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White Nationalism's Deep American Roots

A long-overdue excavation of the book that Hitler called his "bible," and the man who wrote it

Adam Serwer April 2019 Issue Politics

Robert Bowers wanted everyone to know why he did it.

"I can't sit by and watch my people get slaughtered," he posted on the social-media network Gab shortly before allegedly entering the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh on October 27 and gunning down 11 worshippers. He "wanted all Jews to die," he declared while he was being treated for his wounds. Invoking the specter of white Americans facing "genocide," he singled out HIAS, a Jewish American refugee-support group, and accused it of bringing "invaders in that kill our people." Then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions, announcing that Bowers would face federal charges, was unequivocal in his condemnation: "These alleged crimes are incomprehensibly evil and utterly repugnant to the values of this nation."

The pogrom in Pittsburgh, occurring just days before the 80th anniversary of Kristallnacht, seemed fundamentally un-American to many. Sessions's denunciation spoke to the reality that most Jews have found a welcome home in the United States. His message also echoed what has become an insistent refrain in the Donald Trump era. Americans want to believe that the surge in white-supremacist violence and recruitment—the march in Charlottesville, Virginia, where neo-Nazis chanted "Jews will not replace us"; the hate crimes whose perpetrators invoke the president's name as a battle cry—has no roots in U.S. soil, that it is racist zealotry with a foreign pedigree and marginal allure.

The president's rhetoric about "shithole countries" invites dismissal as crude talk, but behind it lie ideas whose power should not be underestimated.

Warnings from conservative pundits on Fox News about the existential threat facing a country overrun by immigrants meet with a similar response. "Massive demographic changes," Laura Ingraham has proclaimed, mean that "the America we know and love doesn't exist anymore" in much of the country: Surely this kind of rhetoric reflects mere ignorance. Or it's just a symptom of partisan anxiety about what those changes may portend for Republicans' electoral prospects. As for the views and utterances of someone like Congressman Steve King ("We can't restore our civilization with somebody else's babies"), such sentiments are treated as outlandish extremism, best ignored as much as possible.

The concept of "white genocide"—extinction under an onslaught of genetically or culturally inferior nonwhite interlopers—may indeed seem like a fringe conspiracy theory with an alien lineage, the province of neo-Nazis and their fellow travelers. In popular memory, it's a vestige of a racist ideology that the Greatest Generation did its best to scour from the Earth. History, though, tells a different story. King's recent question, posed in a New York Times interview, may be appalling: "White nationalist, white supremacist, Western civilization—how did that language become offensive?" But it is apt. "That language" has an American past in need of excavation. Without such an effort, we may fail to appreciate the tenacity of the dogma it expresses, and the difficulty of eradicating it. The president's rhetoric about "shithole countries" and "invasion" by immigrants invites dismissal as crude talk, but behind it lie ideas whose power should not be underestimated.

The seed of Nazism's ultimate objective—the preservation of a pure white race, uncontaminated by foreign blood—was in fact sown with striking success in the

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United States. What is judged extremist today was once the consensus of a powerful cadre of the American elite, well-connected men who eagerly seized on a false doctrine of “race suicide” during the immigration scare of the early 20th century. They included wealthy patricians, intellectuals, lawmakers, even several presidents. Perhaps the most important among them was a blue blood with a very impressive mustache, Madison Grant. He was the author of a 1916 book called *The Passing of the Great Race*, which spread the doctrine of race purity all over the globe.

Grant’s purportedly scientific argument that the exalted “Nordic” race that had founded America was in peril, and all of modern society’s accomplishments along with it, helped catalyze nativist legislators in Congress to pass comprehensive restrictionist immigration policies in the early 1920s. His book went on to become Adolf Hitler’s “bible,” as the führer wrote to tell him. Grant’s doctrine has since been rejuvenated and rebranded by his ideological descendants as “white genocide” (the term genocide hadn’t yet been coined in Grant’s day). In an introduction to the 2013 edition of another of Grant’s works, the white nationalist Richard Spencer warns that “one possible outcome of the ongoing demographic transformation is a thoroughly miscegenated, and thus homogeneous and ‘assimilated,’ nation, which would have little resemblance to the White America that came before it.” This language is vintage Grant.

