

White power movements in US history have often relied on veterans—and not on lone wolves, says expert

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For decades, the white power movement has gained steady momentum in the U.S. [Kathleen Belew](#) is an expert on the history of the white power

movement and its current impact on American society and politics. Her book "[Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America](#)" examines how the aftermath of the Vietnam War led to the birth of the white power movement.

In March 2023, Belew spoke at the [Imagine Solutions Conference](#) in Naples, Florida, about how the narrative of the "lone wolf" actor distracts from the broader threat of the white power [movement](#) in America. The Conversation asked Belew about her work. Her edited answers are below.

What is the white power movement?

The white power movement is an array of activists that is, in all ways but race, remarkably diverse. Since the late 1970s, it has convened people of a wide variety of belief systems, including [Klansmen](#), [neo-Nazis](#), [white separatists](#), [proponents](#) of white supremacist religious theologies, and, starting in the late 1980s, [racist skinheads](#) and militia movement members. These activists represent a [wide range](#) of class positions. The movement has long included men, women and children; felons and religious leaders; high school dropouts and holders of advanced degrees; civilians and veterans and active-duty [military personnel](#). They have lived in all regions of the country, including suburbs, cities and rural areas.

How has the legacy of US warfare fueled white power groups?

After every major American war, [the historical record](#) shows a surge in membership and activity among extremist groups like the Ku Klux Klan. In each example, [these groups also adopt](#) elements of military activity, like uniforms, weapons and the latest military tactics. But this doesn't

mean that these surges are entirely composed of veterans. [All measures of violence rise after warfare](#), including acts carried out by women, children and [older people](#). Groups like the Ku Klux Klan have been able to [use this postwar opportunity](#) for their own purposes: recruitment and radicalization.

When and why did the white power movement emerge in the US?

The white power movement [came together](#) in the late 1970s around a [shared narrative of the Vietnam War](#). In this narrative, the war exemplifies the failure of government, the betrayal of the American people by the government and the betrayal of American men by the state.

Disillusioned veterans and civilians alike mobilized around a number of other [social grievances, such as dissatisfaction](#) with changes caused by feminism, the [Civil Rights Movement](#) and other movements at home, as well as frustrations with [economic changes like the farms crisis](#) and the general move to financialization in the 1970s that made it harder to find and keep a working-class job.

This disaffection allowed for the white power movement to recruit in two different ways: narrative force—the story that was used to hold these activists together; and contextual force—the social grievances many of them had in common.

What role do women play in the white supremacist movement?

People often think of the white power and militia movements as men's movements. It's true that the [majority of media reports heavily feature men](#); that's because those who participate in public demonstrations and

those who get arrested because of underground activity tend to be men. But this is a movement that has relied in [extraordinarily heavy ways on women](#).

Women have [been tasked with normalizing](#) and legitimating violence, orchestrating recruitment and maintaining the relationships that allow this movement to operate as a social network. Take, for instance, the [Aryan Nations World Congress](#), a 1983 meeting in which the white power movement declared war on the United States. This meeting featured men's speeches and ideological activities, a cross burning and a swastika burning. But it also featured matchmaking and a big spaghetti dinner, which socially bound activists together to enable the organization of violence. Women were indispensable for arranging these kinds of activities and for maintaining strong relationships between groups.

Where do US veterans fit in?

Veterans are specifically targeted for recruitment into white power groups because they and active-duty service members have a set of experiences and expertise that is very much in demand by these groups. [Veterans have tactical training](#), munitions expertise and weapons training that the white power movement wants because it is trying to wage war on the American government—in fact, this movement has [directed recruitment](#) specifically aimed at veterans and active-duty troops.

While very few veterans returning from war join white power groups, the groups still feature an [enormous percentage of people who are veterans](#) or active duty—or falsely claim to be. This is because those military roles are in high demand among these groups—and their command structure within the movement mirrors military organization.

How can the US address its lack of care toward

veterans?

The white power movement is one example of a broader social failure to support veterans and to reckon with the cost of warfare. This movement is able to [opportunistically mobilize disaffected people](#) in the aftermath of war because [our society lacks robust social structures](#) to reintegrate people after warfare and to have a real public discourse about the price of war.

Before [the fall of Kabul](#) in Afghanistan, my undergraduate students at Northwestern and the University of Chicago had been at war for their entire living memory. These are kids who don't remember 9/11. And yet that war has not featured prominently even in the list of the top five or 10 crises facing our nation. In the recent past, war has not been at the center of our political conversation. We [don't reckon with the massive impact](#) the people who serve in our armed forces shoulder for the nation.

In all of these ways, the [global war on terror](#) has [continued the cycle](#) of generating a recruitment opportunity for [extremist groups](#). We are now in the middle of a [massive groundswell of white power](#) and militant right activity, both underground and in public-facing actions.

What are you working on now that people might not be aware of?

My next project departs from the white [power](#) movement to examine gun violence in America, specifically the [Columbine shooting](#)—which happened when I was in high school, not far from where I was in high school—as a fulcrum point between the 20th century and the 21st. There were mass shootings at schools and elsewhere before Columbine. But Columbine really marks the moment when mass shootings became normalized. I think the event signals major fissures in the social fabric

and reflects other massive changes in how society thinks about place, politics and violence—not only in Colorado but in the nation as a whole.

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