Democracy in Danger
S1E9 No Lone Wolves

Will Hitchcock [00:00:03] Hello, I'm Will Hitchcock.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:05] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:07] And from the University of Virginia's Deliberative Media Lab, this is Democracy in Danger.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:13] Over some of the past few episodes, we've explored ways that white supremacy has undermined the flourishing of democracy in the United States.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:21] Well, this time we're going to explore how a weak and dispersed collection of white supremacists and militias found each other in the 1970s and 80s. And they were drawn together by an astonishing aim, which was the violent overthrow of the U.S. government and the establishment of white power.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:44] It turns out that white power activists are part of an organized, if essentially leaderless movement according to our guest today.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:52] That's right. We've invited Kathleen Belew to talk about her research and some of the surprising evidence that she's uncovered. Kathleen is an assistant professor of history at the University of Chicago and the author of Bring the War Home: the White Power Movement and Paramilitary America. Kathleen, welcome to Democracy in Danger.

Kathleen Belew [00:01:10] Thank you for having me.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:12] So, Kathleen, you open up your book with a very careful explanation of terms. You know, you use the term white power when talking about the militias that you study. You know, other people refer to neo-Nazis or white supremacists or white nationalist. But you're quite specific about what white power means and why that term matters when others are not appropriate. Can you just kind of give us the terminology that you think is appropriate for this topic?

Kathleen Belew [00:01:39] I think the danger in using a phrase like white supremacy or white nationalism is to confuse categories such that it hampers public response to something that really is dangerous to our democracy. When we talk about the white power movement, what I'm referring to is a coalition of neo-Nazi, Klan, skinhead, violent tax resister and militia groups that have come together over the last several decades with the express intent of creating a race war that would destabilize the United States and undermine American democracy, to say the least. These groups are white supremacist, but to to simply say white supremacy equates them with a broader array of systems and beliefs and people, not all of which are violent. And to call them white nationalist sort of lends itself to a common misunderstanding, which is that white nationalism has something to do with propping up the nation. And it does, right. But the nation and white nationalism is not the United States. The nation and white nationalism is the Aryan Nation. They imagine this as a transnational group of white people that unites, you know, activists across countries and is certainly not interested in the welfare of the United States.
Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:02:56] Well, Kathleen, in the book, you invoke several powerful events that generate a significant attention resulted in a lot of deaths. Two, that helped push these movements to higher levels of enrollment were the Ruby Ridge standoff in Idaho in 1992 and the Branch Davidian compound immolation in Texas 1993, in which 76 people died in. Both of these made the U.S. government seem at least bumbling and at most bent on imposing authoritarian control over Americans with fringe beliefs. And, you know, we’re used to thinking of racist and white supremacist forces harnessing the power of the state to maximize their authority, as the Ku Klux Klan did in the 1920s by winning elections or as Southern Democrats did after rolling back Reconstruction after the election of 1876. So how did this white power movement in the late 20th century get so fixed on the idea that the government, including law enforcement and the military, was working against the interests of white people?

Kathleen Belew [00:03:59] An excellent and very complex question, so let me break that into a couple of pieces. First of all, there’s a pivot in the late 1970s where what we’re talking about with the white power movement is not contiguous with earlier vigilante violence. In that earlier vigilante violence like the Klan in the 1920s or even the Klan in the 1960s was usually invested in preserving some element of the status quo or state power. In other words, its violence was aligned with local systemic power. After the 1970s, what we see in the white power movement is a revolutionary kind of violence. And I say that not to imbue any kind of positive connotation, but just to draw the distinction that the white power movement, unlike the Klan in earlier moments in American history, was not trying to prop up existing systems of power. It was not trying to be reactionary and prevent social change. It was trying to create a revolutionary change by overthrowing the federal government. Now, as you say, that has to do with this profound sense of betrayal by the state and especially by the federal government that is really deeply rooted in the common narrative of the Vietnam War that was espoused by the white power movement and by many other segments of American society in the 1980s and moving forward. And that narrative sort of claimed that the government left people to die, that they betrayed people, that they were not allowed to win. And I mean, this is not at all a fringe interpretation of the Vietnam War. Nor is it unusual to see a sort of decoupling of support for certain very specific parts of state power from a deep distrust of the federal government as a whole. One of the common questions in this period is how can somebody be so militaristic and pro-military and anti-government at the same time? And that’s a phenomenon that appears across American society in this period. We might also look to the speeches and actions of President Ronald Reagan, which is where we get this idea of people being denied permission to win in Vietnam. And of course, we also heard Reagan say things like, you know, the government is not the solution. The government is the problem while he was serving as the head of the government. So this series of fractures in where state power is located, where sovereignty is located, where authority to govern is located, I think is deeply, deeply present in the heart of all white power mobilization from that 1970s moment and into the present.

