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Why I Left White Nationalism By R. DEREK BLACK NOV. 26, 2016

I could easily have spent the night of Nov. 8 elated, surrounded by friends and family, thinking: “We did it. We rejected a multicultural and globalist society. We defied the elites, rejected political correctness, and made a statement millions of Americans have wanted to shout for decades.”

I’d be planning with other white nationalists what comes next, and assessing just how much influence our ideology would have on this administration. That’s who I was a few years ago.

Things look very different for me now. I am [far away](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/the-white-flight-of-derek-black/2016/10/15/ed5f906a-8f3b-11e6-a6a3-d50061aa9fae_story.html) from the community that I grew up in, and that I once hoped could lead our country to a moment like this.

I was born into a prominent white nationalist family — David Duke is my godfather, and my dad started Stormfront, the first major white nationalist website — and I was once considered the bright future of the movement.

In 2008, at age 19, [I ran for and won](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/12/us/12florida.html) a Palm Beach County Republican committee seat a few months before Barack Obama was elected president. I received national media attention and for a while couldn’t go out without being congratulated for “telling them what’s what.”

I grew up in West Palm Beach across the water from Donald J. Trump’s Mar-a-Lago estate, and he was always a loud presence in the neighborhood. I would drive a pickup truck with a Confederate flag sticker past his driveway each morning on my way to the beach and my family would walk out into the front yard to watch his fireworks on New Year’s Eve.

It surprises me now how often Mr. Trump and my 19-year-old self would have agreed on our platforms: tariffs to bring back factory jobs, increased policing of black communities, deporting illegal workers and the belief that American culture was threatened. I looked at my white friends and family who felt dispossessed, at the untapped political support for anyone — even a kid like me — who wasn’t afraid to talk about threats to our people from outsiders, and I knew not only that white nationalism was right, but that it could win.

Several years ago, I began attending a liberal college where my presence prompted huge controversy. Through many talks with devoted and diverse people there — people who chose to invite me into their dorms and conversations rather than ostracize me — I began to realize the damage I had done. Ever since, I have been trying to make up for it.

For a while after I left the white nationalist movement, I thought my upbringing made me exaggerate the likelihood of a larger political reaction to demographic change. Then Mr. Trump gave his Mexican “rapists” speech and I spent the rest of the election wondering how much my movement had set the stage for his. Now I see the anger I was raised with rocking the nation.

People have approached me looking for a way to change the minds of Trump voters, but I can’t offer any magic technique. That kind of persuasion happens in person-to-person interactions and it requires a lot of honest listening on both sides. For me, the conversations that led me to change my views started because I couldn’t understand why anyone would fear me. I thought I was only doing what was right and defending those I loved.

I think the “Hamilton” cast modeled well one way to make that same connection when they appealed to Vice President-elect Mike Pence [from the stage](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/19/us/mike-pence-hamilton.html): “We, sir — we — are the diverse America who are alarmed and anxious that your new administration will not protect us.” Afterward, the actor Brandon Victor Dixon [explained](http://www.broadway.com/buzz/186795/exclusive-brandon-victor-dixon-on-the-hamilton-fams-speech-for-mike-pence-i-hope-he-remembers-us/), “I hope he thinks of us every time he has to deal with an issue or talk about a bill or present anything.” I’m sure Mr. Pence believes his policies are just. But now he has heard from individuals who are worried about those policies. That might open him to new conversations.

I never would have begun my own conversations without first experiencing clear and passionate outrage to what I believed from those I interacted with. Now is the time for me to pass on that outrage by clearly and unremittingly denouncing the people who used a wave of white anger to take the White House.

Mr. Trump’s comments during the campaign echoed how I also tapped into less-than-explicit white nationalist ideology to reach relatively moderate white Americans. I went door-to-door in 2008 talking about how Hispanic immigration was overwhelming “American” culture, how black neighborhoods were hotbeds of crime, and how P.C. culture didn’t let us talk about any of it. I won that small election with 60 percent of the vote.

A substantial portion of the American public has made clear that it feels betrayed by the establishment, and so it elected a president who denounces all Muslims as potential conspirators in terrorism; who sees black communities as crime-ridden; who taps into white American mistrust of foreigners, particularly of Hispanics; and who promises the harshest form of immigration control. If we thought Mr. Trump himself might backtrack on some of this, we are now watching him fill a cabinet with people able to make that campaign rhetoric into real policy.

Much has been made of the incoherence of Mr. Trump’s proposals, but what really matters is who does — and doesn’t — need to fear them. None of the ideas that Mr. Trump has put forward would endanger me, and I once enthusiastically advocated for most of what he says. No proposal to put more cops in black neighborhoods to stop and frisk residents would cause me to be harassed. A ban on Muslim immigration doesn’t implicate all people who look like me in terrorism. Overturning Roe v. Wade will not force me to make a dangerous choice about my health, nor will a man who personifies sexual assault without penalty make me any less safe. When the most powerful demographic in the United States came together to assert that making America great again meant asserting their supremacy, they were asserting my supremacy.

The wave of violence and vile language that has risen since the election is only one immediate piece of evidence that this campaign’s reckless assertion of white identity comes at a huge cost. More and more people are being forced to recognize now what I learned early: Our country is susceptible to some of our worst instincts when the message is packaged correctly.

No checks and balances can redeem what we’ve unleashed. The reality is that half of the voters chose white supremacy, though saying that makes me a hypocrite. I was a much more extreme partisan than a vast majority of Trump voters and I never would have recognized that label.

The motivations that led to this choice are more complex. I have no doubt many of his supporters voted thinking he’d soften his rhetoric, that his words didn’t really matter. The words were not disqualifying for them because they don’t see, or refuse to see, what the message of hate will reap.

Most of Mr. Trump’s supporters did not intend to attack our most vulnerable citizens. But with him in office we have a duty to protect those who are threatened by this administration and to win over those who don’t recognize the impact of their vote. Even those on the furthest extreme of the white nationalist spectrum don’t recognize themselves doing harm — I know that because it was easy for me, too, to deny it.

That is the opening for those of us who disagree with Mr. Trump. It’s now our job to argue constantly that what voters did in elevating this man to the White House constitutes the greatest assault on our own people in a generation, and to offer another option.

There are millions of Americans who don’t understand why anyone might worry about the effects of this election. They see it as “feelings” versus their own real concerns. Those of us on the other side need to be clear that Mr. Trump’s callous disregard for people outside his demographic is intolerable, and will be destructive to the entire nation.

If I had not changed, I would have been jubilant after this election and more certain than ever that anxiety from a shrinking white majority would result in the election of more people who tap into this simple narrative. Now I’m convinced this doesn’t have to be our destiny.

Mr. Trump’s victory must make all Americans acknowledge that the choice of embracing or rejecting multiculturalism is not abstract. I know this better than most, because I’ve followed both paths. It is the choice of embracing or rejecting our own people.

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