

Embodying White Christian Supremacy: From Deputizing Citizens to Flying the Blue Lives Matter Flag

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Moderated by Koki Mendis*

01/25/2023

Koki Mendis: We're going to go ahead and get started. Thank you for joining Political Research Associates today for our final, much rescheduled, much anticipated discussion in our series on the Right's steady capture of the center. Today, we will be exploring how the meaning of constructed cultural identities is made and deployed in right-wing politics.

For those of you who are new to PRA, or Political Research Associates, we are a social justice research and strategy center dedicated to blocking the advance of oppressive and anti-democratic movements, and to building a just and inclusive democratic society. Over the past four decades, PRA has researched, monitored, and publicized the agenda and the strategies of the U.S. and global Right, revealing the powerful intersections of Christian nationalism, White nationalism, and patriarchy. PRA produces investigative reports, articles, and tools; advises social justice movement organizers; and offers expert commentary for local and national media outlets. Our core issue areas span reproductive justice, LGBTQ rights, racial and immigrant justice, civil liberties, and economic justice.

We have just launched a new five year strategic plan and are entering a period of increased investment in growing both our organization and achieving our vision of inclusive feminist democracy. We're excited to dig deep with our partners, contribute more fully in national conversations, and help sustain and grow the Left social justice movement in this critical moment. We invite you to think about getting involved with PRA: write for us, connect your organization to ours, and join us in our work. Our webinars are only one way to engage.

That said, we are deeply grateful to you, our audience, for joining us today, and we are particularly grateful to be joined by three incredible thinkers,

digging into some of the most influential and destructive movements on the U.S. Right. [Bradley Onishi](#) is a social commentator, scholar, writer, teacher, coach and co-host of the Straight White American Jesus podcast. He is also the author of the newly released book *Preparing for War: The Extremist History of White Christian Nationalism—And What Comes Next*. [Zhandarka Kurti](#) is assistant professor of criminal justice and criminology at Loyola University, Chicago, and coauthor of *States of Incarceration: Rebellion, Reform and America's Punishment System* and editor of *Treason to Whiteness Is Loyalty to Humanity*. And last but certainly not least, [Steven Gardiner](#), PRA's own Research Director. Steven has been researching and writing in opposition to the politics of bigotry, violence and authoritarianism since the early 1990s. At PRA he ties together analysis of the disparate right-wing movements that we monitor and strategize against to provide high level intel on the broader U.S. Right.

Thank you very much to our esteemed panelists and to you, our wonderful audience, for joining us today. Please note the webinar will be recorded. The recording, along with the transcript, will be distributed by email on PRA's website next week. You can also toggle on captioning today by clicking the "Show Captions" button on the bottom of your screen. Audience members, feel free to introduce yourself in the chat so we can see who all is with us. We encourage you to use the chat to engage in the conversation. If you're having any trouble with our tech today, feel free to message PRA Tech Support directly and we'll help to the best of our abilities. Okay. With housekeeping, that's out of the way. Let's get started.

In the same breath as decrying so-called liberal identity politics, the U.S. Right declares itself representative of an oppressed White Christian social class, fly Blue Lives Matter flags in place of old glory, and bedecked themselves in the cultish paraphernalia of Trump's MAGA movement. With pins and badges signaling adherents to QAnon or movements like the groypers, right-wing politics have taken on the role of cultural identity for millions of Americans. In this discussion, we will examine how the culture war frames the Left's struggle to preserve a faltering American democracy and conclude with ideas for a new vision for inclusion and justice that makes meaning of and builds solidarity across identity.

And I apologize for my sound, if it is it all hard to hear. It is temporary. Please bear with me. And I'm just going to start with question one. Before we embark on a robust conversation interrogating the deployment of culture war by the U.S. Right. We should define what we mean by culture war and the predominant engineered culture as to which we are referring. Steven, can you start us by giving a brief overview of what culture war refers to today?

Steven Gardiner: Yeah. Thank you, Koki, for the introduction and welcome, everyone, today. I'm Steven Gardiner, Research Director at PRA. I'm going to take us back just a moment into a little bit of history, something that I remember from the early days of my own, sort of, life as a Fight the Right activist in Portland, Oregon. But this was 1992 August, when a person, who most of you will probably have heard of, his name is Patrick Buchanan, he was a candidate, Republican candidate for nomination for president, and he got enough votes to leverage a prime time speaking gig at the Republican National Convention. And he gave what came to be known as the culture war speech. It's certainly not the first time anyone ever talked about culture wars, and it was obviously far from the last. But he defines in this moment, the beginning of a emerging coalition from different sectors—of what PRA thinks of as sectors—of the Right. What had been disparate, although interconnected social movements and the long process of their coming together in a power bloc, a political power bloc. So what he said was, "My friends, this elect—" I'm quoting, "this election is about more than who gets what. It is about who we are. It is about what we believe and what we stand for as Americans. There is a religious war going on in this country. It is a cultural war as critical to the kind of nation we shall be, as was the Cold War itself. For this war is for the soul of America. And in that struggle for the soul of America, Clinton and Clinton are on the other side and George Bush is on our side." He's saying that with a pained look on his face. "And so to the Buchanan Brigades out there, we have to come home and stand beside George Bush." All right. Now, famously, columnist and humorist Molly Ivans quipped in response, "It probably sounded better in the original German," which of course is a funny remark, but it cuts a certain way. And though this is 30 years old now, in the course of my understanding of where—how we got to where we are today, there are some key things that emerged during the 90s—the early 90s and through that decade, that sort of queue up what comes into being in the in the next 30 years.

So I want to point to three things in Buchanan's very brief remark. The first thing: this is not about who gets what. This is a reference to the traditional politics of the New Deal and what followed from the New Deal, which is about economic redistribution, and a little bit of government regulation of the most powerful economic interests, and marginally less hostility to organized labor. And this being the defining politics of the two party system in the United States: being about who gets what in terms of "we're going to do a little bit of just redistribution of wealth. We all know that there's still going to be vast differences in wealth and income and the kinds of power that gives people. But we're going to try to make this a little bit more legitimating." This is the politics and he's saying it's beyond that now.