Most Americans, however, quickly forgot who Grant was—but not because the country had grappled with his vision’s dangerous appeal and implications. Reflexive recoil was more like it: When Nazism reflected back that vision in grotesque form, wartime denial set in. Jonathan Peter Spiro, a historian and the author of *Defending the Master Race: Conservation, Eugenics, and the Legacy of Madison Grant* (2009), described the backlash to me this way: “Even though the Germans had been directly influenced by Madison Grant and the American eugenics movement, when we fought Germany, because Germany was racist, racism became unacceptable in America. Our enemy was racist; therefore we adopted antiracism as our creed.” Ever since, a strange kind of historical amnesia has obscured the American lineage of this white-nationalist ideology.

Madison Grant came from old money. Born in Manhattan seven months after Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox, he attended Yale and then Columbia Law School. He was an outdoorsman and a conservationist, knowledgeable about wildlife and interested in the dangers of extinction, expertise that he soon became intent on applying to humanity. When he opened a law practice on Wall Street in the early 1890s, the wave of immigration from southern and eastern Europe was nearing its height. “As he was jostled by Greek ragpickers, Armenian bootblacks, and Jewish carp vendors, it was distressingly obvious to him that the new arrivals did not know this nation’s history or understand its republican form of government,” Spiro writes in his biography.

Jews troubled Grant the most. “The man of the old stock,” he later wrote in *The Passing of the Great Race*, is being “driven off the streets of New York City by the swarms of Polish Jews.” But as the title of his 1916 work indicated, Grant’s fear of dispossession ran wide and deep:

These immigrants adopt the language of the native American, they wear his clothes, they steal his name, and they are beginning to take his women, but they seldom adopt his religion or understand his ideals and while he is being elbowed out of his own home the American looks calmly abroad and urges on others the suicidal ethics which are exterminating his own race.

Grant was not the first proponent of “race science.” In 1853, across the Atlantic, Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, a French count, first identified the “Aryan” race as “great, noble, and fruitful in the works of man on this earth.” Half a century

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later, as the eugenics movement gathered force in the U.S., “experts” began dividing white people into distinct races. In 1899, William Z. Ripley, an economist, concluded that Europeans consisted of “three races”: the brave, beautiful, blond “Teutons”; the stocky “Alpines”; and the swarthy “Mediterraneans.” Another leading academic contributor to race science in turn-of-the-century America was a statistician named Francis Walker, who argued in *The Atlantic* that the new immigrants lacked the pioneer spirit of their predecessors; they were made up of “beaten men from beaten races,” whose offspring were crowding out the fine “native” stock of white people. In 1901 the sociologist Edward A. Ross, who similarly described the new immigrants as “masses of fecund but beaten humanity from the hovels of far Lombardy and Galicia,” coined the term race suicide. Grant blended Nordic boosterism with fearmongering, and supplied a scholarly veneer for notions many white citizens already wanted to believe.

But it was Grant who synthesized these separate strands of thought into one pseudo-scholarly work that changed the course of the nation’s history. In a nod to wartime politics, he referred to Ripley’s “Teutons” as “Nordics,” thereby denying America’s hated World War I rivals exclusive claim to descent from the world’s master race. He singled out Jews as a source of anxiety disproportionate to their numbers, subscribing to a belief that has proved durable. The historian Nell Irvin Painter sums up the race chauvinists’ view in *The History of White People* (2010): “Jews manipulate the ignorant working masses—whether Alpine, Under-Man, or colored.” In *The Passing of the Great Race*, the eugenic focus on winnowing out unfit individuals made way for a more sweeping crusade to defend against contagion by inferior races. By Grant’s logic, infection meant obliteration:

The cross between a white man and an Indian is an Indian; the cross between a white man and a Negro is a Negro; the cross between a white man and a Hindu is a Hindu; and the cross between any of the three European races and a Jew is a Jew. What Grant’s work lacked in scientific rigor, it made up for in canny packaging. He blended Nordic boosterism with fearmongering, and supplied a scholarly veneer for notions many white citizens already wanted to believe. Americans’ gauzy idealism blinded them, he argued, to the reality that newcomers from the Mediterranean and eastern Europe—to say nothing of anyone from Asia or Africa—could never hope to possess the genetic potential innate in the nation’s original Nordic inhabitants, which was the source of the nation’s greatness. Grant gleefully challenged foundational ideas:

We Americans must realize that the altruistic ideals which have controlled our social development during the past century and the maudlin sentimentalism that has made America “an asylum for the oppressed,” are sweeping the nation toward a racial abyss. If the Melting Pot is allowed to boil without control and we continue to follow our national motto and deliberately blind ourselves to all “distinctions of race, creed or color,” the type of native American of Colonial descent will become as extinct as the Athenian of the age of Pericles, and the Viking of the days of Rollo.

His thesis found eager converts among the American elite, thanks in no small part to his extensive social connections. The *New York Times* and *The Nation* were among the many media outlets that echoed Grant’s reasoning. Teddy Roosevelt, by then out of office, told Grant in 1916 that his book showed “fine fearlessness in assailing the popular and mischievous sentimentalities and attractive and corroding falsehoods which few men dare assail.” In a major speech in Alabama in 1921, President Warren Harding publicly praised one of Grant’s disciples, Lothrop Stoddard, whose book *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* offered similar warnings about the destruction of white society by invading dusky hordes. There is “a fundamental, eternal, inescapable difference” between the races, Harding told his audience. “Racial amalgamation there cannot be.”

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Harding's vice president and successor, Calvin Coolidge, found Grant's thesis equally compelling. "There are racial considerations too grave to be brushed aside for any sentimental reasons. Biological laws tell us that certain divergent people will not mix or blend," Coolidge wrote in a 1921 article in *Good Housekeeping*. The Nordics propagate themselves successfully. With other races, the outcome shows deterioration on both sides. Quality of mind and body suggests that observance of ethnic law is as great a necessity to a nation as immigration law. Endorsing Grant's idea that true Americans are of Nordic stock, Coolidge also took up his idea that intermarriage between whites of different "races," not just between whites and nonwhites, degrades that stock.

Perhaps the most important of Grant's elite admirers were to be found among members of Congress. Reconstruction struggles; U.S. expansion in the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Hawaii; high levels of immigration—each had raised the specter of white people losing political power and influence to nonwhite people, or to the wrong kind of white people. On Capitol Hill debate raged, yet Republicans and Democrats were converging on the idea that America was a white man's country, and must stay that way. The influx of foreigners diluted the nation with inferiors unfit for self-government, many politicians in both parties energetically concurred. The Supreme Court chimed in with decisions in a series of cases, beginning in 1901, that assigned the status of "nationals" rather than "citizens" to colonial newcomers.

A popular myth of American history is that racism is the exclusive province of the South. The truth is that much of the nativist energy in the U.S. came from old-money elites in the Northeast, and was also fueled by labor struggles in the Pacific Northwest, which had stirred a wave of bigotry that led to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Grant found a congressional ally and champion in Albert Johnson, a Republican representative from Washington. A nativist and union buster, he contacted Grant after reading *The Passing of the Great Race*. The duo embarked on an ambitious restrictionist agenda.

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In 1917, overriding President Woodrow Wilson's veto, Congress passed a law that banned immigration not just from Asian but also from Middle Eastern countries and imposed a literacy test on new immigrants. When the Republicans took control of the House in 1919, Johnson became chair of the committee on immigration, "thanks to some shrewd lobbying by the Immigration Restriction League," Spiro writes. Grant introduced him to a preeminent eugenicist named Harry Laughlin, whom Johnson named the committee's "expert eugenics agent." His appointment helped ensure that Grantian concerns about "race suicide" would be a driving force in a quest that culminated, half a decade later, in the Immigration Act of 1924.

