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Fighting Fascism from the Age of Reagan to the Present

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Two years after the failed Jan. 6, 2021, coup, the far right continues to escalate threats against marginalized groups and to the democratic system more broadly. The mass killing at Club Q in Colorado Springs, followed soon after by an attack on an electrical grid, which some suspect might have been motivated by a desire to disrupt a drag show in North Carolina, offer a grim foreshadowing of more violence to come. This is particularly worrying given Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene's (R-Ga.) recent statement to the New York Young Republican Club that if she and Stephen K. Bannon had been in charge on Jan. 6, the mob "would have been armed" and "we would have won."

This movement has many of the elements we recognize as fascism. Fascism is a far-right political approach that offers what the historian Robert Paxton calls "compensatory cults of unity, energy, and purity" to people obsessed with perceived humiliation and social decline. Historically, fascist movements have taken the form of militant nationalist parties that turn against democracy in alliance with elements of the conservative elite. They engage in "redemp-

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tive violence” to pursue “goals of internal cleansing and external expansion.” Although it may seem to have come out of nowhere, today’s American fascism has roots in a surge of far-right violence in the late 20th century. We have much to learn from the recent evolution of fascism — and from anti-fascist responses — to help understand far right violence today.

Even as President Ronald Reagan led the New Right into power, fascists and white supremacists on the fringes turned against the government. Despite Reagan’s right-wing transformation of the GOP, far right groups did not celebrate. Instead, they believed that “globalist” Jewish elites had misled the Republican Party into capitulating to the Black civil rights movement at home (by embracing legal equality) and to communism abroad (by accepting defeat in Vietnam). A growing number of fascist and white power activists saw no future in the current order. To them, the GOP was insufficiently racist and too willing to share power with liberals and people of color — which they perceived as an existential threat to the White race. As historian Kathleen Belew has illustrated, neo-Nazis and leading elements within the Ku Klux Klan set aside their traditional enmity and united to fight for a “white revolution” against what they called the “Zionist Occupied Government.”

Fascist and white supremacist organizations including the National Alliance, the KKK and White Aryan Resistance offered radical programs to White people who felt victimized by social changes since the 1960s. Economic disruptions in the 1970s, particularly the outsourcing of manufacturing jobs from the United States, were accompanied by perceived threats to the status of White men from the civil rights movement and the women’s liberation movement. Increased immigration in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly from non-European countries, became a source of anger on the right. All of these factors cemented a sense of grievance among some White Americans.

Fascists exploited this sense of White male victimization and argued that the only way to secure a future for the White race was

to use mass violence to purify society of leftists, Jews and people of color.

William Pierce, the leader of the neo-Nazi National Alliance, wrote two novels that guided revolutionary struggle in this era. The course was set with the 1978 publication of “The Turner Diaries,” in which a fascist white power group called the Order carries out escalating attacks to overthrow the government and “cleanse” the United States of people of color, Jews and all White people that they accused of being race traitors. Fiction and reality blurred in 1983 when Robert Jay Mathews founded a group called the Order modeled after the book. The Order was responsible for violent actions, including the murder of the Jewish talk show host Alan Berg in 1984.

Pierce released a second novel, “Hunter,” in 1989 that helped popularize the purportedly “lone wolf” practice of individuals carrying out terroristic violence such as mass shootings. Portraying these acts as one-offs by individuals helped mask the organized and collective nature of this violence, and its political goals. Timothy McVeigh cited Pierce’s work as inspiration for his 1995 Oklahoma City bombing that killed 168 people and injured hundreds more.

Other fascists in this era, most notably Tom Metzger of White Aryan Resistance, targeted punk subculture to recruit racist skinheads and harness their violent energy for the White revolution. Neo-Nazis regularly started violence at punk shows and attacked people of color and queer people in the streets. The murder of an Ethiopian immigrant named Mulugeta Seraw in Portland in 1988 by a group associated with White Aryan Resistance signaled a clear escalation. Although Seraw’s murderers ended up in prison, mainstream institutions were largely ill-equipped to deal with fascism’s violent turn and loath to recognize these incidents as connected parts of an organized threat.

But a new generation of antifascists rose up to meet the renewed danger of fascism — often with masked faces and baseball bats in hand. Anarchists, punks and other leftists united to form

the organization Anti-Racist Action (ARA) in Minneapolis in the late 1980s, which quickly spread across the country. Rather than relying on the police or legal system to deal with fascists, ARA became known for its willingness to physically engage them. Vowing that “we go where they go,” they confronted fascists in punk spaces and beyond. ARA routed the skinhead White Knights in Minneapolis, helped run Nazis out of the Portland punk scene and disrupted KKK rallies across the Midwest. They also identified the militant antiabortion movement as a key component of the growing fascist threat and participated in defending abortion clinics against groups such as Operation Rescue in the 1990s.

Yet ARA believed that fighting fascists was not enough; the underlying social conditions that gave birth to fascism must be addressed as well. Thus ARA collaborated with groups like the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation to build the anarchist movement. Anarchism — meaning not disorder and chaos but rather anti-state socialism in the tradition of Emma Goldman and the Spanish Revolution of 1936 — attracted renewed interest after the fall of the Soviet Union. In the 1990s, anarchists sought to “build the new world in the shell of the old” by creating alternative institutions and organizing within social movements that fought for workers’ power, racial justice, environmental justice and reproductive freedom. ARA’s sustained offensive across the United States and Canada played a central role in disrupting the fascist movement in the late 20th century.

Nevertheless, the underlying conditions — economic insecurity, social atomization and perceived threats to the social status of White men — that produced this organizing among far right and white power groups have persisted. Fascists exploited the opening for mainstream attention provided by Donald Trump’s run for president in 2016. The deadly 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville echoed the 1980s merger of multiple strands of the fascist and white power movements. The coup attempt on Jan. 6 was a bid to seize power through purportedly “legal” channels.

With Trump out of office, a worrying number of fascist groups today are repeating the revolutionary turn of the 1980s, from neo-Nazis like the Atomwaffen Division (also known as the National Socialist Resistance Front), which has sought military training with both the Ukrainian Azov Battalion and the Russian Imperial Movement, to the street-fighting Proud Boys, a far-right group with a history of violence. They have recently begun opportunistically targeting queer and trans people who they accuse of “grooming” children, using this issue to build coalitions and increase their capacity for violence.

When members of the government and mainstream media perpetuate the moral panic against both queer and trans people and critical race theory, they provide cover for far right violence against LGBTQ communities and people of color.

While the Jan. 6 committee may help prevent Trump from regaining the presidency, it cannot address our underlying social crises. During the late 20th century, Anti-Racist Action combated fascism’s revolutionary turn in the streets while also building grassroots institutions and organizing radical social movements. Like ARA, today’s anti-fascist left is called to respond on two fronts: organizing to confront the immediate threat of fascist violence while also working with other social movements to build a better world.