



SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER

# PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITION PRIORITIES

CONFRONT THE MAINSTREAMING OF  
WHITE NATIONALISM AND EXTREMISM

SPLC | ACTION 

# CONFRONT THE MAINSTREAMING OF WHITE NATIONALISM AND EXTREMISM

The explosive events of 2020 have triggered a remarkable and widespread movement to dismantle racism in its many forms. Since George Floyd was killed at the hands of Minneapolis police in May, millions of Americans have taken to the streets to demonstrate against racist policing. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed how vastly unequal America remains, with Black, Hispanic, and Native American communities suffering a disproportionate number of cases and deaths.<sup>1</sup>

This moment is unique in American history: As tragedies have laid bare how much work we have to do, Americans of different racial and class backgrounds have come together in a struggle against racist policing, mass incarceration, economic inequality, health care inaccessibility, and other injustices.

But amid this historic movement, white nationalism and far-right extremism threaten to derail our progress. Just as the events of this year rallied racial justice activists, they also helped to mobilize the far right. That was made clear at Black Lives Matter protests, where a variety of far-right extremists repeatedly assembled to counter these events. Militias are actively finding new recruits at demonstrations and online forums, white nationalists and neo-Nazis are hoping to use today's uncertain political climate to spark a civil war, and white supremacist violence continues to surge.

According to the Department of Homeland Security, 2019 was the most lethal year for violent domestic extremism since the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, and white supremacist extremists were responsible for the majority of deaths that occurred in 2019.<sup>2</sup> This emboldened radical right is not an anomaly, but the culmination of years of mobilization.

The SPLC has laid out concrete steps the federal government can take to combat white supremacist terrorism, prevent violent extremism, transform institutions that reflect white supremacist ideology, and rebuild trust in our democracy.

## EXECUTIVE ACTION

➔ **Establish a national truth, racial healing and transformation commission to examine the history of white supremacy and structural racism in the United States.**

The United States must reckon with its long history of injustice if we hope to substantially remedy the harms the country has inflicted on many of its citizens in the name of white supremacy. There is no better time to do so than amid the Black Lives Matter movement that has brought millions of Americans out in solidarity against racist policing and other forms of racial discrimina-

tion. An estimated 10% of Americans participated in demonstrations this summer.<sup>3</sup> A large majority of Americans — nearly seven in 10, according to recent polling conducted by the SPLC — are concerned about racism in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

Congress has created similar commissions in the past, including a Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians<sup>5</sup> to examine the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Taking executive action to establish a long-overdue truth and reconciliation commission is a necessary step in acknowledging the injustices our country has committed and bolstering a movement to eliminate racial discrimination.

## LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

➔ **Prohibit racial, ethnic, and religious profiling in federal, state, and local law enforcement.**

Discriminatory policing is a widespread problem, with Black, Latinx, Muslim, and Indigenous people, in particular, subject to increased surveillance and state violence. The recent past is full of examples of discriminatory policing — including the profiling of Muslims after 9/11, the use of gang databases that disproportionately target Black and Latinx youth and subject them to harsher sentences, and the disproportionately high rates at which Indigenous and Black Americans are killed by police.<sup>6</sup> Law enforcement agencies continue to profile based on race, ethnicity, and religion, or proxies of these characteristics that may appear neutral but, in practice, disproportionately impact certain communities. The Department of Justice and Department of Homeland Security need to close the broad loopholes that allow discriminatory policing to continue.

➔ **Reject efforts to create a new criminal domestic terrorism statute — or a listing of designated domestic terrorist organizations.**

Federal law enforcement already has the tools and authority it needs to effectively investigate and prosecute white supremacist terror groups. According to the Brennan Center for Justice, 51 of the 57 federal statutes related to terrorism are applicable to domestic terrorism.<sup>7</sup> Recent investigations and charges brought against members of white power groups like Atomwaffen Division and The Base demonstrate that, even outside of the statutory terrorism framework, federal law enforcement can effectively prosecute crimes by violent white supremacists. Failure to effectively pros-

ecute white supremacists as domestic terrorists is not due to a lack of statutory authority, but of political will.

A new federal terrorism statute or list would adversely impact civil liberties and — as our long and disturbing history of targeting Black activists and leftist political movements has shown — could be wielded to surveil and investigate communities of color and political dissidents. Under the pretext of “national security,” the federal government attempted to discredit civil rights activists in the 1960s. More recently, the New York Police Department unlawfully surveilled Muslim communities,<sup>8</sup> the FBI’s Domestic Terrorism Analysis Unit manufactured the label “Black Identity Extremists” to undermine legitimate political activism,<sup>9</sup> and between 2004 and 2008 the FBI designated “eco-terrorism” the nation’s primary terror threat despite there being no fatality attributable to environmental activists.<sup>10</sup> New domestic terrorism legislation threatens to reprise episodes like these, while not demonstrably providing greater protection against terrorist attacks.

➔ **Require renaming of military bases named for Confederate leaders, and ban the display of Confederate flags or other racist symbols from all military installations, federal parks, streets, and highways.**

Since the 2015 Charleston church massacre sparked a nationwide effort to remove Confederate symbols from public places, more than 100 monuments and other markers have been removed. Most still remain, however — a sign that we have failed to fully acknowledge the injustices of slavery or affirm our commitment to a wholly inclusive, pluralistic democracy.<sup>11</sup> Just as Americans across the country have organized to remove these racism symbols from their communities, the federal government must take action to finally remove names, emblems, and monuments that honor the Confederacy from federally operated spaces — including the 10 U.S. Army bases currently named for Confederate leaders.<sup>12</sup>

➔ **Mandate federal collection of hate crime data, and fully fund and promote the FBI’s new police use-of-force incidents data collection and reporting mandate.**

Data drives policy. Robust data collection is necessary for developing and implementing sound public policy. However, large gaps exist in the collection of hate crime data and instances of police use of force — both of which have a heightened impact on communities of color.