Second point he mentions is the Cold War and it being the immediate aftermath. The aftermath of the Cold War—you see, the Cold War was, prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the uniting factor for the various parts of the Right. Through most of the 20th century, you could look at basically three strands of right-wing social movement activism in the United States. One is religious. And this is the one that is today, and since Buchanan's speech, most associated with the phrase "culture war" or sort of the Christian Right. The other—a second is White supremacist or what becomes White nationalist over the course of the 1990s into the 21st century. And then the third is anti-communist. And it's the anti-communism that holds these factions together and puts them into a bit of a crisis once the Soviet Union collapses because they're like, "okay, what was it that we had in common again?" And then there's been sort of—since that time, a bit of difficulty, but some well-played strategy on the part of the Right to form what we have now, which coalesces through the early years of the 2000s, in response to the Obama presidency with the Tea Parties, and then with the Trump administration and the emergence of the MAGA movement, or what I sometimes called the MAGAverse. Where you have the Christian Right, the racial and ethnic Right, and to a certain extent economic libertarians cooperating very closely together, along with people who are more or less willing to go along as long as they get something out of it, the sort of the traditional conservative and other folks who are Right of Center—didn't necessarily love Trump, would much rather have a more establishment figure. But if he's winning, okay.

But the core of this is, the Christian Right is the largest faction and then followed by the racial and ethnic Right, which is really centered on two things. One is immigration and the other is defining an Americanness that is not necessarily explicitly expressed in racist terms, but draws a lot of its politics straight from White nationalism. And then the third are the libertarians who are extremely well-funded, very smart, have always known that their politics are not particularly popular, and to get their stuff across, basically they have to find ways to deploy the kinds of politics of resentment that both the Christian Right and the racial and ethnic Right use.

So first thing I would say, what are culture wars today? One, I just want to point to this word "war," because when you define something as a war, which Buchanan did and which is sort of central to the core components of the MAGA movement, you're defining people as enemies when you have a war. If you don't have enemies, you don't have a war. War requires enemies. An enemy is different than an opponent. An opponent is someone with whom you have a difference of opinion. But in terms of your core values, you have enough alignment to get along. That is, you don't have to kill each other. With

an enemy, you're expecting that they are trying to kill you. And this justifies almost any kind of response. And this is the rhetorical core here: that the values of everyone who is not of the MAGA movement, are an existential threat to the ethnic/racial/religious/idea of gender that the MAGA movement and its closest allies believe are necessary to the survival of a real American nation. Real in their terms.

So when I say culture war and what I think culture war has to mean today, and we started actually to do some analysis that says that this is not just true intuitively, but that in fact it's true in terms of who is supporting what, both at the level of leadership and at the level of ordinary followers. So it's not just what is typically thought of, which are things like around opposition to reproductive freedom, or opposition to LGBTQ liberation, or religious priority for certain kinds of Christians who should be allowed to make their own rules. It also includes immigration as a key and existential threat. The whole point around the "Great Replacement," conspiracy narrative, it is around belonging, who is a real American. And that includes also a big piece around policing and incarceration, and the idea that there's a war against against policing or against police. And it also includes the libertarian Right and the whole deregulation and sort of zero scrutiny of financial institutions, environmental polluters and so on, as well as "we need to do away with taxes because they're too much used for purposes of redistribution." This forms a nifty little triangle of people who basically understand that in order to get their way that a majority rule democracy isn't going to work for them. They're going to both have to convince people—they say, sure, but really, they're going to have to limit who can participate. So it's an authoritarian, anti-democracy agenda. And these issues have become linked in terms of the factions that support them.

So today in the in the 2020s, we have, you know, organizations that were, in their origins, most associated with say small government, like the Heritage Foundation that now spends its time worrying about critical race theory and, trans rights. And we have Christian Right organizations that back in the early 90s were pro-immigrant today, jumping on the "Great Replacement," and of course, since 9/11, especially the anti-Muslim bandwagons. And the libertarians willing to jump in and support anyone as long as they can get \$1,000,000,000,000 tax break for their best friends. So that's my quick and dirty summary.

Koki Mendis: Thank you, Steven. That was indeed quick and it was very thorough simultaneously. I really appreciate that you set the historical context for us. Really did a good overview of the landscape of who we're talking about today. And I'd like to continue to draw out some of these themes and open the

question to our full panel. How does this landscape, that Steven has given us such a clear overview of, of political contestation on so-called cultural grounds differ from, relate to, more recent periods of bipartisan, neoliberal, political economy, the cultural exaltation of the nuclear family, and very policy-targeted war of attrition on welfarism. So Zhandarka, Brad would either of you like to take the first crack at it?

Zhandarka Kurti: Sure. I just want to add, first of all, thank you so much for inviting me to be part of this panel. It's really an honor and a privilege. I guess something that I think a lot about when I hear culture wars, when you look at especially mainstream reporting of it, and I know today we're focused a lot, obviously, on the Right, the Far Right part of the culture war, but I do want to highlight that I think an important part of what has happened—well, since I think the 80s really the culture war has been one sided, right? It has been mostly on the Right. But what we have seen in many ways, I mean, there is a way in which liberals fall also within the cultural war. And I think when we talk about it— when we talk about culture war, the Far Right does a really good job, I think at actually conflating liberalism and the Left. And they do this like—you could just pull up any article. Just Google culture war, right? And any article you see is, you know, is blaming the Left, right? Calling, you know, calling for people to come after Marxists and what they actually mean I mean, they're conflating the Left and Marxists with what they understand to be the Democratic Party, right? And these are two very different things, I want to highlight and I kind of want to remind us because it's something that gets conflated a lot and something that I think begs a lot more clarity from Leftists, right, to be able to differentiate, I'll pull myself, from the liberal standpoints, from the policies, austerity policies of the Democratic Party, right? I mean, sure, Biden can say I support abortion, I support trans rights, but in the same breath, he's carrying out austerity policies that are hurting the very same communities that the Democrats purport to be supporting. I just want to kind of be really clear about kind of the frustration that I feel between the way in which the Left and liberals are pulled together.

And then the second point I want to make is that, you know, this is something that a lot of people are thinking about and talking about, right? Neoliberalism, which was a social, political and economic order that arose as a reaction to a deep, longstanding crisis in capitalism starting in the 70s, is being fractured, right, is losing a lot of legitimacy. And that is not just in the United States. That is globally, right? We've seen the rise of social movements that are challenging the policies that have been embraced by both wings of capital, both the Right and the liberals, so to speak. So I think it's really a crisis

of neoliberalism, right. It doesn't have the same cachet anymore. And I think we're entering the terrain that's very muddled. And I think this in many ways explains kind of our current situation. And unfortunately, the Right, you know, in many ways is really good at propagandizing and being able to capture people's real fears. So I'll just say that.

