained:

The increasingly overt but “merely verbal” aggression against immigrants, refugees and minorities in political and media discourse may effectively curb immigration, encourage discrimination, legitimize inequality and generally violate the human rights of millions of people.[42]

In Trump-speak, and the perception of his followers, the terms Mexico and Mexican(s) became synonymous with undesirable people from and in Central America and the Caribbean. Thus, when a White high school teacher in New Jersey told his High School class of mostly Hispanic students “he agreed with Donald Trump that Mexicans are bad for the country calling them ‘pigs’ and ‘lazy’ the day after the election in 2016,” a student from the Dominican Republic “took the teachers’ remarks on Mexicans as derogatory for all Latinos.”[43] Similarly, words like wall, border, deportation, invasion, and caravan stood metaphorically for White Americans forcing illegal “intruders” back “behind the wall” and prevent the invasion of “illegals” across the border into “our” country.

While Donald Trump voiced his negative views about Hispanic immigrants before he entered the political arena as a presidential candidate, he amplified his often derogatory on- and off-line remarks during the presidential campaign and as U.S. president. In a typical tweet of this kind, he summarized his obsession with building a border wall to stop illegal immigrants (in reality they were asylum seekers), “More troops being sent to the Southern Border to stop the attempted Invasion of Illegals, through large Caravans, into our Country. We have stopped the previous Caravans, and we will stop these also. With a Wall it would be soooo much easier and less expensive. Being Built.” In another tweet he wrote, “There are a lot of CRIMINALS in the Caravan. We will stop them. Catch and Detain!” One female supporter responded, “Thank you, Mr. President! It’s comforting to know that we have a president with America in mind and the people in his heart! May God bless you and keep you safe!” Others simply wrote, “Build the Wall!”

In the first three years in the White House, Trump mentioned the terms “border,” “wall,” and “border security” in 10.5 percent of his total tweet production and “Mexican(s),” “Mexico,” “caravan” and “invasion” in additional 2.1 percent of his Twitter posts for a total of 12.6 percent of all his posts.[44] After more than two years in office, Trump expressed ever more extreme ideas for stopping “aliens” from crossing the Southern border. In one meeting he demanded that his aides completely closed the 2,000-mile border with Mexico by the next day. According to reports he suggested illegal and inhumane measures, such as:

- Fortification of the border wall with a water-filled trench, stocked with snakes or alligators;
- Electrification of the border wall “with spikes on to top that could pierce human flesh;
- Soldier shooting migrants if they were throwing rocks; or
- Soldiers shooting migrants in their legs to slow them down.[45]

Whether made online or off-line, Trump’s relentless verbal attacks had consequences in the daily life of Hispanics in America regardless whether they had legal or illegal status.[46] Teachers across the country reported that, following Trump’s election victory, elementary, middle, and high school students used the terms “deportation”

and “wall” more often than any other words when they taunted their Latino peers and other minority students. Thus, according to one teacher, “White high school students interlocked arms and walked together, chanting, “Build a wall! Build a wall!” while making eye contact with students of color. Colleagues heard children saying, “Trump won, you’re going back to Mexico...,” one student going around asking, “Are you legal?” and other telling a teacher they no longer needed Spanish since Trump was sending all the Mexicans back.”[47]

For many Latinos verbal aggression and harsh government actions and policies against them and their ethnic brethren affected how members of the largest ethnic minority perceived their place in the country and the threat of being deported. Shortly after Donald Trump’s election victory, two in five (41 percent) Latinos in the U.S. told pollsters that they were concerned “about their place in America.”[48] Nearly two years into Trump’s presidency more than half of ethnic Hispanics (55 percent) in the U.S. feared that they themselves, a family member, or a friend could be deported. Not surprisingly, a strong majority of illegal Latinos (78 percent) had those worries; it was startling, however, that 65 percent of *foreign-born legal* residents and 58 percent of *foreign-born U.S. citizens* of Hispanic descent shared those concerns.[49] In mid-2019, 58 percent of Latinos in the U.S. said they had personally experienced discrimination based on their ethnicity or race; 30% of those told pollsters that they had “feared for their personal safety.”[50]

### ***Anti-Muslim Rhetoric and Policies***

Similarly, Muslims in America were constantly attacked in Trump’s tweets, at rallies, and in off-the-cuff remarks during ad hoc exchanges with the press. He repeatedly claimed that thousands of Muslim Americans living in New Jersey across from the World Trade Center in Manhattan celebrated the destruction of the famous twin towers on September 11, 2001—although there was no evidence. Trump retweeted several followers’ claims that they saw militant Muslims celebrating the 9/11 attacks right here in America. By keeping his false accusations alive, Trump and his followers tagged Muslim Americans as traitors with allegiances to foreign enemies.