Will Hitchcock [00:06:40] Kathleen, I’m really interested in the way in which the Vietnam War plays such a big role in your analysis and in the experience of the people that you write about. So young men, they’re there in Vietnam, they’re fighting in a faraway place for purposes that may seem unclear to them. They come back to a country that has that has turned its back on the war, or at least that’s their impression. Not everybody goes into a white power cell or group, but some do. What happens to them? What’s the process of radicalization, if you like, that you were able to document?
Kathleen Belew [00:07:16] So I think the most instructive example is probably that of Lewis Beam, who became a major leader in this movement after his return from serving two tours in Vietnam as a gunner on a QE helicopter. Now, he had been involved in at least segregationist, if not Klan activity before he served. But when he returned in the late 1960s, he joined another Klan group, rose to leadership by working to paramilitarize, first the local Klan, and then working with Aryan Nations to kind of spread different technologies and tactics of the white power movement to groups across the country. And he did that in large part by invoking this very deep and very widely felt sense of government betrayal in Vietnam. He writes and speaks at length about the disruption of the war in his life, about losing fellow soldiers, about the impression that it left on him. And he did it in such a way that was incredibly effective in mobilizing other people. That narrative brought people into the room who couldn't get in the room before. In other words, if you take a veteran of World War II, for instance, a lot of Klansmen who served in World War II didn't want to band together with neo-Nazis because they saw them as the enemy they had faced in combat. It needed something like this new narrative about government betrayal to bring together these two very different stripes of white supremacist belief. But as you say, not everyone becomes violent. And it's not just veterans doing this violence, not by a long shot. What we find instead is that although veteran involvement is really important in instrumentalizing particular kinds of white power violence, a large array of people are claiming this paramilitary identity who did not serve in the Vietnam War. It turns out all of Americans become more violent in the aftermath of warfare. That's a phenomenon that cuts across age. It cuts across gender. A whole bunch of different people become violent after war. And what the Klan is doing is simply operationalizing that and using it opportunistically to recruit and to do violence.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:09:29] Well, Kathleen, let's talk about the aftermath of a different war, too. You know, so in 1995, when the Murrah Federal Office Building in Oklahoma City blew up and collapsed and killed 168 people, a few days later, we found out that the perpetrator was a young man named Timothy McVeigh. Well as it turns out, I grew up in a suburb north of Buffalo in the 1970s and 1980s. And Timothy McVeigh grew up just a few miles from me. He was two years younger than me. We could have gone to high school together if the boundaries had been drawn differently. And I knew a lot of boys like Timothy McVeigh when I was growing up. They had seen their parents lose their jobs as western New York factories closed and jobs moved south to Texas or Mexico. And they had seen that the schools around them and the streets underneath them crack and wither and never get repaired. They certainly heard no optimistic messages from older people about the future of western New York. So they all knew, as I knew, we had to find a way out. It was like one big Bruce Springsteen song with, in many cases, a terrible ending. So, you know, in my middle school, in high school, Soldier of Fortune magazine was as popular among the boys as Sports Illustrated. I was fortunate enough to be among a group who could see college as a way out of Buffalo before it all crumbled and crushed us. But Tim McVeigh was among a group that saw the military as the only viable way up and out. And, of course, he ends up joining the army. He serves in the first Gulf War, and he returns with some very different ideas in his head. How does Tim McVeigh's story fit into the argument of your book?