Koki Mendis: Thank you, Zhandarka. I really appreciate the way that you bring a clearer picture of the enemy as described and held by the Right and you know, really making clear the distinction between the Left and liberals. And I think the international perspective is definitely important, especially when thinking about iterations of culture war we see beyond U.S. borders. So thank you for bringing that perspective. Brad, would you like to chime in here?

Bradley Onishi: Sure. And I'll be brief so we can jump into the next question. I'll just say, to jump off of both comments before me, culture wars seem to be about the kind of image of the nation, the idea of, you know, citizens sharing certain principles. I'm thinking of the work of the political scientist, Julia Mourão Permoser, who talks about this. And I think this highlights why we have some issues that I think appear to many of us as incredibly silly that are part of the culture wars now. So recently it's been gas stoves, and not that gas stoves are silly, but just the sort of reaction and seeing shirts that say come and take it and it's a gas stove does seem silly. You know, there's been controversies over M&M's, and Potato Head, and Xbox and other things. And on one hand it's easy to laugh about them. But I think if we take the culture war as a matter of the image of the nation, shared principles of citizens of a certain country, and then we realize that the propagandizing, as just mentioned, and the fear mongering has led to a situation where people who are part of the Right feel as if their identity at every moment is just always under attack, then any suggestion about change or cultural evolution or adjustment, the reaction is not, "Oh, maybe we should consider that gas stoves are unhealthy. I don't know. We'll have to think about that," it is "you are destroying my way of life. You are trying to replace me. Come and take it and we'll see about that, pal." And so I just—I know that those things can seem very silly to us, but I think that's why we're—the manifestations of those kinds of culture war issues are happening more often and in ways that are more, in many ways comical.

I also just want to just touch back on the Buchanan speech and say that by framing the culture war in this way, this is a vehicle for working around class as something that might fracture the Right. And so if the entire, sort of, program of the American Right is based on culture war, then you can really sort of avoid the growing chasm of wealth inequality that has opened up even

further since the Buchanan speech. And so you can really frame the issue as the shared principles, your way of life, the image of the nation are what matters, not the fact that the minimum wage has not gone up, that health care and other social services have disappeared, that education has been privatized, and that's hurting working families and others that have been convinced that voting for right-leaning candidates and so on is for their best interests. And so when people ask me, well, why can someone vote against their interests when it comes to some of these policies, I think pointing to culture wars is a good way to frame how they understand their political participation and the choices they're making along those lines.

Koki Mendis: Thank you, Brad. Thank you for really underlining too, that existential threat the way in which culture is really deployed here, both as a scare tactic, and as a way of have captured narrative in everything from Potato Head to gas stoves.

We started doing this, but I really want to make sure that we start this discussion by firmly establishing the relationship between culture and power in contemporary right-wing political organizing. Zhandarka, I'd like to start with your work on the carceral state and social order maintenance. How does the cultural embodiment of policing and militarism interact with, perpetuate, a sociopolitical commitment to maintaining and expanding the carceral state? How do the Blue Lives Matter and militia movements respectively contribute to social order maintenance in a White supremacist carceral state? I know this is a big question, so answer, you know, to the best of your ability in the 90 minutes allotted to us.

Zhandarka Kurti: Great. I will do my best and I'm sure we'll continue having these conversations as well. So I guess to kind of begin from the last question, right? I mean, if we look at Blue Lives Matter and its rise, it was really a rebuttal and a reaction, a counter-movement to Black Lives Matter, right? It initially came about as a reaction to the death of two policemen in New York City, and then kind of overnight won a lot of support among rank and file officers. It became really kind of a powerful cultural symbol. This was also a moment that, you know, that helped galvanize the police as really kind of this important cultural hero, right, in the midst of so much protest against police violence.

And, you know, it's not a coincidence that, you know, they were emboldened under Trump, right? I mean, something that I think it's important to say that even though Black Lives Matter did start under the Obama presidency, and I think obviously, that's something to contend with, right, Obama, for the most part, was seen by a lot of Blue Lives Matter folks, as you know, not being so

supportive of police, right? I mean, he led a lot of DOJ investigations into the Baltimore Police Department, Ferguson, right? There were like over 20 investigations under his administration. So, you know, he kind of took the liberal line of, you know, if we have more data, we have more transparency, we'll be able to address police violence, right? And that was really not the case under Trump. Under Trump, Blue Lives Matter really found a voice and a platform, Right? I mean, Trump's speech calling for law and order, the ways in which he emboldened not just Blue Lives Matter, but ICE militarization of the border, right? He kind of gave carte blanche, you know, for those forces to do what was necessary.

So I think it's you know, it's kind of important that Blue Lives Matter really becomes this powerful cultural symbol. And, of course, we know that this is not new in American history, right? And when we look at historically moments of crisis, especially the threat of, you know, rebellions, Black-led rebellions, or moments of, you know—when large groups of people are questioning the status quo, it has created openings for far more an embrace of right-wing politics among the police. We see something similar happening in the 60s with John Birch Society, right? And kind of like a lot of police embracing—you know, and kind of creating this, you know—this support for these kinds of politics, right? But I think in the current moment, it seems like, you know, Trump emboldened them and Blue Lives Matter, you know, has not really gone away, right? It kind of continues. And I mean, it's interesting to see that Louisiana became the first state to pass a law that basically looped in police to hate crimes, right? So any attack on a police officer is seen as a hate crime and other states are kind of considering similar bills. So we're kind of still in that moment.

And I want to say that, you know, so we have the Blue Lives Matter phenomenon. Then we have the phenomena, which I know you all study a little bit, a lot more of also, which is the phenomenon of, you know, White supremacist linkages to police, right? The ways in which—what are the relationships between White supremacist groups and individual officers? I think the siege on the Capitol gave us a glimpse of that, right? I forget the percentage of police officers that participated, or people that participated that were police officers. I think it was like 20 or 30 percent. It was a significant number, right? So I think that there's that kind of relationship, too.