In late 2015, Trump called for excluding Muslims from traveling into the United States. In a “Statement on Preventing Muslim Immigration”, posted on his official campaign website, he called for “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States.” The aggressive treatise claimed, “There is great hatred towards Americans by large segments of the Muslim population.” Citing a survey of [American] Muslims conducted by a far-right organization, Trump’s statement continued:

25% of those polled agreed that violence against Americans here in the United States is justified as a part of the global jihad and 51% of those polled ‘agreed that Muslims in America should have the choice of being governed according to Shariah.’ Shariah authorizes such atrocities as murder against nonbelievers who won’t convert, beheadings and more unthinkable acts that pose great harm to Americans, especially women.[51]

The Trump-led anti-Muslim propaganda campaign was reminiscent of the verbal attacks on Japanese Americans and Japanese Canadians in the months and years following the Pearl Harbor attacks in 1941. According to Lynn Thiesmeyer, resident Japanese were “linguistically designated [by government officials] as ‘enemy aliens,’ although such labels or laws were never applied to resident Germans or Italians.”[52] Many of them were incarcerated or deported. One U.S. General wrote at the time, “The Japanese race is an enemy race.” He claimed that second- and third-generation “Japanese” may have become Americanized but that “the racial strains are undiluted.”[53]

When under fire because of his “Statement”, Trump defended his proposed Muslim ban to President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s internment of Japanese Americans. In a television interview Trump said, “What I’m doing is no different than FDR. I mean, take a look at what FDR did many years ago and he’s one of the most highly respected presidents. I mean respected by most people. They named highways after him.”[54]

Trump compared Muslim Americans and Muslims abroad to the depiction Japanese Americans and Japanese in general after the Pearl Harbor attack—they all were “enemy aliens.” In this view, being Muslim disqualified

a person from enjoying the same rights other Americans were granted.

As for Trump's regular anti-Muslim rants, he threatened more than once that he was considering closing down all mosques in the United States. After several suicide attacks by jihadists in Brussels, Belgium, he recommended the surveillance of mosques in America because we "have to deal with the mosques, whether we like it or not, I mean, you know, these attacks aren't coming out of—they're not done by Swedish people." [55] At another occasion he said that "Islam hates us," making no distinction between Islam as religion and extremist Islamic groups. [56] During Trump's election campaign the conspiracy theorist and Trump propagandist Alex Jones and his Infowars team produced an anti-Muslim video that contained the following statement:

After every single Islamist terror attack we're subjected to the same BS from the media and the regressive left. "This is just a tiny minority of radical extremists. This has nothing to do with Islam." There's no such thing as moderate Islam. Islam is a violent, intolerant religion which, in its current form, has no place in supposedly liberal western democracies. [57]

Appearing on Jones's radio show a few days later Trump told the host, "Your reputation is amazing." [58] Many of the most outrageous rumors and conspiracy theories invented by Jones became part of Trump's propaganda and policy agenda.

One of his first acts as president was an executive order that banned citizens from seven Muslim majority countries from entering the United States. Officially called "travel ban" a Muslim American lawyer described the measure more accurately as "Muslim ban" and cause of great suffering by Muslims in the U.S. and abroad. She wrote:

This ban has split parents from children, wives from husbands, and extended family from each other and interrupted the lives of students, medical patients, and working professionals who cannot enter. There is fear that the ruling could create loopholes that our ruthless administration could use to re-define citizenship for all who are Muslim or perceived to be Muslim. [59]

When Trump's move was widely criticized, his administration reworked the plan by singling out six Muslim countries plus Venezuela and North Korea and renaming it "Foreign Terrorist Entry Act." Trump called it a watered-down, p.c. [for 'political correctness'] policy. In her dissent from the 5-4 Supreme Court decision in favor of the Trump administration Justice Sonia Sotomayor wrote:

The First Amendment stands as a bulwark against official religious prejudice and embodies our Nation's deep commitment to religious plurality and tolerance... Instead of vindicating those principles, today's decision tosses them aside. In holding that the First Amendment gives way to an executive policy that a reasonable observer would view as motivated by animus against Muslims, the majority opinion upends this Court's precedent, repeats tragic mistakes of the past, and denies countless individuals the fundamental right of religious liberty. [60]

Trump's disregard for the civil and human rights of Muslim Americans was shared and applauded by his core supporters whose responses to @realDonaldTrump tweets mirrored his "Islamophobia". When President Trump attacked Minnesota Governor Gretchen for her refusal to loosen restrictions in the fight against COVID-19 and joined heavily armed militias in their demand to "Liberate Minnesota," his supporters, well informed by Trump of Muslim communities in Minnesota and their Muslim representatives, reacted to @realDonaldTrump tweets with divisive demands like these, "Too many muslims ! #StopImmigration;" "Americanize minnesota, too many muslims [sic];" "Make an ex. order so muslims can't hold office in our country."

The frequent verbal attacks on Islam and Muslims and the anti-Muslim measures implemented by Trump and blessed by a U.S. Supreme Court majority had psychological effects on Muslim Americans—not only because of the travel ban. A few months after Trump's inauguration, 38 percent of Muslim Americans feared that their or their family members' safety was threatened by White Supremacy groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan and Neo-Nazis. [61] Muslim communities were aware of Trump's hate speech against Muslims and his anti-Muslim

policy proposals once he took office. At least Muslim American leaders knew, too, that Trump's campaign chief and White House advisor was Stephen Bannon, the former chief of Breitbart, a popular, right-wing online media outfit. In his earlier position, Bannon had declared his site home of the racist Alt-Right.