Kathleen Belew [00:11:14] Well, first, I want to thank you for that story. So Timothy McVeigh served in the first Gulf War as part of the Big Red One Infantry Division. But even before his military service, he was flirting with some white nationalist content while he was going through training at Fort Riley, Kansas. There is a substantial record of his sort of entrance into the movement. And as you say, of a existing interest in guns and Soldier of Fortune magazine and a bunch of other sort of elements of paramilitary culture writ broad.
What seems to have happened with McVeigh is that he really wanted to be in special forces. And because of the timing of his Special Forces evaluation, he washed out and did not make it and felt deeply betrayed by the military and deeply betrayed by the government and returned from his military service without that upward career in the army he had been counting on and with this existing interest in white power activity. And what we see after that - leading up to the Oklahoma City bombing - is not the work of a lone actor or a "lone wolf" but the work of somebody who's deeply, deeply, deeply invested in the white power movement, who is traveling the country with contact with different people within the movement and different groups in the movement - and also deeply involved in the gun show circuit - who chooses as the target of his bombing, a building that has been in the crosshairs of the white power movement since 1983 at least. I think the thing to understand about the Oklahoma City bombing is both that it was an act of coordinated white power violence and that it is the largest deliberate mass casualty in the United States between Pearl Harbor and 9/11. And most people are still walking around without any idea of what it was or what it meant.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:13:10] Right. Because we personalize the story as I did. We still think of McVeigh as a lone wolf. We still think that it's about his motivations and his turn toward this this violent position toward the American government, the American people. But you're very clear in your book that there is no such thing as a lone wolf when it comes to this movement, right?

Kathleen Belew [00:13:32] That's absolutely right. I think it's one of the most, you know, cataclysmic misunderstandings. It's difficult for me to overstate how damaging the idea of a lone wolf has been to the ability of the American public to face this very real threat to our democracy. And part of the reason that this happened is because of a strategy called leaderless resistance that was pioneered in the movement in the early 1980s. And leaderless resistance is quite easy to understand now because it's very similar to self-styled terrorism and we know plenty about that after 9/11. But the idea is that one or a few white power activists could form a cell and work on their own without contact with each other or with movement leadership in order to accomplish a shared set of violent objectives that would further the goals of the white power movement. And that strategy was actually implemented to foil federal informants because the Klan had become very, very frustrated with infiltration in the civil rights era and also, of course, to prevent effective prosecution in court. But I think the much more catastrophic impact of leaderless resistance has been that it has shredded our public understanding of white power activism as a social movement. And what we get instead are all of these different stories about lone wolf gunman, lone wolf actors, lone wolf bombers, instead of a story about a rising tide of action. So in the present, what that looks like is we get a story about the El Paso shooting as the work of a anti-immigrant gunman. And the story about the Tree of Life shooting as anti-Semitic violence and Christchurch as anti-Muslim violence. And all of these things are, you know, racist and anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant. But they're also all white power violence carried out by a group of people who have the same ideology, the same set of symbols, and who have deep social networks that tie them together.

Will Hitchcock [00:15:34] There is one key piece of evidence that you use in your work and that we know is an influential document in the movement, and that is The Turner Diaries. What on earth is this dystopian novel about? Why does this book have such or did it have such a hold on young men like Timothy McVeigh? And does it still circulate around today?
Yes, absolutely. And The Turner Diaries is important to the movement well into the present and not just to young men, but to young women, too, and to older men and older women, not because it is a delightful read or a well done novel in any sense, but because it fills this really critical hole in the movement's ideology. The question is, how could a tiny fringe movement possibly hope to accomplish the overthrow of the federal government? How are they going to, you know, overthrew the most militarized superstate in the history of the world? And in The Turner Diaries, they even talk about this as the problem of - I think they say something like a gnat trying to assassinate an elephant. It's a huge problem. And in order for somebody to really invest in the white power movement, they have to believe it can succeed. So The Turner Diaries is important because it lays out a plan for how this could happen. And, you know, it's important to people who want to oppose this movement because it lays out also exactly how violent a project this is imagined to be. The Turner Diaries is set in a future moment, which for white power activists is the sort of utopian moment where this small group of white power activists has successfully overthrown the state through a long project of guerrilla warfare and subversion. And the novel ends with a post script that explains that they go on to take over the country to annihilate all people of color and all racial enemies, and then to use chemical or biological weapons to eradicate all other people of color around the world.

Well, we're used to thinking of the white power movement as a as a men's movement. Certainly the current collection of white supremacist movements that flourish all over the Internet, are deeply connected to the men's rights movement and other misogynistic expressions. There's a serious overlap in that area and often misogyny is the gateway drug to white supremacy in current parlance. You're emphatic, though, that we not see the white power movement of the late 20th century as a movement that excludes women. Right? Women play a central prescribed role within it. Could you tell us what what role women played in this movement, how important they were to it?