But I think while that thread is really important and of course, it should rightly be focused on, right, the ways in which police officers, rank and file officers, are embracing right-wing politics, White supremacist politics, I think oftentimes we have to be really careful because the answer to that, a lot of the liberal answer to that, is more police transparency, right? We should just research this to know what's out there. And then the reality is that when we

look at the history of policing, right, police have always had these relationships with White supremacist groups historically. But most importantly, they've served the purpose of maintaining capitalist social relations, right. So whatever that meant in the South, in the North, in the United States. The North basically, you know, making sure workers are abiding by what their employers are telling them, in the South was deputizing White citizens to basically act like—to act as slave patrols, right? I think it's an important thing to realize that even though there are these rightward shifts in policing, just simply like transparency, or kind of looking into the matter, is not going to be an end in itself, right? That, you know, policing would still be very—would still be really racist and would still be, you know, reaffirming the social order and managing that social order, which we know is a very racialized social order in the United States. So I just kind of wanted to point that out, I think, because the White supremacist force within law enforcement is really important, but I think we need to kind of step back and look at policing in general and the way in which it kind of maintains the racialized order that we live in.

Koki Mendis: Think you Zhandarka. Steven, Brad, either of you like to jump in on this question too?

Steven Gardiner: Yeah, sure. I mean, that was a very thorough answer from Zhandarka, so I'll just say one or two quick things. One is that the—it's totally endorsed, by the way, the you can't reduce to the problem with policing and the policing oriented social control state to the presence of ideological White supremacists within the ranks, it's a much more systemic problem than that. It's a White supremacist state that has come to sort of euphemize that White supremacy, but it's still being defended by state violence that is racialized in the way it constructs social control. Totally endorse that. But I would also say that there are times at which in the history of the United States, and in regional history and in state history—since we have in many ways with reference to police, policing and state violence, a state by state kind of construction—there are times when vigilante forces are encouraged, and there are times when they're less convenient and are discouraged or even prosecuted. And the prosecution of the sort of independent vigilantes or the insurrectionists, the J6 perpetrators, for example, should not be taken to equate to a flipping of the basic ideology of, say, the Department of Justice or policing. I mean, these ironies are going to be there. About one in five of the participants in J6 were military—military veterans. Many were also former or active duty police people. And at the same time, you know, you've got these weird, weird images of Capitol Police being attacked. Attacked literally with Blue Lives Matter flags. This is an irony. It's not

a contradiction, though. I mean, because it depends on where you're standing within the policing apparatus, what kinds of positioning you're going to take. And the moment that you happen to be in sort of the rule of the ordinary—the rule of the ordinary is that the powers that be tend to endorse patriotic bigotry, but they're less enthusiastic about attempts to overthrow state power.

Koki Mendis: Thank you, Steven. Oh, go ahead, Brad.

Bradley Onishi: Oh, I'll just say briefly. You know, my research focuses on White Christian nationalists and the religious right-wing that Steven talked about earlier. And data shows us that they are some of the Americans who are least likely to see issues of police brutality when there are, you know, fatalities involving people of color, Black men, Black people. And so that's there.

I also would just point to the seminal work by Perry and Gorski, *The Flag and the Cross*. And they say something that I think lines up with what Steven just said very well. "White men must sometimes exercise righteous violence to defend their freedom and maintain social and racial order. It is freedom for us, and authoritarian social order for them." And so if you are a police officer and you're standing in the way of the kinds of order we're trying to impose, say, at J6, we might attack you with a Blue Lives Matter flag. And so it sort of makes sense if we think about it in that frame. So I'll leave it there.

Koki Mendis: Thank you. I appreciate that. All three of you really touched on the relationship between sort of policing and militaristic cultural identity and social order maintenance and really underlying the ways in which some of the culture war framework is dedicated to maintaining, right, to maintaining White supremacist Christian order as it currently exists.

I want to move our discussion into how the deployment of culture war narratives provides the scaffolding for future vision and for the establishment of anti-democratic minority rule, which Steven mentioned in his introduction. I'd like to continue our discussion with the relationship between manufactured cultural identities and political mobilization. Although social order maintenance is certainly a significant factor in the preservation of a national narrative privileging Christianity, Brad, I'd like to delve into the way that the Christian Nationalist movement further politicizes primarily White Evangelical Christianity as a cultural staging for theocratic organizing. How does Christian nationalism in its various forms differ from, and relate to, apolitical cultural Christianity and religious cultural identity more broadly? And how does it sort of set the stage for an expansion of a White supremacist Christian state?

Bradley Onishi: Yeah. Really important questions. I think I'll start at the end and say that I'm not convinced that there is a possibility for apolitical Christianity. I think that, you know, as a scholar of religion, religious traditions are born and cultivated within cultures and within political context. And so there's, I think to be a Christian in the United States or anywhere else, is also to be a political actor and to be entangled in political systems and so on. And so I think there's no—there's never a purely distilled religion box and a purely distilled politics box.

With that said, it is very true that as you as you say, White Christian nationalism has really become a kind of staging ground. And one of the reasons I think it's so potent and it's something that you mentioned earlier, Koki, is because of story and narrative. So White Christian nationalism is not the same as White evangelicalism. When we look at the data, White Christian nationalists are—there are many, many evangelicals. About 80% of White evangelicals are White Christian nationalists, but there are many White Catholics. There are many Latter Day Saints or common—folks who are commonly referred to as Mormons. So there are Pentecostal Christians. There are many that fit the bill. And I think the story of the White Christian nationalist nation is one that says the United States is built for and by Christian people, and it's expansive and it's nimble. And what it does is it's a great way to a) provide a story that reaches to the ends of time and space and to offer someone a chance to play a role in that story that feels quite important and quite cosmic, and at the same time, it's a way to hide race. It's a way to sort of provide an umbrella. Such that talking about White supremacy or the idea of patriarchy or xenophobia, all of the ways that we might think of the cultivation of a kind of minority rule, as you say, are really wrapped in the umbrella of Christian nationalism, such that when you approach the Christian nationalists and charge them, right, with trying to develop something like minority rule, or a theocratic state, or something that is based on White supremacy or xenophobic impulses, the response rhetorically is often, "I'm an old fashioned American Christian. I have family values, and you are just attacking traditional approaches to faith. I love God. I love my country. I love the flag. I love the cross." And whether or not anyone listening or part of our call today buys any of that, it's much harder rhetorically to provide a quick and decisive blow to that kind of discourse, than the person who shows up and says, "I'm a White nationalist, deal with it." That kind of person, in most spaces in the country, of course, not all, but in many is whisked away very quickly.

