

'White Lives Matter', now a hate group, is part of a long arc of white supremacy

by Peniel E Joseph

America's racial Pandora's box, once thought to have been closed by Obama's watershed presidential election, has been reopened with a vengeance



'The group traffics in the fiction that white Americans are under assault from an onslaught of illegal immigration, reverse racism and political correctness.' Photograph: Darla Guillen/AP

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The Southern Poverty Law Center's designation of the White Lives Matter organization as a hate group this week confirms what we already knew: that a group of white racists have organized what might be called a backlash to the Black Lives Matter surge.

It is more accurate, though, to view it as a continuation of a long and dreadful history of white supremacy in America. This country's practice of anti-black racism coupled with official denial of institutional racism and collective amnesia regarding the

horrors and crimes inflicted on black people nurtures white resentment against black advancement.

White supremacist groups rose in the civil war's aftermath, organized by southern white people determined to use violence to deny Reconstruction-era promotion of black citizenship. The Ku Klux Klan is the most famous of these groups, whose numbers steadily increased at the end of the 19th century. By the early 20th century the Klan's worldview helped shape the racial nativism – marked by anti-immigrant fervor, antisemitism and anti-Catholicism – that gripped the nation.

The Klan practically joined the American mainstream during the 1920s, proudly marching by the tens of thousands in the nation's capital, their very presence giving weight to the pseudo-science of eugenics being popularized at the time.

Fewer white hate groups dotted America's political landscape after the second world war, the result of both the success of racial segregation and the pushback from anti-racist groups during WWII's freedom surge. The 1954 *Brown v Board of Ed* supreme court desegregation decision resurrected these groups with a vengeance, one of the most notable being the White Citizens Councils opposing public school integration that gained traction throughout the south.

By the late 1960s, the political energies of hate groups reached their apex in the candidacy of former Alabama governor George Wallace, who received nearly 10m popular votes as a segregationist candidate for president in 1968. And the Republican party's now infamous "southern strategy" further cultivated disgruntled white voters, sometimes called "Dixiecrats", with naked appeals to racism.

Donald Trump, the inheritor of this complex history, is playing a most dangerous game. His calls to "make America great again" – which many view as thinly veiled code for white nationalism – has inspired millions of disgruntled and economically insecure white people, unleashing barely controlled furies that have roiled and embarrassed the nation.

White Lives Matter proponents gained national attention when they staged a protest outside of NAACP offices in Houston that prominently featured the Confederate flag. An outgrowth of a social media meme that spread among white people in the aftermath of Black Lives Matter protests, the group traffics in the fiction that white Americans are under assault from an onslaught of illegal immigration, reverse racism and political correctness.

With ties to the white nationalist Aryan Front Coalition and a self-described mission to preserve the white race, White Lives Matter joins the Southern Poverty law Center's list of 892 active hate groups in the US. America's racial Pandora's box, once thought to have been closed by Obama's watershed presidential election, has been reopened with a vengeance.

As our third consecutive summer of racial discontent comes to an end, white and black Americans remain [split](#) over what might be called our collective racial reality. Blacks are more likely than whites to perceive racial discrimination, advocate for substantive policy changes, document unfair treatment by the criminal justice system and other institutions and to support Black Lives Matter.

Yet these differences merely scratch the surface of the pernicious effect of groups such as White Lives Matter. Buoyed by Trump's campaign and the capitulation of mainstream Republicans, groups like White Lives Matter have helped anti-black racism to once again be normalized. And its activists form the latest beachhead in the racial archipelago that contours a nation that twice voted overwhelmingly to elect a black president.

The devastating takeaway from allegations of reverse racism, the promotion of the Confederate flag and the demonization of Black Lives Matter is the surreal picture by many aggrieved whites that they are the most discriminated-against group in America.

Even as social economic indicators reveal the exact opposite, the racial grievances and resentment emanating from such hate groups have successfully captured the imagination of a sizeable portion of the American electorate. White Lives Matter's designation as a hate group confirms what we already knew about not just one organization, but the iconic demagogue who has breathed life into racial furies that we recently thought were facing extinction.