There was an increase in bullying incidents against Muslim boys and girls in schools across the country. According to one survey, "Teachers reported hearing Muslim students—or those perceived as Muslim—being called names such as 'terrorist,' 'bomber,' 'Osama' or 'ISIS.' One educator told us of classmates pressuring a student to translate the phrase 'Death of America' into Arabic." [62] A 10-year old Muslim girl in a school in Massachusetts found a message in the cubby with the warning, "You are a terrorist. I will kill you." [63]

### ***Open Season on the News Media***

In Minneapolis, police arrested a CNN reporter and hit a Swedish journalist with a rubber bullet in the thigh while they reported on protesters in the aftermath of the brutal killing of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man at the end of May 2020. As peaceful and violent demonstrations spread like a wildfire through the U.S., reporters seemed to be singled out by police officers in a host of cities, even when they were in compliance with police orders. In Louisville, a female reporter and her cameraman were targeted by police and hit by pepper balls. "I'm getting shot," screamed the reporter repeatedly. She suffered an eye injury. Two Australian journalists were assaulted near the White House by U.S. Park Police as they covered a peaceful "Black Lives Matter" demonstration that was dispersed when the military shot rubber bullets and released tear gas. Elsewhere, similar media hostility was displayed by police. During a three-day weekend of protests there were at least 100 incidents of reporters being arrested, pushed around, shot at with pepper or rubber bullets, or buried in clouds of tear gas. According to the U.S. Press Freedom Tracker:

We're now investigating over \*\*100\*\* press freedom violations at the many #GeorgeFloyd protests around the country from the last few days. These include reporters arrested, pepper sprayed, tear gassed, hit with rubber bullets, and assaulted. Many of the attacks have been targeted. [64]

If all of this felt like open season on the press, it was not difficult to link frequent police interferences and violent attacks against the free press to President Trump's regular declarations of war against news organizations and individual journalists—except for his praises for his propagandists at far-right news organizations, such as FOX News and One America News Network (OANN). In response to a documented jump of anti-media incidents at the height of this civil unrest, the President laid once again into what he frequently called the "enemy of the people". On May 31, 2020 he tweeted:

The Lamestream Media is doing everything within their power to foment hatred and anarchy. As long as everybody understands what they are doing, that they are FAKE NEWS and truly bad people with a sick agenda, we can easily work through them to GREATNESS!

In his book *Time to Get Tough: Make America Great Again*, Donald Trump wrote, "Politics and television are nasty businesses. When the two collide, things get even nastier." [65] This statement foreshadowed the hostile relationship between President Trump and the independent news media. He completely ignored that the country's leading print and TV media covered him far more extensively and, in fact, more positively than his GOP primary rivals and Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton during the pre-primary season (January 1, 2015–December 31, 2015) and primary months (January 1, 2016–June 7, 2016). [66] Nearly three decades before he became a presidential candidate, Trump wrote, "If you are a little different, or a little outrageous, or if you do things that are bold or controversial, the press is going to write about you." [67] In this, he was right. The more despicable his statements and behavior were, the more media attention he got. It was far less important, whether the coverage criticized or praised him. As a businessman Trump had embraced both positive and negative news about him as a net gain, [68] but as GOP nominee and as president he attacked any journalistic criticism and the refusal of reporters to validate his and the administration's constant diet of "alternative facts" and "alternative truth."

The most often used adjectives and nouns in his tweet bombs dropped regularly on news organizations and individual reporters were: unhinged, distorted, unethical, unpatriotic, failing, corrupt, dishonest, dumb, crazy, low-rated, nasty, obnoxious, lightweight, loser, and psycho. His favorite put-downs of female journalists included the terms stupid, loser, bimbo, unattractive, low IQ, and third-rate.

His obsession with the media was reflected in his tweet production. Of the 1,845 Trump tweets we hand-coded as attacking particular targets during his presidency (January 20, 2017 to September 20, 2020), 27.5 percent were derogatory statements about “fake” or “lying” news organizations and individual journalists or hosts of political talk shows.

Toward the end of his term Trump changed the cable network MSNBC’s name to MSDNC with the last three letters standing for Democratic National Committee and supposedly indicating that this cable channel was synonymous with the Democratic Party.

It seems that Trump borrowed his anti-press tactics from past and present dictators by sowing doubts about the truthfulness of news organizations and media workers. Just as Hitler and his propagandists attacked the independent German news media as “Lügenpresse” (lying press) before turning the press into a propaganda arm of the government, Trump set out to systematically undermine the American public’s trust in the credibility of the mainstream media. Following his election victory in 2016, Trump had a telling encounter with the well-known TV reporter Lesley Stahl that she described eighteen months later during a journalism award event this way:

At one point, he started to attack the press. There were no cameras in there. I said, “You know, this is getting tired. Why are you doing it over and over? It’s boring and it’s time to end that. You know, you’ve won ... why do you keep hammering at this?” And he said: “You know why I do it? I do it to discredit you all and demean you all so that when you write negative stories about me no one will believe you.”[69]

Trump’s supporters shared his obsession with the “bad, bad” news media. Comparing the president’s tweets in the @realDonaldTrump account and responses by his followers during a five-week period (March, 27, 2020–May 1, 2020), we found the strongest word correlations for “news” and “fake” with “media” right behind “house” (for the U.S. House of Representative) in fourth place.

Trump supporters internalized his obsession with, and war against, all media that did not carry his propaganda. When their idol was confronted with the COVID-19 crisis and the concurrent “Black Lives Matter” uprising, his followers’ verbal attacks on the media became more ferocious. There were a multitude of responses to Trump’s anti-media tweets like the following:

@nytimes @washingtonpost They’re animals Trump, those newspapers, that is. Cheap rant fake media. Keep your iron hand work on many issues the country faces due to Obama mishandling of his responsibility with the country.