I'll share an anecdote. In the wake of the murder of George Floyd. There were many pro sports kind of protests, and at a Mets game in New York, both sides, both teams decided they would kneel. And everyone kneeled, except for one player on the Mets. A pitcher, a White man. And afterwards, the reporters all ran up to him and said, you were the only one. The coaches and the players and

everybody, the ballboy, everybody kneeled, you know, a hundred people and you didn't. How come? And he said, Well, I can't kneel because I'm a Christian. And at that point, the reporter didn't know what to say. Do I challenge him? If I challenge him, am I going to appear to be anti-God and I'm going to be on Fox News tonight. I'm Tucker Carlson's new face of the liberal Left media who hates God and country. So the reporter left it alone. Well, a couple of weeks later, you know, you revisit it and you ask him, "Hey, you're Christian. That was the reason you couldn't protest or kneel. What happened? What church do you go to?" And he says, "I don't go to church. I haven't been to church in a long time." Right?

So he's telling a story about himself and his country. And that story does not demand religiosity. Doesn't demand reading the Bible or going to church three or four times a week, even if it provides him this cover, right, to say, I'm not going to kneel in the face of police brutality, in the face of White supremacy, I'm not going to do that. And so I think White Christian nationalism is nimble. I think it's agile. And if we think about—I'll just finish on this—if we think about an event like January 6th, it's easy for those on the outside to think of January 6th as a sort of everyone there is kind of in the same position. They're on the same side, so to speak. But if you think about the Oath Keeper, if you think about the Pentecostal Christian who is singing a pray song, if you think about the megachurch pastor, if you think about the realtor from Dallas, they're not necessarily folks who are always in the same space and coming from the same social milieu or even political situations. But if they all believe that they are not only real Americans, but they are sent by God to try to rescue the country, that what they are doing is not only on the right side of their nation, but on the right side of the divine. If they can gather in a loosely knit coalition of those who are there to save nation and fight for God, then they can all agree on that day that they have the permission, and that they are not trespassers or treasonous, but that they are in fact patriots, godly warriors, and they are doing what they are meant to do.

And I think that's why White Christian nationalism is such a potent story. It's such a powerful narrative, and it's one that is really hard to kind of pin down and evaporate because of its agility and its way to recruit various actors and various communities into its narrative.

Koki Mendis: Thanks, Brad. I think the important—you know, focusing on sort of the narrative utility of Christian nationalism, for the Right more broadly, I think is a really important point to underline. Zhandarka, Steven, would either of you like to chime in on this question? Oh, go ahead, Steven.

Steven Gardiner: Yeah, sure. I'll just say a couple of things. Great. I mean,

I appreciate what Bradley had to say. The astonishing thing about that nimbleness, how we now have people who are identifying as Christians, and in many cases they will in fact self-identify as evangelical Christians without going to church, or reading the Bible, or praying. In other words, this is a political identity, almost exclusively of traditionalist political identity.

On the other hand, looking at also simultaneously the sort of large, and well-organized, and sort of decades-long-thinking Christian Right institutions that have created many of these narratives and had it amplified in their associated large scale media, and preached it from the pulpit, and created these parachurch networks grounded in a fairly coherent set of theological propositions, PRA refers to as Dominionism, that is not necessarily what most of the people who are following along in the wider MAGA train believe. Many of them are like this guy, this player who was, “Oh, I don’t go to church. I haven’t been in a long time, but I’m a Christian.” What exactly does that—it’s now, you know, a political—it’s a claim on political identity. And of course, that is flexible, but it also then allows for the coalescence of a political bloc that is catalyzed at times by the organizational social movement of folks, but is not only about them. It’s increasingly what is sometimes—what is referred to as the narrative, or the unorganized social movement. And both of those components, I guess I would say that.... There are people who are doing this intentionally, and there are people who are following along in the wake.

Koki Mendis: Thank you, Steven. We, I think, have done a great job of mapping sort of some of the major areas of terrain and the landscape of the culture war. And I do want us to shift in sort of the second half of our discussion to talking about how the Left can overcome these sectarian fear-based cultural identities to establish a new vision for inclusion and justice that makes meaning of and builds solidarity across identity.

Before we move into the second half of our discussion, I do want to talk—I want to problematize the language of culture here for a second. I want to touch on the implications of talking about, and engaging in politics using the language of culture and culture war. How does this framing— how does framing struggle for and against basic rights and protections as culture, potentially occlude systems of oppression and violence? How does using the language of culture war aid or obstruct the Left’s contestation for power? Who would like to take up this tricky question?

Bradley Onishi: I’ll just jump in briefly and say, I think that one of the things we discuss quite often on my show and in my work is that culture war has really become almost the entire...the entire program of the American Right. There’s

very little offered in terms of “this is how we’re going to make your life better,” and there’s a lot of anger about Potato Head and gas stoves and Xbox. And so I think one of the great sort of debates is whether or not it’s possible to actually govern in a way that helps human beings survive, and thrive, and to reach places of liberation and freedom that outstrip that propaganda.

I think there’s questions, you know—and I appreciated earlier Zhandarka talking about the difference between the Democratic Party and the American Left—And that’s just always just such a needed reminder. But there’s a lot of articles being written right now about can Biden’s various programs in red states that will provide jobs, whether those are in factories or other places, will providing jobs and allowing people to survive and thrive outstrip the constant demonization, the constant, as Steven said, turning political opponents into enemies and demons, and people who smell like sulfur, and people who have serpent DNA. Will, you know, actually just helping people, in a way that government is supposed to, provide any piercing of that kind of propaganda cosmos and propaganda blanketing. So I think that’s a really big question. And I think that does lead us beyond culture war, right, to the question of what is government for and what are we fighting for? It’s not to win the culture wars, even if the other side wants to just “own the Libs” as a way to sort of think of victory, obviously to be a human being, to live in a modern society, to live in a way that we flourish collectively is much more than winning culture wars. And so I think it’s a really important question and a really important set of issues.