Johnson found a patrician ally in Senator David Reed of Pennsylvania, who sponsored the 1924 bill in the Senate. A Princeton-educated lawyer, he feared that America was going the way of Rome, where the "inpouring of captives and alien slaves" had caused the empire to sink "into an impotency which made her the prey of every barbarian invader." This was almost verbatim Grant, whose portrait of Rome's fall culminated in the lowly immigrants "gradually occupying the country and literally breeding out their former masters." (His plotline helped him preserve the notion that fair-haired and -skinned people are responsible for all the world's great achievements: Rome's original inhabitants were Nordic, but contemporary Italians were descendants of Roman slave races and therefore inferior.)

Grant's slippery pseudoscience also met with significant resistance. The anthropologist Franz Boas, himself of German Jewish descent, led the way in poking holes in Grantian notions of Nordic superiority, writing in *The New Republic* in 1917 that "the supposed scientific data on which the author's conclusions are based

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are dogmatic assumptions which cannot endure criticism.” Meanwhile, the Supreme Court was struggling mightily to define whiteness in a consistent fashion, an endeavor complicated by the empirical flimsiness of race science. In one case after another, the high court faced the task of essentially tailoring its definition to exclude those whom white elites considered unworthy of full citizenship.

In 1923, when an Indian veteran named Bhagat Singh Thind—who had fought for the U.S. in World War I—came before the justices with the claim of being Caucasian in the scientific sense of the term, and therefore entitled to the privileges of whiteness, they threw up their hands. In a unanimous ruling against Thind (who was ultimately made a citizen in 1936), Justice George Sutherland wrote: What we now hold is that the words “free white persons” are words of common speech to be interpreted in accordance with the understanding of the common man, synonymous with the word “Caucasian” only as that word is popularly understood. The justices had unwittingly acknowledged a consistent truth about racism, which is that race is whatever those in power say it is.

As the Immigration Act of 1924 neared passage, some in the restrictionist camp played up Grant’s signature Nordic theme more stridently than others. Addison Smith, a Republican congressman from Idaho, proudly invoked the Scandinavian, English, Irish, and other northern-European immigrants of his district, highlighting that among them were no “‘slackers’ of the type to be found in the cities of the East. We have ample room, but no space for such parasites.” Johnson was prepared to be coy in the face of opposition from other legislators—mostly those from districts with large numbers of non-northern European immigrants—who railed against the Nordic-race doctrine. “The fact that it is camouflaged in a maze of statistics,” protested Representative Meyer Jacobstein, a Democrat from New York, “will not protect this Nation from the evil consequences of such an unscientific, un-American, and wicked philosophy.” “A fundamental, eternal, inescapable difference” exists between the races, President Harding publicly declared. “Racial amalgamation there cannot be.”

On the House floor in April 1924, Johnson cagily—but only temporarily—distanced himself from Grant. “As regards the charge ... that this committee has started out deliberately to establish a blond race ... let me say that such a charge is all in your eye. Your committee is not the author of any of these books on the so-called Nordic race,” he declared. “I insist, my friends, there is neither malice nor hatred in this bill.”

Once passage of the act was assured, however, motives no longer needed disguising. Grant felt his life’s work had come to fruition and, according to Spiro, he concluded, “We have closed the doors just in time to prevent our Nordic population being overrun by the lower races.” Senator Reed announced in a New York Times op-ed, “The racial composition of America at the present time thus is made permanent.” Three years later, in 1927, Johnson held forth in dire but confident tones in a foreword to a book about immigration restriction. “Our capacity to maintain our cherished institutions stands diluted by a stream of alien blood, with all its inherited misconceptions respecting the relationships of the governing power to the governed,” he warned. “The United States is our land ... We intend to maintain it so. The day of unalloyed welcome to all peoples, the day of indiscriminate acceptance of all races, has definitely ended.”