President Trump is by far the best President this Nation has ever had, you scumbaggs [sic] are absolutely the dumbest group I have ever seen!

They are the scum on top of the swamp protecting the creatures swimming just beneath the surface.

Besides selling his “fake news” scheme the President appealed in tweets and speeches repeatedly for measures to curb press freedom and often followed up with actions. Thus, he called for changes in libel law to make it easier for public officials to win defamation lawsuits. On September 5, 2018, for example, he tweeted in reaction to Bob Woodward’s newly published book “Fear” and related articles:

Isn’t it a shame that someone can write an article or book, totally make up stories and form a picture of a person that is literally the exact opposite of the fact, and get away with it without retribution or cost. Don’t know why Washington politicians don’t change libel laws?

There was no change in libel law. However, in early 2020 the Trump campaign filed libel suits against the *New*

*York Times*, *Washington Post*, and CNN. The plaintiffs probably knew that they would ultimately lose those legal actions but were content to burden the three news organizations with substantial legal costs.

The President also threatened television networks with the withdrawal of their licenses. In a tweet from October 11, 2017 Trump wrote, "Network news has become so partisan, distorted and fake that licenses must be challenged and, if appropriate, revoked. Not fair to public!" While no broadcast licenses were rescinded, the President called repeatedly for the firing of TV executives. At one occasion (August 28, 2019), he even called for a boycott against Fox News because a few reporters did not support him fully. In one of his tweets he complained, "We have to start looking for a new News Outlet. Fox isn't working for us anymore." Yet, the morning show *Fox & Friends* and FOX's prime time programs remained the President's favorites.

Opinion polls reflected the effectiveness of Trump's war against individual reporters and news organizations that did not slavishly praise his words and deeds. In late 2019, the vast majority of Conservatives had most trust in Fox News (75 percent), the network that was most distrusted by Liberals (77 percent); Liberals on the other hand had most trust in CNN (70 percent), the cable network most distrusted by Conservatives (67 percent).[70] When pollsters asked respondents in March 2017 whether or not they agreed with Trump calling journalists and the media "the enemy of the American people," 34 percent agreed, 59 percent disagreed, and 7 percent were undecided.[71] In other words, one-third of the public viewed the media as enemy of the people. When Trump was not mentioned, between 21 percent and 26 percent of survey respondents said they considered the news media the public's enemy.[72]

Even more disconcerting was Trump's constant flogging of the press during his mass rallies before and after he became president. This angered his supporters so that they inevitably hurled insults and threats toward the press section. As he explained to Lesley Stahl of CBS, that was exactly what Trump's anti-media strategy and tactics were supposed to achieve.

### ***Rhetorical Attacks against Political Opponents***

At the end of May 2020 some 100,000 Americans had succumbed to the COVID-19 pandemic and cities across the country dealt with social unrest in the wake of a Black man's brutal murder by police in Minneapolis. In the midst of this dual crisis, President Trump took the leisure to retweet a repugnant video posted by Cowboys for Trump @RideWithC4T that ended with one Trump supporter's exclamation, "The only good Democrat is a dead Democrat!"[73] This endorsement summed up Donald Trump's bellicose speech and behavior toward political opponents. While America's partisan and ideological polarization was deep before Trump came to power, he made sure that it got much worse during his presidency. In their research on lethal partisanship, Kalmoe and Mason mention the influence of opinion leadership and the example of Donald Trump "who violates the norms of appropriate social and political behavior and frequently espouses views hostile to democracy, including the endorsement of low-level political violence at his campaign rallies." [74]

Democrats were collectively and individually the most often attacked targets in Trump's total tweet output (before his candidacy, during the campaign months, and during his presidency) with 44 percent surpassing the 23 percent tweet total directed at the media. As president, he devoted 46 percent of his tweets to Democrats compared to media in second place with 25 percent, and merely 3 percent for the GOP that he totally controlled. The sole exception is the campaign period, when Republicans were addressed in 33 percent of his tweets and Democrats in 32 percent. This high total for Republicans was the result of Trump's relentless and ruthless attacks on his GOP competitors during the primary season.[75]

In tweets and during his mass rallies or White House appearances Trump vilified Democrats regularly. Bemoaning his impeachment in December 2019, the President tweeted, "The Radical Left, Do Nothing Democrats have become the Party of Hate. They are so bad for our Country!" Three months earlier, he wrote @realDonaldTrump, "I am so tired of hearing the rationalization of the Left in the country because they hate Donald Trump. Inexplicably and without foundation, they choose to hate America..." These statements

synthesized his attacks on Democrats as not loving but hating their country; as individually and collectively threatening the constitutional rights of patriotic Americans; and as “Radical Left” harboring Socialist and Communist designs for this country. Thus, his tweeted assurance, “We will never be a Socialist or Communist Country.” At a rally in Louisiana in late 2019 Trump said, “Democrats are becoming increasingly totalitarian,” and are “trying to overthrow American democracy to impose their socialism agenda.” He accused Democrats of “trying to rip our nation apart.”[76]