Zhandarka Kurti: Yeah, I just wanted to jump in and say: I mean, you think—I appreciate what you said. And I mean, when we talk about culture wars, I think, Bradley, that you may have brought this up earlier, too, it’s really a politics that’s driven by fear, right? So, I mean, take, for instance, the, you know, the attack on critical race theory, right? When that happened, I was like, what? You know, I thought here was something that was like basically mostly in academic settings, right? And overnight became like this hyper-sensationalized, you know, parents were like, showing up to PTA meetings, like holding up signs against critical race theory. And at the end of the day, what is critical race theory, right? It’s like taking seriously structural racism, institutional racism and how that continues despite, you know, the modest gains of the Civil Rights Movement and the idea that allegedly we live in this colorblind society, right? But it’s like. I mean, that’s a lot, right? So it’s like it’s easier to say critical race theory, you know, it’s coming for you, it’s about you know, digging the past.

And I think it’s—culture war is like really a politics of fear, right, and the Right is definitely winning, right? It has been kind of this one-sided war for a very long time with some minor changes, right? With the rise of like socialist

means and all the other young kids are into like Marx and communism, you know, and AOC. But mostly it's been the Right. So, I mean, I think it really flattens really structural issues. It doesn't provide any solutions, right? But it's really effective at getting people who are being affected by, you know, by these policies, right? For the past four decades, working class people's lives had been terribly affected, right? You know, in so many ways, right? And I think the Right is just able to capture that dissatisfaction, that fear.

I think the shame that comes often also with Whiteness, right? And talking about race and is able to weaponize it, right? And I think more and more, you know, as Bradley said, it's less about winning the culture wars, but I think it is important about articulating a vision of what makes Leftists, revolutionaries, whatever you want to call yourself, very different from the Democrats, very different from Biden. And somebody put in the chat, Biden also said, we're in a battle for the soul of America, right? I mean, you know, so what are we for? Certainly, we are for, you know, people living...people not being, you know, targeted for being trans, for being Black, for being queer, right? But we also, you know, as a Leftist, I don't believe we could address these issues under, you know, the system we live in. We can't address those issues under a system of capital social relations, right? And that makes me really different from a Democrat who is like, "yes, I'm going to give you, and I'm going to do everything to protect these civil rights, but not really. I'm just going to talk about it, right? And then I'm going to hold that over your head every four years so you can vote for me, right?" So I don't know. I think more and more this is a good opportunity to begin to articulate like what is happening, what are the big structural things that are wrong with life right now. And, you know, sometimes it's, you know, it's difficult, right? But yeah, more and more I think it's about articulating clearly about what is wrong and what what we're for, right?

Koki Mendis: Thank you. I appreciate both your answers sort of looking at sidestepping the emotional salience of culture war framing, and meeting people sort of where their material needs are at. And thinking about how to address structure and material, the material benefits of policies that address structure and programs that address oppressive and unequal structures as a way to really operate outside of the bounds of a culture war framing. Steven I see you came off mute.

Steven Gardiner: Yeah. I'll just throw a little bit of a curve in here because although I agree that with the framing that the point is not to win culture wars, on the other hand, we also can't pretend that we're not in the fight. When you're being attacked, it doesn't matter whether or not that the people

who are attacking you have a sort of rational grounds for the attack. And of course, there's this key difference between a sort of politics of the possible and a politics of—how do I say this—it's a question of what time are we at right now and how fragile are the institutions in which we are embedded. And by institutions, I don't just mean the ones that we would really like to transform in really fundamental ways. I mean, capitalism. Yeah, let's do away with that. But the systems of production, and distribution, and logistics in which we are now embedded are so complicated that even the most nominal democracy is very likely to be the first victim of any large scale systemic change. That doesn't mean we shouldn't do it, but we should always understand that the fight is three way. It's both with people who think that the country is not racist and unequal and patriarchal enough, as well as the people who think "it's working pretty well for me, I'd like to keep it the way it is."

The fight is three sided. And if you focus on, understandably, the institutions where people hold the most power, you get blindsided. And this is repeatedly what has happened to the Left since the 60s, partially because of fragmentation between different identities, but also because the narratives around economics were not nimble enough and quick enough to respond to demands for racial justice, for gender justice, for queer liberation and so on. And of course, the fractures that opened between the various elements of people who were coming under attack, they were intentionally open, they were wedged open by right-wing social movements. They said, oh, we can split these people apart. We can get them taking different directions, you know. But always to remember that both the austerity people as well as the libertarians, not the same people necessarily, in many cases, not. The austerity people, they don't want stop spending money, they just don't want to spend it on ordinary people. They want to spend it on creating more complicated trade situations and increasing the military global imperial strength.

But anyway, just to say that it's a complicated fight, there are people out there who think that it's not racist enough, it's not sexist enough, it's not Christian supremacist enough. And they think that that we're all Leftists. And that goes back to—I appreciate it again—Zhandarka's comment at the beginning. That's why I included the end of that quote with Buchanan, who said that "the enemy is the Clintons." You know, from a point of view of Leftist, those people are more or less on the same side of maintaining sort of capitalist systems of oppression. But from the point of view of the Right, the Clintons aren't racist enough. They're not sexist enough. And both of those are tactically important assessments for us to keep in mind as we formulate our strategy.

Zhandarka Kurti: I just want to add one thing. Sorry. Very quickly.

Koki Mendis: No, take your time.

Zhandarka Kurti: Yeah. I just want to say that I really appreciate this conversation. I think, you know, I appreciate that PRA is hosting this and for all of us to be talking about this. Yeah, I just—I think that kind of like distinction is really, really important because I think so many young people have gotten politicized and they're being politicized really fast by the events of the past years. I mean, since 2008, right? So I think kind of these distinctions are really important. I think, you know, in the chat, I see people talking about identity politics. It's something I wish like Leftists were kind of like, let go of this idea that the Left—the reason why there's no Left is because of identity politics. It's a terrible take, you know, and it's like really not true. And I think it's kind of..the Left doesn't exist for various reasons right?