“It was America that taught us a nation should not open its doors equally to all nations,” Adolf Hitler told The New York Times half a decade later, just one year before his elevation to chancellor in January 1933. Elsewhere he admiringly noted that the U.S. “simply excludes the immigration of certain races. In these respects America already pays obeisance, at least in tentative first steps, to the

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characteristic völkisch conception of the state.” Hitler and his followers were eager to claim a foreign-American-lineage for the Nazi mission.

In part, this was spin, an attempt to legitimize fascism. But Grant and his fellow pioneers in racist pseudoscience did help the Nazis justify to their own populations, and to other countries’ governments, the mission they were on—as one of Grant’s key accomplices was proud to acknowledge. According to Spiro, Harry Laughlin, the scientific expert on Representative Johnson’s committee, told Grant that the Nazis’ rhetoric sounds “exactly as though spoken by a perfectly good American eugenicist,” and wrote that “Hitler should be made honorary member of the Eugenics Research Association.”

He wasn’t, but some of the American eugenicists whose work helped pave the way for the racist immigration laws of the 1920s received recognition in Germany. The Nazis gave Laughlin an honorary doctorate from Heidelberg University in 1936. Henry Fairfield Osborn, who had written the introduction to *The Passing of the Great Race*, received one from Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in 1934. Leon Whitney, another of Grant’s fellow travelers, evidently received a personal thank-you letter from Hitler after sending the führer a copy of his 1934 book, *The Case for Sterilization*. In 1939, even after World War II began, Spiro writes, Lothrop Stoddard, whom President Harding had praised in his 1921 diatribe against race-mixing, visited Nazi Germany and later wrote that the Third Reich was “weeding out the worst strains in the Germanic stock in a scientific and truly humanitarian way.”

What the Nazis “found exciting about the American model didn’t involve just eugenics,” observes James Q. Whitman, a professor at Yale Law School and the author of *Hitler’s American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law* (2017). “It also involved the systematic degradation of Jim Crow, of American deprivation of basic rights of citizenship like voting.” Nazi lawyers carefully studied how the United States, despite its pretense of equal citizenship, had effectively denied that status to those who were not white. They looked at Supreme Court decisions that withheld full citizenship rights from nonwhite subjects in U.S. colonial territories. They examined cases that drew, as Thind’s had, arbitrary but hard lines around who could be considered “white.”

The Nazis reviewed the infamous “one-drop rule,” which defined anyone with any trace of African blood as black, and “found American law on mongrelization too harsh to be embraced by the Third Reich.” At the same time, Heinrich Krieger, whom Whitman describes as “the single most important figure in the Nazi assimilation of American race law,” considered the Fourteenth Amendment a problem: In his view, it codified an abstract ideal of equality at odds with human experience, and with the type of country most Americans wanted to live in.

Grant, emphasizing the American experience in particular, agreed. In *The Passing of the Great Race*, he had argued that

the view that the Negro slave was an unfortunate cousin of the white man, deeply tanned by the tropic sun and denied the blessings of Christianity and civilization, played no small part with the sentimentalists of the Civil War period, and it has taken us fifty years to learn that speaking English, wearing good clothes and going to school and to church do not transform a Negro into a white man.

The authors of the Fourteenth Amendment, he believed, had failed to see a greater truth as they made good on the promise of the Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal: The white man is more equal than the others.

Grant’s final project, Spiro writes, was an effort to organize a hunting expedition with Hermann Goering, the commander in chief of the Nazi air force who went on to become Hitler’s chosen successor. Grant died in May 1937, before the outing was to take place. A year and a half later, Kristallnacht signaled the official beginning of the Holocaust.

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America has always grappled with, in the words of the immigration historian John Higham, two “rival principles of national unity.” According to one, the U.S. is the champion of the poor and the dispossessed, a nation that draws its strength from its pluralism. According to the other, America’s greatness is the result of its white and Christian origins, the erosion of which spells doom for the national experiment.