During the 2016 campaign, “Lock Her Up” became for Donald Trump and his supporters a rallying cry against Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton. Whenever Trump or one of his prominent supporters mentioned “Crooked Hillary,” the “Make America Great Again” crowd demanded “Lock Her Up”. But eventually, this slogan borrowed from Banana Republic strongmen, was used against other GOP “enemies” as well. After President Trump complained that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi had mumbled behind him during his 2020 State of the Union address, the crowd at his New Hampshire rally chanted, “Lock her up, lock her up...”[77] At a rally in Iowa Trump attacked U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein for her role during the confirmation hearing for Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh and provoked the crowd to demand, “Lock her up!”[78]

As noted above, no other individual was as often and maliciously attacked as Barack Obama. Other male Democrats were on Trump’s rhetorical hit list as well, among them “incompetent & corrupt” Adam “Shifty” Schiff (422 tweets). “Sleepy” Joe Biden (42 tweets), “Cry’n” Chuck Schumer (65 tweets), “Do Nothing Democrat Savages” like [Jerry] Nadler (49 tweets) and “Crazy Bernie” Sanders (39 tweets).[79]

However, just as Trump singled out female reporters for his insults, he was particularly nasty in his rhetorical attacks on female politicians. He called Hillary Clinton a “total train wreck,” Nancy Pelosi “crazy” and “an inherently dumb person,” Dianne Feinstein “another beauty.” His most vicious attacks were reserved for a quartet of progressive congresswomen of color, Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan. After the four, nicknamed “Squad,” criticized his policies, Trump tweeted (July 14, 2019):

So interesting to see “Progressive” Democrat Congresswomen, who originally came from countries whose governments are a complete and total catastrophe, the worst, most corrupt and inept anywhere in the world (if they even have a functioning government at all), now loudly..... and viciously telling the people of the United States, the greatest and most powerful Nation on earth, how our government is to be run. Why don’t they go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came....

A female supporter tweeted her agreement. “The notion that you can’t criticize these Anti-America fools by virtue of the amount of melanin they have in skin is utterly ridiculous.”

Ironically, three of the four politicians were born in the United States, only Ilhan Omar came in her youth (she was eight years old) as legal immigrant from Somalia. These rhetorical attacks had consequences. Representative Omar received death threats as did her three colleagues. The owner of a gun shop in North Carolina, a Trump supporter, put headshots of the four congresswomen on a billboard with the message, “The 4 Horsemen Cometh” changing the words after protests into “The 4 Horsemen are Idiots”.[80]

After Senator Kamala Harris was nominated as the Democratic Party’s vice-presidential candidate, Trump attacked her in tweets and public statements as “mean,” “horrible,” “disrespectful,” “awkward,” and “a monster” claiming that “she doesn’t meet the requirements [for vice president]” and “is going to be a big failure.”

### ***Praising and Encouraging Violence***

Before and during his presidency Donald Trump’s preferred words were those that project strength, toughness, and most of all wins. In his tweets he used “win” and “won” 1,136 times; also prominent were the terms “strong” (551 times), “tough” (326 times), “fight” (279 times), and “attack” (226 times). He degraded his opponents as

“failing” 234 times, “weak” 199 times, and “loser” 128 times.[81] According to his own account, Trump showed his dominant traits already as a child. “Even in elementary school, I was a very assertive kid,” he wrote in one of his books. “In the second grade I actually gave a teacher a black eye - I punched my music teacher because I didn’t think he knew anything about music. . . .It’s clear evidence that even early on I had a tendency to stand up and make my opinion known in a very forceful way.”[82]

On the campaign trail and during his presidency Trump did not merely attack his opponents and “enemies” with aggressive and degrading language, he condoned, praised, and even encouraged physical violence against various “enemies.”

On August 9, 2016, at a campaign rally in Wilmington, North Carolina, Trump attacked Hillary Clinton and warned his supporters of the terrible things she would do, if she were to win in November. Implying that she would end their constitutional right to bear arms, he warned:

Hillary wants to abolish—essentially abolish the Second Amendment. By the way, and if she gets to pick (CROWD BOOING) If she gets to pick her judges, nothing you can do, folks. Although the Second Amendment people, maybe there is. I don’t know. But—but I’ll tell you what. That will be a horrible day. If—if Hillary gets to put her judges—right now, we’re tied. You see what’s going on.[83]

Many observers understood Trump’s remarks as instigating violence in case of a Clinton victory. In response, Hillary Clinton said, “If you are running to be president, or you are president of the United States, words can have tremendous consequences.”[84]

In October 2018, after congressional GOP candidate Greg Gianforte of Montana body slammed and injured a reporter of *The Guardian* because he did not like to be questioned about his healthcare policy. President Trump praised Gianforte during a rally and mimicked a body slamming motion. “Greg is smart,” he said. “And by the way, never wrestle him. Never. Any guy that can do a body slam is my kind of guy. My kind. I shouldn’t say that, but this is nothing to be embarrassed by.”[85]

When his supporters roughed up protesters at his rallies, candidate and President Trump often supported these violent actions. Here are but a few examples of such incidents:

- After a “Black Lives Matter” protester at one of Trump’s rallies in 2015 was kicked and punched by his supporters, candidate Trump supported the violent incident. “The man that was—I don’t know, you say ‘roughed up’—he was so obnoxious and so loud, he was screaming,” he said. “He should have been, maybe he should have been roughed up.”
- Allegedly informed by his security team that protesters were going to throw tomatoes at one of his 2016 campaign events, Trump told his supporters, “If you see somebody getting ready to throw a tomato, knock the crap out of them, would you? Seriously. Okay? Just knock the hell. I promise you I will pay for the legal fees. I promise.”
- When another 2016 campaign rally was interrupted by protesters, Trump told his supporters, “I love the old days. You know what they used to do to guys like that when they were in a place like this? They’d be carried out on a stretcher, folks. It’s true. . . . I’d like to punch him in the face, I’ll tell you.”
- President Trump encouraged police violence before police brutality resulted in social unrest in 2020. Addressing police officers in 2017 he told them, “When you see thugs being thrown into the back of a paddy wagon, you just see them thrown in; rough. I said, please don’t be too nice. Like when you guys put somebody in the car and you’re protecting their head, you know, the way you put your hand over it. Like, don’t hit their head, and they’ve just killed somebody. I said, you can take the hand away, O.K.?”[86]
- Four months after MSNBC anchor Ali Velshi covered a peaceful “Black Lives Matter” demonstration and was hit by a rubber bullet, Donald Trump recalled the incident at a campaign rally in September 2020 as he promoted a tough law and order stand. “They [law enforcement officers] threw him aside like he was a



little bag of popcorn,” the President said. “But I mean honestly, when you watch the crap that we’ve all had to take so long...when you see it, it’s actually a beautiful sight.”[87]

### ***The Rise of Political Violence in the Trump Era***

Ultimately, the question is whether Donald Trump’s frequent verbal attacks on minorities and implicit and explicit calls to violence against singled-out groups and individuals resulted in political violence or what by definition would be acts of domestic terrorism.

An early study by the American Psychological Association concluded that “viewing [TV] violence increases viewers’ appetites for becoming involved with violence or exposing themselves to violence.”[88] To be sure, news consumers react differently to interpersonal and mass-mediated violent text and images. Thus, more recent survey experiments found that “citizens with aggressive personality traits expressed significantly greater support for political violence, and their support doubled when they were exposed to political messages infused with violent metaphors.”[89]

Donald Trump declared his candidacy for the GOP presidential nomination on June 16, 2015. One day later, 19-year-old White Supremacist Dylann Roof shot to death nine African-American worshippers at the Emanuel African Methodist Church in Charleston, South Carolina. In a “manifesto” Roof explained that he was radicalized by [right-extreme] online sites and their [false] information about the high number of incidents in which Blacks were killing Whites. While then-candidate Trump did not cause Roof’s violence, he had publicized the falsity that most violent crimes in the U.S. were committed by Blacks, the very same rumor that had motivated Roof to kill. Obviously, Roof was guided by aggressive personality traits. “We have no skinheads, no real KKK, no one doing anything but talking on the internet,” he wrote. “Well someone has to have the bravery to take it to the real world, and I guess that has to be me.” He added mysteriously, “I am in a great hurry.”

One year later, ahead of the first anniversary of the Charleston massacre, South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley was the first public official to connect Trump’s rhetoric and Roof’s terrorist attack. According to a South Carolina newspaper:

Nikki Haley said Thursday she wishes Donald Trump communicated differently because bad things result from divisive rhetoric, as evidenced by last June’s massacre in Charleston. The Republican governor said divisive speech motivated Dylann Roof to gun down nine black parishioners at historic Emanuel AME Church.[90]

Indeed, Trump’s racist speech before and during his presidential campaign and as president seemed to affect a significant number of like-minded individuals to commit what the authorities labeled hate crimes. When asked by a reporter whether his rhetoric was dividing Americans, Trump answered, “I don’t think my rhetoric does at all. My rhetoric is very—it brings people together.” Obviously, he counted only his, the real people united and once again excluded the rest of the nation.

Examining whether correlations existed between counties that were venues of Donald Trump’s 275 campaign rallies in 2016 and subsequent hate crimes, three political scientists found that “counties that had hosted a 2016 Trump campaign rally saw a 226 percent increase in reported hate crimes over comparable counties that did not host such a rally.” While cautioning that this “analysis cannot be certain it was Trump’s campaign rally rhetoric that caused people to commit more crime in the host county,” the researchers also found it “hard to discount a ‘Trump effect’ since data of the Anti-Defamation League showed “a considerable number of these reported hate crimes referenced Trump.”[91]

Moreover, investigative reporting identified 41 cases of domestic terrorism/hate crimes or threats thereof, in which the perpetrators invoked Trump favorably in manifestos, social media posts, police interrogations, or court documents. Almost all of this violence was committed by White males against minorities or politicians

singled out frequently by Trump for rhetorical attacks, and journalists.[92]

The U.S. Press Freedom Tracker recorded a total of 202 attacks on U.S. journalists from 2017, Trump's first year in office, through mid-2020.[93]

### ***White Supremacy and The Great Replacement***

The three most lethal terrorist attacks during the Trump presidency, the mass shootings in the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, and in a Walmart supermarket in El Paso, Texas, were carried out by White Supremacists who embraced racist "Great Replacement" conspiracy theories popular in their circles. The term "The Great Replacement" was coined by the French author Renaud Camus, when he described the coming substitution of the native French majority by non-Western immigrants, many of them Muslims. Right-extreme conspiracy theorists expanded the alleged threat to Whites in Western Europe and North America. Besides, there was a multitude of similarly motivated attacks in the United States and elsewhere plus foiled plots.

*Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.* On the morning of October 27, 2018, 46-year-old Robert Bowers shot his way into the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburg, killing six worshippers and injuring six more. During his shooting spree and a stand-off with police he screamed, "They have committed genocide to my people. I just want to kill Jews." Only minutes before rushing into the building Bowers logged onto his account on the Gab social media platform telling his followers, "I can't sit by and watch my people get slaughtered." Bowers left a long trail of social media posts that revealed his admiration for Hitler, denial of the Holocaust, and extreme hate of African Americans, Muslims, and most of all Jews whom he called "children of Satan." He posted conspiracy theories about George Soros and other globalists. He blamed the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, a Jewish pro-refugee organization, for bringing "invaders in that kill our people." [94]

Five days before the Pittsburg massacre and less than three weeks before the mid-term elections in early November, President Trump threw White Supremacists the red meat they craved. At a campaign rally for U.S. Senator Ted Cruz in Houston he said, "You know what a globalist is, right? A globalist is a person who wants the globe to do well, frankly, not caring about our country so much. You know what? I'm a nationalist. Use that word." [95] Some right-extremists rejoiced publicly. "Raise your hands if you are an American nationalist like Trump," tweeted a columnist for One America News. "Trump sounds like Breitbart," Ann Coulter posted on her Twitter feed.

Robert Bowers seemed not appeased. He tweeted that he was not a Trump supporter, complaining that the president was "a globalist, not a nationalist." And, yet, his social media posts reflected Trump's divisive and hateful rhetoric towards minorities with terms like "caravan," "invaders," and "infestation." These similarities did not mean that Trump caused the bloody attack; however, they underscored that political rhetoric matters and that a leader like the president of the United States sets the tone.

*Christchurch, New Zealand:* On March 15, 2019, a 28-year-old Australian man entered first Al Noor Mosque and about 12 minutes later the Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch during Friday Prayers killing 51 and injuring 49 worshipping Muslim men, women, and children with automatic weapons. With a camera mounted on his hat Brenton Tarrant streamed the massacre live on a social media account.

In his lengthy manifesto titled "The Great Replacement" the mass killer wrote, "We must crush immigration and deport those invaders already living on our soil. It is not just a matter of our prosperity, but the very survival of our people."

He warned that the first such replacement in the U.S. would occur in and change Texas. "Soon the replacement of the whites within Texas will hit its apogee and with the non-white political and social control of Texas"; he wrote. "And with this control, the electoral college will be heavily stacked in favor of

a democratic victory so that every electoral cycle will be a certainty.”

He paid tribute to Donald Trump as “a symbol of renewed white identity and common purpose”, emphasizing the importance of these words by underlining them in his text.

*El Paso, Texas:* On August 3, 2019, a lone gunman, armed with a semi-automatic civilian version of the AK-47, shot and killed 23 persons and injured 23 at a Walmart supermarket in El Paso. 21-year-old Patrick Crusius from Allen, Texas, selected this particular Walmart store at the U.S.-Mexican border because he wanted to kill Mexicans and other Latinos. He was arrested shortly after the massacre.

“I support the Christchurch shooter and his manifesto,” was the opening sentence in his own manifesto that he posted online shortly before the horrific killing spree. “This attack is a response to the Hispanic invasion of Texas,” he explained. “They are the instigators, not me. I am simply defending my country from cultural and ethnic replacement brought on by an invasion.”

Repeating Tarrant’s warning that the White race’s replacement in Texas would cause a disastrous electoral shift, the El Paso terrorist wrote, “The heavy Hispanic population in Texas will make us a Democrat stronghold. Losing Texas and a few other states with heavy Hispanic population to the Democrats is all it would take for them to win nearly every presidential election.”

Crusius’s social media posts attested to his support of Donald Trump. Aware that the president’s critics questioned Trump’s attitudes towards White nationalists, the mass shooter tried to spare Trump such accusations. “Thus, at the end of his declaration he wrote that his ideology did not change “for several years” and “predate[d] Trump and his campaign for president.” Like Trump, he attacked the “fake” media and predicted, “I know that the media will probably call me a white supremacist anyway and blame Trump’s rhetoric.”

### ***Failed and Foiled Violence***

*Homemade IEDs:* In the second half of October 2018, 16 homemade pipe bombs were mailed to Barack Obama, Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, George Soros, actor Robert De Niro, a number of other prominent Democrats, and the CNN headquarters in Atlanta. None of the improvised explosive devices detonated. Cesar Savoc (54) was arrested and eventually received a 20-year prison term for building and mailing the devices. During his trial defense lawyers described their client as a loner who “found light in Donald J. Trump,” supported his idol “on social media and at rallies,” and thereby found “the sense of community that he had been missing for so many years.” Before his sentencing, Savoc himself compared his obsession with Trump to an addiction.