We should fight for these things, right? I mean, we should fight for racial justice, for trans justice, right? But I think the biggest myth of liberalism is that it can protect those rights, right? I mean, race in many ways was the compromise. You know, it was kind of like the compromise that like...it was how America kind of was able to come to terms with both the fact that it had slavery and was also a liberal democracy, right? And I think at the end of the day, that's where we're at, right? The Civil Rights Movement made really important strides. But at the end of the day, people's humanity cannot be protected, right? And people cannot be full human beings, and considered human beings even under liberal democracy, right? And I feel like we're constantly, you know, sort of every four years, you know, we're put through the grinder to say, hey, we got to protect these rights. And these rights are important, I'm saying. It's just I think that a lot of the tensions, this three way fight, right, is also coming as liberalism, as an ideology, right? It's also come under attack, is kind of, you know, being torn apart in many ways. So it's really scary times. I do want to underscore that. But I think it's also important to kind of articulate, you know—to articulate a vision that takes us beyond just a terrible state of affairs, you know.

Koki Mendis: Brad, go ahead.

Bradley Onishi: Yeah. And just to add, I think it is tricky and everything that Zhandarka just said I think is so important to underscore at every turn. And Steven talked about the three way fight. And I think the tricky part with culture war discussions is that, you know, from my perspective, as somebody who studies White Christian nationalism, the goal for them is to reestablish the order they believe our society should have and no longer does. And a lot of that starts in the 1960s, and it goes way back further. And I know that we could go

to 1619, 1770, you know, but if we think of modern memory, the 1960s are the time that Focus on the Family will tell you this country got out of order, right?

And so I think the tricky part is we want to engage the culture wars and try to obviously push back. Their goal, however, is to maintain order. And as Zhandarka just said, when we talk about trans rights, when we talk about racial justice, the goal is for people to be full human beings without being attacked, without being targeted, without having, you know, unfair treatment under the law, under a policy to have equal representation in culture, and in every part of society.

And so I think that the war is one we engage, right? The battle is one we engage, but we recognize the different goals. Like their goal is not, "oh, I need to express my full humanity. That's why..." the goal is "I want to put you back in order. If I need to bully you and brutalize you, okay. If I need to tell you you don't exist, or you're not human? Been doing that for hundreds of years, I know how to do that." The goal on the other side, I think, and I'm speaking very broadly, these are incredibly broad strokes, so forgive me, but is for humans to be human in every instance of who they are, every expression, whether that is in terms of their gender, their sexuality, their race, their ethnicity, their religion or non-religion. And so I think, you know, there's a difference there, right? I have no desire to own the conservatives. I never think about that. What I think about is, you know, can people in my community be human beings without, you know, being targeted or attacked or oppressed? So anyway.

Koki Mendis: Steven, go ahead.

Steven Gardiner: Yeah, I just never remuted myself. So, yeah, I think we should just move on at this point.

Koki Mendis: Yeah, I think it's—no one here would accuse us of not understanding the full spectrum of threat and the realm of discourse that we're in currently in this moment. And I want to push the three of you because it's, you know, it's clear you understand sort of the Right and what culture war means, and how it functions, and how identity for the Right, what it means and how it functions. Now, I want to push you to think about what opportunities exist for us on the Left, on a fledgling, you know, poorly organized, Left, right. I mean, Zhandarka, you really hit the nail on the head with sort of the existential crisis on the Left as well. What opportunities exist for grassroots organizing, economic policy, coalition building, narrative change? I think there's an opportunity here to highlight some ways to to participate in culture war discourse in ways that challenge it and that can sort of bridge the divide between material policies that can actually bring people along. But in the short

term, how do we talk to them about these policies, right? How do we talk to them about politics that isn't fear based, that isn't other? And so who are some of the folks in the social justice space that you all know that are thinking critically about culture and identity and base building? And what are some of the promising takeaways that each of you have encountered in your work for overcoming divisive, oppressive cultural identities and their political salience, which we've been talking a lot about today? This is the part of the conversation where we give people hope.

Steven Gardiner: Oh, hope, right! Yeah, I think that's probably someone else's job. But my job description is to try to understand some of the forces that are arrayed against us. But I will say that without—that hope has to start with defining a “we” that is big enough. If the “we” is just the people we most agree with, or those who are the most oppressed by the current system, it's not enough to win. It's not enough to win. And by win, honestly, I mean, I'm not a utopian. I would like to see a world with, you know, socialist institutions. I would like to see a world without patriarchy, and without White supremacy. I would like to see systemic ways of addressing settler colonialism. But I also don't want to see, you know, collapse. I don't think after some collapse, things are going to be better, I think they're going to be genocidal, and that the worst elements will rise to the top in a societal collapse. So I think we need to define—the first element of strategy, has to be defining a “we” that is big enough that it doesn't abandon people who are vulnerable. This is why I hesitate around the “oh, if we can just get rid of capitalism. We don't have to talk about access to abortion.” Well, I mean, you know, for someone in a particular position, they may need to talk about access to abortion today and the vision for when, you know, a fully socialist society is established is not soon enough to deal with issues that can be dealt with today. And I think we have to start from where people are. And there are a number of base building organizations out there from, you know, from People's Action, Movement for Black Lives and many others. PRA's sort of role in all of that is to try to say, “I love what you're doing. Let's make sure you don't get blindsided.”

Koki Mendis: Thank you, Steven. Hope is not your strong suit, but I appreciate it. I also know that you spend a lot of your time in coalition with these folks, providing them with the intel to make their work most effective. And so while we are not going to put you on the road as our inspirational speaker, I really appreciate that you do that in your work on a day to day. Brad, Zhandarka would either of you...go ahead.

Zhandarka Kurti: Yeah, I was going to say, I mean, I think to, you know, saying... you know, it's a fight against capitalism is not just going to be like a wish or desire. It is going to take the actions of millions of people. And it's not going to be overnight. It's going to be people struggling in various ways. You know? So I just want to say I think it will involve the participation of people, right, the fact that people will be motivated.

Something I think that gave me a lot of hope was the George Floyd Rebellion right? In the middle of a pandemic, millions of Americans were moved and took to the streets, right. Instead of sitting on their couches worrying about their next unemployment checks, right? They took action. I never thought I would live through something like this, right? I mean, I never thought I would be living through a global pandemic. Probably others thought we should have been—we would have been living under one a lot sooner. But, I mean, I think that gave me a lot of hope to see that in a moment, millions of Americans were on the right side of history, right? They took action. They did something.

