

## 📖 Topic Page: [White Supremacy](#)

Definition: **White supremacy** from *Collins English Dictionary*

- n*
- 1 the theory or belief that White people are innately superior to people of other races
- › White supremacist *n, adj*



Image from: [Scene from the Film The Birth of a Nation. Actors... in Encyclopedia of Race and Racism](#)

### Summary Article: **White supremacy**

From *Routledge Companions: The Routledge Companion to Race and Ethnicity*

White supremacy is the belief that members of the Caucasian **race** are superior in all ways to other ethnic groups or races in the world. The term is usually used to describe a political ideology that advocates white social and political dominance. In the United States, white supremacy was the official law of the land until the Civil War ended in 1865. Until that time, the Constitution denied all rights to black slaves brought to the United States from Africa as they were deemed to be property, not worthy of the same treatment afforded white Americans. From 1948 to 1994, **apartheid**-era South Africa, which was characterized by a system of legal racial **segregation** and **discrimination** against nonwhites, also functioned as a white supremacist system.

After 1865, white supremacy continued de facto in the Deep South of the United States as Reconstruction eventually gave way to a reassertion of white **power** through Jim Crow laws that kept schools segregated and made voting by blacks nearly impossible. It was not just the South that favored whites over **minorities**. Other parts of the country had laws on the books discriminating against blacks and other minorities in such areas as housing, schooling and public accommodation. Racist views about nonwhites were expressed in legislation, particularly as it related to immigration. An example of this was the Immigration Act of 1924, which banned Asians from the United States and instituted a national origin quota system favoring Europeans. It was not until the 1950s and 1960s, as pressure mounted from the **Civil Rights Movement**, that legal provisions allowing for white domination were finally found to be unconstitutional.

The most important white supremacist group in American history is the Ku Klux Klan. Founded immediately after the Civil War and first led nationally by former Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest, the group's aim was to re-impose the racial *status quo ante* of the Old South by instilling fear in the black population. The Klan's robes originally served the purpose of making members appear more ominous, particularly when harassing blacks at night from horseback. After virtually disappearing after the imposition of Jim Crow laws, the "second era" Klan was inaugurated in 1915 and reached a membership of nearly four million by the mid-1920s. During that time, the Klan saw itself as a defender of white Protestant Christianity and its concerns had as much or more to do with anger over a major influx of Irish and Italian Catholic immigrants as they did with blacks.

The 1920s saw other expressions of white supremacy. In the early 1900s, there was a widespread

movement in the United States advocating **eugenics**, meaning the “science” of breeding a better human race. Several states, pushed by eugenicists espousing racist views, advocated against nonwhite immigration and discriminated against the mentally ill through forced sterilizations. Eugenicists favored immigration restriction, segregation and, in some cases, even entertained the idea of extermination of nonwhites. These ideas were so respected by Adolf Hitler that he awarded prizes to prominent American eugenicists. Hitler’s white supremacist and genocidal National Socialist regime, with its extermination policies for Jews, non-“Aryans,” and those with disabilities, represented the most frightening example of where eugenicist thinking could lead.

As the Jim Crow regime came tumbling down in the years after the Second World War with U.S. Supreme Court rulings against segregation and the passage of civil rights laws, organized white supremacists reacted violently. The Klan resurged, engaging in a violent political campaign against civil rights activists, including several murders. A revitalized Klan was joined in its white supremacy by new groups that arose to fight desegregation, most notably the White Citizens’ Councils, which earned the moniker, “uptown Klan.” White Citizens’ Council chapters formed across the South, signing up prominent members of Southern society. In the end, the egalitarian ideas of the Civil Rights Movement, not those of the Klan, prevailed.

White supremacist ideology in the twenty-first century is significantly different than at the time of the Civil Rights Movement, when the explicit goal of white supremacists was to maintain – or reestablish – the dominance of whites in America. As segregation was dismantled and the US population became more amenable to desegregation and extending civil rights protections to minorities, white supremacists had to accommodate their movement to the fact that their views were those of a shrinking minority, and that, increasingly, government, law enforcement, and the communities in which they lived opposed their goals.

From the 1970s forward, white supremacist ideology changed to reflect these conditions. The concept of “white separatism” arose, whereby many white supremacists conceded that whites could no longer dominate all of America and instead focused on various plans to create all-white “homelands.” This was a much more defensive and somewhat paranoid ideology, whose main focus was on saving the white race from a supposed “extinction.” White supremacists have come to believe that the future of the white race itself is in doubt, about to fall prey to a “rising tide of color” brought on by immigration and other malignant forces. This viewpoint was best captured by the popular white supremacist slogan, “The 14 Words,” coined by deceased white supremacist terrorist David Lane. Based on a section of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, the slogan reads, “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for White children.”

Reaction by white supremacists to demographic and other societal changes has ranged from peaceful protest to extreme violence. Groups that label themselves “white **nationalists**,” a subset of the white supremacist scene that arose over the last few decades, mostly engage in publishing racist political tracts or holding meetings that, at times, have received support from politicians on the far right (usually Deep South politicians). Other white nationalist outfits put out pseudo-academic “studies” asserting the inferiority of minorities. For those most steeped in neo-Nazi ideology, demographic and other changes seen as detrimental to white power are viewed as controlled and manipulated by Jews. There have been several instances of violence where neo-Nazi beliefs have enabled domestic terrorists to rationalize taking violent or extreme actions, including mass murder, in the hope of “saving” the white race.

Today, white supremacist groups are found in several countries across Europe and in South Africa, New Zealand, Australia and Canada. They tend to be small organizations with few members that operate far outside the mainstream. However, some of their ideas, particularly their dislike of nonwhite immigrants, have found their way into the ideology of extreme-right parties, including the British National Party and the French National Front. [HB & MP]

### Key readings

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