*Foiled Plot of Political Violence:* In early 2019, Coast Guard Lieutenant Christopher Hasson (49) was arrested and charged with plotting terror attacks against a multitude of prominent Democrats in public offices and liberals in the news media. Police found seven rifles, two shotguns, four pistols, two revolvers, and two silencers, along with magazines and ammunition in his home. The search of his computers revealed that Hasson was a self-described White supremacist who idolized the Norwegian terrorist mass shooter Anders Breivik, believed in the white genocide or great replacement conspiracy theory, and had compiled a list of targets. Shortly before his arrest his computer searches focused on the following topics:

- what if trump illegally impeached;
- best place in dc to see congress people;
- where in dc to congress live;
- civil war if trump impeached.

### ***Threats of Political Violence Are Violence***

Many definitions of terrorism include threats of this sort of political violence and confirm John Galtung's categorical statement that "*threats* [emphasis added] of violence are also violence." [96] While there were dozens of serious threats of violence against prominent Democrats, TV hosts, reporters, and members of minorities with references to Trump, here are just three examples:

In the summer of 2019, police arrested Eric Lin of Maryland for harassing a female Floridian with 150 pages worth of Facebook messages that threatened her with kidnapping and deadly attacks on her, her family, and other Latinos. According to the arrest warrant, the White Supremacist threatened with the "extermination" of all Latinos. In one post he wrote, "I thank God everyday President Donald Trump is President and that he will launch a Racial War and Crusade to keep [derogatory names for African Americans and Latinos), Muslims, and any dangerous Ethnically or Culturally foreign group 'In Line.'" He spelled out that "In Line" meant concentration camps or forced military service.

In early 2019, the U.S Capitol Police arrested Stephen Taubert, a 61-year-old veteran from Syracuse, New York, for threatening to kill two prominent Democrats, former President Barack Obama and Congresswoman Maxine Waters, both African Americans. According to prosecutors, Taubert used "overtly bigoted, hateful language" in his phone calls. After threatening to "hang" Obama in 2018, he called Representative Waters' Los Angeles office warning that he would find her at public events and kill her and her staff. During his trial he explained that he got "riled up" when seeing negative comments about President Trump on social media and the news.

In August 2018, the *Boston Globe* published an editorial on its front page, declaring "We are not the enemy of the people" and asked other news organizations to join the resistance against President Trump's rhetorical assaults. In 14 phone calls 68-year-old Californian Robert Chain repeated Trump's label "fake media" and "the media is the enemy of the people." He warned he would continue his threats as long as they were attacking President Trump. In one call he told a *Globe* staffer, "I'm going to shoot you in the f...head later today."

### ***Conclusion: Violent Rhetoric and Violent Consequences***

Whereas the well-known children's rhyme mentioned above claims that unlike physical violence "words will never hurt me," our research demonstrates the opposite. Donald Trump's hate speech and demonization of non-Whites, mainstream media, and oppositional politicians, and his implicit and explicit praise of violence resulted in many verbal and corporal attacks against members of the denigrated groups. School bullying increased with many young bullies using Trumpian hateful terminology and/or referring to his discriminatory policies. Particularly in minority communities, there was heightened anxiety and fear. Just as important, Trump stirred fear, hate, and anger among his core supporters by warning them of dangerous "others" threatening "America as we know it" in terms of history, culture, values, and racial dominance. Whether by dog whistle or bullhorn, he spread online and off-line a divisive propaganda that in many respects resembled right-extremists' ideology and glorification of violence.

Donald Trump did not invent racist and nativist hate speech. Racism and nativism are as American as apple pie. The reaction of right-extremists to the 2008 election victory of Barack Obama, America's first black president, set off the latest wave of white nationalism and related hate speech and violence. Trump, then best known as star of his own TV reality show, became the de facto spokesman of the anti-Obama birther conspiracy theory embracing its racism along with anti-immigration nationalism as core component of his presidential campaign and presidency. Trump became the first U.S. president who in public statements expressed sympathy and support for violent right-extremists and thereby pulled them into mainstream politics.

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### About the Authors:

**Brigitte L. Nacos** is a political scientist and journalist teaching at Columbia University. Her fields of specialization are (1) terrorism and counterterrorism and (2) mass media, public opinion, and decision-making. Among her books related to terrorism and counterterrorism are: 'Terrorism and Counterterrorism' (Routledge); 'Mass-Mediated Terrorism' (Rowman & Littlefield); 'Terrorism and the Media: From the Iran Hostage Crisis to the World Trade Center Bombing' (Columbia University Press), and she is coauthor of 'Selling Fear: Counterterrorism, the Media, and Public Opinion' (University of Chicago Press).

**Robert Y. Shapiro** is the Wallace S. Sayre Professor of Government and International and Public Affairs at Columbia University. He is coauthor of 'The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences' and 'Politicians Don't Pander: Political Manipulation and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness'. His most recent coauthored/coedited books are 'The Oxford Handbook of American Public Opinion and the Media', 'Selling Fear: Counterterrorism, the Media, and Public Opinion', and 'Presidential Selection and Democracy'. He is currently President of The Academy of Political Science.

**Yaeli Bloch-Elkon** is a Senior Lecturer/Assistant Professor of Communications and Political Science at Bar Ilan University. She is an Associate Research Scholar at the university's Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies (BESA) and at the Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy (ISERP), Columbia University. She has published articles in numerous journals on media, public opinion and foreign policy, terrorism and counterterrorism, and partisan polarization and is co-author of 'Selling Fear: Counterterrorism, The Media and Public Opinion' (University of Chicago Press).

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