Yes. And I would actually also push back on the idea that what we're seeing now is a men's movement. I mean, certainly there are new kinds of men's activism in the present that make the involvement of women in the movement more complex than it might have been in the earlier time. But women have been enormously important to the present day movement as well. And if you look at the recent manifestos, one thing you'll see is the recurring language around birth rates. It's the birth rates. It's the birth rates. It's the birth rates. This is the beginning of, I believe, the Christchurch manifesto. We see this over and over again. The El Paso manifesto ended with idealized pictures of white women and children. This is a very, you know, basic component of white supremacy, which is that a white supremacist society has to produce white babies in order to continue. And white power activists in the earlier period and today grabbed onto a number of issues that we might think of as conservative issues like anti-immigration, anti-abortion, anti LGBT rights, anti feminism, not in the way that we sort of think about those issues, but because of how they thought they would impact the white birthrate and white population growth in comparison to the birth of people of color. They worried a great deal about how many children women were having, how many children women of color were having versus white women and about what they could do about that. And alongside that, you see a whole bunch of work by men in the movement around this sort of idealized white female body and how they have to defend white women. All of that, I think, was pretty well known. The surprise to me in the archive is that this is not just symbolic at all. There is a whole bunch of activity carried out by white women as activists in their own right. And I think part of why we've missed this is because historians and journalists typically have an idea of women's political participation that takes the shape of feminism.
That's the model we're most familiar with for a wide variety of reasons. And the women in the white power movement spent a lot of time saying, I'm not an activist. I'm not a leader. I'm not involved really. At the same time that they were publishing their quarterlies, you know, running their own home schools, maintaining social relationships between groups and even doing things like disguising people and driving getaway cars when they carried out acts of violence.

**Will Hitchcock [00:20:52]** Towards the end of your book, you take a stab at guessing how many people had been participating in some way in the white power movement and you come up with a number of five million, which is people who are active and also who are who formed a support network of one kind or another, that's an enormous number. But then you suggested after Oklahoma City in the mid 90s and maybe the advent of the Internet, those numbers might have gone down or maybe the movement sort of dispersed or morphed. What happens in the subsequent 20 years? What's the arc of the story since the mid 90s?

**Kathleen Belew [00:21:26]** What happens into the present is very difficult to say for a number of reasons, partly because of the Internet, but partly because we haven't been counting this movement. We haven't been monitoring. People haven't been dedicating the surveillance and infiltration resources to know how many people are in this movement. I would really love to have those numbers. I don't think anybody has them. What we do know is that white power movement violence accounts for a staggering majority of domestic terrorism. We do know that these groups are on an upswing. We can see that from the stories that are in the newspaper all the time about boogaloo, the base, Atomwaffen identity, Europa, Proud Boys. All of this is part of the same groundswell. And we do know that one of the agencies just listed 2019 as the most violent year for domestic terrorism since 1995 because of the Oklahoma City bombing. So we're there. We know we're in an upswell. The other thing I would say about membership numbers is just that it's super important to keep in mind that because of this ideology of leaderless resistance, there is not a neat correlation between rising group membership numbers and rising amounts of violence. Because when you're doing leaderless resistance activism, you're not interested in getting two thousand people to march down Main Street. You're interested in getting six people to detonate a bomb. So one thing that the historical archive can show us is that sometimes when the membership numbers go down is when we actually see spikes in violent activity. So I would encourage people, instead of watching the membership numbers, which I think are less important, I think the best measure for where we are in those big ebb and flow cycles of vigilante violence and revolutionary violence by these kinds of actors has to do instead with sort of the tide of common examples and the fact that we're seeing coordinated strategies across multiple cities. And the fact that we're seeing major social media activity and chatter about domestic terror attacks and mass violence. I think this is a moment of very great concern and I hope that more people will pay attention to this story.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:23:44]** Well, Kathleen Belew thank you very much for joining us today on Democracy in Danger.