I think a challenge that we face is to translate these spontaneous moments of anger, of rejection of the status quo into a vision, right? Like, what is the world we want? Clearly, we don't want to have a world where, you know, a Black man gets killed by police. We don't want a world where, you know, the ruling class is like, you know, deciding our fate and deciding whether we're going to add \$200 so, you know, to our unemployment checks, right? Where, you know, employers are telling us to go back to normal, even though there is so much uncertainty around the pandemic. But I think it was an important rejection of the status quo. And I think we're seeing that rejection not only in the United States. It's a global rejection. Turn on the news. You know, Peru is going up in protest, right. Throughout the world we're getting kind of these blips, right? Whether people are coming together to challenge authoritarian regimes, demanding more rights. I think we're living through a really important moment in history.

I don't have the answers, but I think conversations like this organizing, right, coming together to figure out the things that matter to you, to change your conditions, you know, to come together, to do something is important, and kind of figuring out what do we do in these moments where there is no spontaneous rejection of the status quo, where we have gone back to, you know, back to our alienated existences, right? Like, how can we come together with people in our neighborhoods, in our workplaces, wherever, to do something? Right. I think that's a that's a big, big part of it.

And I do want to say that there is a really important danger in this moment, too, right? To kind of go back to this distinction between liberals and Left, right? You know, I think as more and more we talk about the threat of the Far Right,

which is a really important conversation. Fascism, right? I mean, we...the Left, can easily be co-opted into working with liberals, right? And to kind of focus on like legislation or, you know, these things that I think we need to be kind of really careful of, right? And how do we—how do we think about independence from the realm of legislative politics, right? And maintain kind of a really critical eye of what the state is doing and what even liberal politicians are doing? Just a small contribution.

Koki Mendis: Thank you. Brad would like to—and Steven after.

Bradley Onishi: Yeah. I get asked questions similar to this quite often. And one of the things that I like, as I've done today, to focus on is on narrative and on emotion. And I know that emotion can be tricky because I think we think of a lot of the issues we've discussed today as based in fear, and that being a sort of way that our politics and our public square become quite toxic and oppressive and so on. But, you know, when I think about talking to folks, organizing, talking to young people, I want to start with, you know, "what do you need? What are you afraid of? What are you anxious about? You know, what is it that keeps you up at night?" When I talk to people in their 30s or 40s, you know, it's "what are you afraid of for your kids? What are the things that are just making your existence in some way unlivable or unbearable, or just something that that makes it such that you are afraid all the time." And if we can start there, I think we start on a level that is not one where people have to have answers, and tell you who they support, and exactly what they want to do, and how they want to get involved. We can start with discussions of just "what is it that makes you afraid? And what would make it better? What is it that hurts you? What is it that makes you resentful or anxious? And what? What is it that makes you hopeful? Like, what would be a scenario that would make you feel hope and fulfillment? And what would make you feel free?" And I think if we start there, right, we can really get to a place where we're talking as human beings and we can understand why we enter into things like political organizing in the first place, right? It's not for power. It's not for winning or owning the other side. It's for us to all find ways, right, to first survive and then thrive and then flourish.

And so I think affect and emotion are really important to this. And I think affect and emotion can help us build the kinds of stories that that Steven talked about, that we can construct a narrative that is big enough and expansive enough to include what would be an American Left that could really identify as a movement and push towards goals that are both in the realm of the possible and also in some sense, perhaps beyond that in terms of the current moment. So I think affect, emotion, and story are really important.

My experience with Christian nationalists is that they have an advantage here because conformity is a value. Homogeneity is a value on that side. And so it's really easy to mobilize if you've already self-selected a community that is willing to conform to whatever the leaders and the movement says. When you have a situation where diversity is a value, as it should be, where inclusiveness is a value, as it should be, at least for my view, and I'm happy to have someone to discuss this, but there is so much patience, there is so much needing empathy, there's so much understanding, there's so much learning that we have to do. And I think some...if that work doesn't happen, then it's easy to feel as if we just disagree in ways that are untenable and to fracture, to feel as if we just will never understand each other, or we just don't know where each other are coming from, or we simply just don't have the same goals or the same issues or the same threats. And so we might as well just go our separate ways. And so I think that's a huge part of this, is that if we're going to talk about inclusion and diversity and a big story, then that inherently includes patience, empathy, understanding and a willingness just to keep trying to be human together, which is always harder than it seems.

Koki Mendis: Thank you, Bradley. Steven, you wanted to contribute.

Steven Gardiner: I'll just add that my one thing that I always say when it comes down to talking about what can we do is really talk to people. All of the things that Bradley just said. And not just making posts on social media. It's like in 1 to 1 or one to a few interactions. I've seen people change course over a course of years after being exposed to sort of opinions and ideas and evidence to the contrary. Not everyone, but I've seen people move from quite authoritarian and leaning toward Christian nationalist, but perhaps not having like a full blown sort of theological justification for everything, but being quite far down that road and change their views over time with consistent and empathic interaction. From people who are like—they perceive as being like them.

You know, explaining why you think what you think. So, yeah, I mean, it would be nice to have control of, you know, a bunch more large scale narrative engines, but keeping in mind that from the point of view of the Right, the reason why they see us—see the Left as such an enemy is because they see, for example, the Marvel Cinematic Universe as being part of the Left for them. That's you know, the end of civilization. And, you know, you're going to have... if we're going to have things in common, yeah, we need some big stories, but you have to be willing to share their stories at the at the individual level.

Koki Mendis: Thank you, Steven. Thank you Bradley. I think you both touched

on something that Zhandarka reminded us that, you know, as we recede back to our atomized lives, that we have to continuously work to get back out there and to be with one another in struggle. And I think that's a great, great note to end this conversation. To echo folks in the chat, this has been a really, really fantastic conversation. I think we could have gone for a lot longer, but we will spare everyone that on this Wednesday evening. And I hope to have you both Zhandarka and Bradley back with us for future conversations. So thank you. Thank you. Thank you, Bradley, Zhandarka, Steven. And thank you to those of you who took time out of your day to join us in the audience for today's discussion. We look forward to seeing you at future PRA events, including a briefing that we're holding next week on Organizing for the Year Ahead: Countering Anti-LGBTQ Persecution and Violence in 2023. That's the year we're in. We will be holding that next Tuesday, January 31st at 4 p.m. Eastern. Until then, visit our website at politicalresearch.org and religiondispatches.org for more on the U.S. and global Right. Thank you all.