People of both political persuasions like to tell a too-simple story about the course of this battle: World War II showed Americans the evil of racism, which was vanquished in the 1960s. The Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act brought nonwhites into the American polity for good. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 forever banished the racial definition of American identity embodied in the 1924 immigration bill, forged by Johnson and Reed in their crusade to save Nordic Americans from “race suicide.”

The truth is that the rivalry never ended, and Grantism, despite its swift wartime eclipse, did not become extinct. The Nazis, initially puzzled by U.S. hostility, underestimated the American commitment to democracy. As the Columbia historian Ira Katznelson writes in *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (2013), the South remained hawkish toward Nazi Germany because white supremacists in the U.S. didn’t want to live under a fascist government. What they wanted was a *herrenvolk* democracy, in which white people were free and full citizens but nonwhites were not.

“It was America that taught us that a nation should not open its doors equally to all nations,” Hitler told *The New York Times*.

The Nazis failed to appreciate the significance of that ideological tension. They saw allegiance to the American creed as a weakness. But U.S. soldiers of all backgrounds and faiths fought to defend it, and demanded that their country live up to it. Their valor helped defeat first the Nazis, and then the American laws that the Nazis had so admired. What the Nazis saw as a weakness turned out to be a strength, and it destroyed them.

Yet historical amnesia, the excision of the memory of how the seed of racism in America blossomed into the Third Reich in Europe, has allowed Grantism to be resurrected with a new name. In the conflict between the Trump administration and its opponents, those rival American principles of exclusion and pluralism confront each other more starkly than they have since Grant’s own time. And the ideology that has gained ground under Trump may well not disappear when Trump does. Grant’s philosophical framework has found new life among extremists at home and abroad, and echoes of his rhetoric can be heard from the Republican base and the conservative media figures the base trusts, as well as—once again—in the highest reaches of government.

The resurrection of race suicide as white genocide can be traced to the white supremacist David Lane, who claimed that “the term ‘racial integration’ is only a euphemism for genocide,” and whose infamous “fourteen words” manifesto, published in the 1990s, distills his credo: “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.” Far-right intellectuals in Europe speak of “the great replacement” of Europeans by nonwhite immigrants and refugees.

In the corridors of American power, Grant’s legacy is evident. Jeff Sessions heartily praised the 1924 immigration law during an interview with Steve Bannon, Trump’s former campaign chief. Bannon regularly invokes what has become a cult text among white nationalists, the 1973 dystopian French novel *The Camp of the Saints*, in which the “white world” is annihilated by mass immigration. Stephen Miller, a former Senate aide to Sessions and now among the president’s top policy advisers, spent years warning from his perch in Sessions’s office that immigration from

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Muslim countries was a greater threat than immigration from European countries. The president's stated preference for Scandinavian immigrants over those from Latin America or Africa, and his expressed disdain for the Fourteenth Amendment's guarantee of birthright citizenship, are Grantism paraphrased.

That nations make decisions about appropriate levels of immigration is not inherently evil or fascist. Nor does the return of Grantian ideas to mainstream political discourse signal an inevitable march to Holocaust-level crimes against humanity. But to recognize the homegrown historical antecedents of today's rhetoric is to call attention to certain disturbing assumptions that have come to define the current immigration debate in America—in particular, that intrinsic human worth is rooted in national origin, and that a certain ethnic group has a legitimate claim to permanent political hegemony in the United States. The most benignly intentioned mainstream-media coverage of demographic change in the U.S. has a tendency to portray as justified the fear and anger of white Americans who believe their political power is threatened by immigration—as though the political views of today's newcomers were determined by genetic inheritance rather than persuasion.

The danger of Grantism, and its implications for both America and the world, is very real. External forces have rarely been the gravest threat to the social order and political foundations of the United States. Rather, the source of greatest danger has been those who would choose white purity over a diverse democracy. When Americans abandon their commitment to pluralism, the world notices, and catastrophe follows.

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