Hate crimes have risen since 2016, and in 2019, hate crimes increased 3% and reported hate crime murders reached their highest level — 51 such murders — since the FBI began collecting this data in 1991. While the FBI’s annual hate crime report uncovers these larger trends, it vastly underestimates the extent of the problem because local law enforcement agencies are not

required to report hate crime data. In 2019, 86% of law enforcement agencies either affirmatively reported that they had zero hate crimes, or they did not report any data to the FBI at all — including some 80 cities over 100,000 in population.

And while the FBI reported 7,314 incidents nationwide, other governmental studies show there are an average of 250,000 hate crime victimizations each year.<sup>13</sup> Law enforcement must be adequately trained and resourced in hate crime collection and mandated to report this information — including the number of reported incidents, arrests made, and charges resulting in prosecution — to the FBI.

Likewise, reporting use-of-force incidents must be expanded. While the FBI began to collect this information in 2019, agencies representing only 41% of all law enforcement officers reported to the FBI.<sup>14</sup> More robust data must be made available if we are to hold police accountable and address discriminatory policing.

➔ **Codify independent authority and autonomy protections for inspectors general at federal agencies.**

Congress established a system of federal agency inspectors general as part of post-Watergate legislative and oversight reform. President Trump’s unprecedented purge of several federal agency inspectors general revealed the limits of current law to protect these government watchdogs.<sup>15</sup> “Strong, independent inspectors general have the potential to combat public cynicism and inject much needed accountability into the federal government,” says a report in the Good Governance Papers published by *Just Security*. “The current system, in which any IG can be fired for any reason — or for no reason at all — at any time, fails to live up to this potential.”<sup>16</sup>

## EXECUTIVE/CONGRESSIONAL FUNDING PRIORITIES

➔ **Move funding for Department of Education programs aimed at preventing extremism and promoting deradicalization from punishment models to initiatives that build community resilience.**

Our country’s failure to reckon with far-right extremism stems from two factors: our inability to reconcile with how systemic white supremacy shapes our culture, society, and civic institutions; and our faulty over-reliance on arrest and imprisonment to curb problems our criminal justice system cannot address.

Simply put, terrorism cannot be solved with prison sentences, domestic terrorism designations, or laws that threaten civil rights and privacy. Prevailing “counter-terrorism” frameworks for targeting terrorists do not address, and can even exacerbate, the root causes in our society that drive white terrorism.

Congress should shift funding away from punishment models and toward the prevention of violent extremism. It should focus on programs that build resilient communities and empower adults — including parents, teachers, caregivers, counselors, therapists, faith leaders, and coaches — to help steer young people away from dangerous ideas. These programs are better housed in the Department of Education than the Department of Homeland Security or other national security agencies. The Department of Education should fund exploratory research to evaluate which kinds of interventions and public education initiatives most effectively reduce polarization, hate, and extremism.

➡ **End funding for police militarization and the transfer of excess military property to law enforcement agencies (1033 Program).**

Since it was established in the 1997 FY National Defense Authorization Act, the 1033 Program has allowed the transfer of more than \$7.4 billion in surplus military equipment to local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection have both received military equipment from the program. This program does not protect our communities and has instead encouraged some police officers to treat our cities like war zones.

Police militarization disproportionately exposes communities of color to police violence. But it exacerbates other problems as well. Police militarization inflames the paranoia of the extreme right, which uses state-sponsored violence as evidence of government tyranny and impending civil war.<sup>17</sup> Right-wing extremists also pattern their paramilitarism after the police and military. The militarized police response to Black Lives Matter demonstrations has emboldened the far right, which has used state violence against protesters, journalists, and others as tacit permission to also act violently against these groups. In order to curb far-right violence and protect communities of color, Congress should end the 1033 Program.

➡ **End funding for Department of Homeland Security programs that profile and target immigrants, Black Muslims and other Black Americans.**

White extremism and terrorism cannot be “solved” without addressing systemic white supremacy, as the former springs from the latter. This is why the Department of Homeland Security’s Countering Violent Extremism/Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention programs should be ended. These programs profile and target immigrants, Black Muslims and other Black Americans. These efforts have subjected communities of color to illegal spying and surveillance,

elevating feelings of distrust, anger, and disillusionment. They are not only ineffective, but harmful.

➡ **Provide funding for states and municipalities to remove Confederate monuments and public displays.**

The SPLC has counted more than 1,700 Confederate symbols that remain in public places across the country, including 780 monuments.<sup>18</sup> Removing these racist statues, emblems, and other symbols can be a long and difficult process, and Congress should aid communities’ efforts by creating a federal grant program to help municipalities remove symbols of the Confederacy.

➡ **Provide funding for the Department of Education to develop a curriculum on structural racism and funding for states to implement their own related initiatives.**

Americans can only dismantle white supremacy if they understand how racism shaped (and continues to shape) housing, education, policing, health care, and other policies and practices that affect our everyday lives.

Anti-racist education enjoys strong support as a way of reducing and preventing hate and extremism. A nationwide SPLC poll conducted in August 2020 found that seven in 10 adults support anti-racist education, and 67% support a curriculum on America’s “history of racial prejudice and violence, including slavery, lynching and Jim Crow laws.”<sup>19</sup> Support for anti-racist education extends across the lines of race, geography, and political party affiliation. Understanding our history is vital to understanding racism today, and we should take advantage of today’s broad bipartisan support for this curriculum.

## ENDNOTES

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