**Kathleen Belew [00:23:50]** Thank you.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:24:01]** Will, one of the most important lessons that Kathleen Belew tries to get us to grasp is the notion that the lone wolf is a myth and that it's all about the movement and the flow of history. So the McVeigh example, I think, is really instructive here. McVeigh's action in Oklahoma City followed on this string of events starting in the
1980s, but really culminating with the Ruby Ridge standoff in 1992 and then the Branch Davidian standoff in Waco, Texas, in 1993. In fact, Timothy McVeigh had gone to Waco and had witnessed the standoff. He was fascinated by this example of what he interpreted as excessive state power against a fringe group. And he and he felt deeply offended and troubled by his government's action here. And that certainly folded itself into this set of deep seeded beliefs and suspicions about the government, even though he had served in the armed forces of this very government.

Will Hitchcock [00:25:10] I think that one of the crucial messages that Kathleen was trying to send is that if we miss the larger picture, we do so at the risk of our democracy. That is to say, the stakes are really, really high. So just saying Timothy McVeigh, boy, he was a bad apple. Look what he did. He was horrible. And missing the sea that he was swimming in sets us up for failing then to grasp the larger circumstances from which Timothy McVeigh and many others have emerged. Their common language, their common texts like The Turner Diaries, their common utopia or dystopia that they imagined they are, as she has documented, they're sharing a network. And it's it's visible if you know how to look. And you know where to look. And if you're pointing the right amount of resources to look into these movements. And I think it has been hard for the federal government, for state governments to accept that domestic terrorism by white people, especially by military veterans, is actually a danger to our democracy. We're much more inclined for all kinds of cultural reasons to see terrorism as an external threat by people who don't, "look like us." what happens if it's the Timothy McVeigh's, the highly trained white soldiers from upstate New York who are actually posing the biggest threat? And we miss that. If we just hide them off and say, well, that was just a bad apple. So this is a moment in which the scholars are alerting us to a huge task that democratic society has to undertake, which is vigilance about the larger picture in which these men and women have operated.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:26:43] Now, you know, Will, I used to be a journalist, a newspaper reporter, and our goal was always to humanize. Our goal was always to avoid the esoteric, the general, the historical, the God forbid theoretical or academic approach to an event. So, look, in terms of building up our immune system and building up our muscles. I mean, one of the things we could do is, is push for better journalism, broader journalism, journalism that takes into account the historical, the social, the anthropological, the theoretical, and really embraces those larger stories and doesn't always focus on the narrative or the character. Right? Doesn't it doesn't always try to make journalism like a novel or a movie. We could urge journalists to be, dare I say it, more academic in their approaches to these stories. And I know dozens of journalists are doing this exact thing right now - that's going to help quite a bit. The other thing, as you pointed out, that we really need to push for is more daring, boldness and accountability from law enforcement and our security services. We need prosecutors at all levels not to think about these perpetrators as lone wolves, as individual criminals, but as parts of syndicates, parts of movements and a direct threat to the stability of society and to democracy.

Will Hitchcock [00:28:08] Siva, one way of strengthening our immune system is something that Leah Wright-Rigueur suggested, which is for public policy schools, maybe for undergraduate curricula all across the board. What we need is more history and we need more history of race. And I think these are, you know, simple but important ways in which we can kind of double down on what we're already good at, but what has been washed out of a lot of education lately, which is thinking historically. Everybody is trying to make money nowadays so accounting majors and commerce majors and business majors are all the rage. But none of that really matters if you can interpret your place in time. And
it's a plug for my professional discipline. But a historical consciousness allows you to take the individual narrative and put that story into a larger context.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:28:59] That's it this week for Democracy in Danger. On our next episode, we'll talk to Carol Anderson of Emory University about an issue getting a lot of attention right now at voter suppression.

Carol Anderson [00:29:10] The Voting Rights Act was so good that it immediately had the crosshairs put on it because it was a threat to the political power of white supremacy.

Will Hitchcock [00:29:24] Share your thoughts on this episode when you have a chance, you can find us on Twitter @UVAMediaLab or you can reach us through our Web site, medialab.virginia.edu.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:29:36] You can subscribe to Democracy in Danger wherever you get your podcasts. We are going to be dropping new episodes every week, at least through the November election. So be sure not to miss our upcoming shows about authoritarian rhetoric and about the dark web.


Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:30:00] Support comes from the University of Virginia’s Democracy Initiative and from the College of Arts and Sciences. This show is a project of UVa’s Deliberative Media Lab, and it’s distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective at WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

Will Hitchcock [00:30:20] And I'm Will Hitchcock. See you next time.