Episode 169-- The Dangerous Intersection of White Women, Whi...

Fri, 1/28 10:09AM 32:52

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, white nationalism, women, violence, movements, white, book, important, womanhood, iconography, extremism, rhetoric, united states, gun violence, country, instance, brady, ways, day, idea

SPEAKERS

Seyward Darby, JJ Janflone, Kelly Sampson

JJ Janflone 00:08

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JJ Janflone 00:37

Hey everybody, JJ here,

K

Kelly Sampson 00:39

and this is Kelly.

JJ Janflone 00:40

And we're your hosts of Red, Blue, and Brady, welcome back.

K

Kelly Sampson 00:43

Yep. And today, we're covering an aspect of extremist movements that often gets left out of the conversation, even though it's super important. And that's the role that women play within white nationalism.

JJ Janflone 00:53

Exactly. We're jumping right in with some big questions. For example, who are the women who inspire, fund and participate in white nationalist movements? And why does this all matter? For gun violence prevention?

K

Kelly Sampson 01:06

Yeah, and to get those answers, we are joined by the woman who literally wrote the book on this topic, Seyward Darby, journalist and author of the book "Sisters in Hate: American Women on the Frontlines of White Nationalism."

S

Seyward Darby 01:21

So my name is Seyward Darby, and I am a journalist, a writer and an editor. My day job is that I'm the editor-in-chief of the Atavist magazine. So I focus on long form narrative journalism. And I'm also the author of the book "Sisters in Hate: American Women and White Extremism," which looks at the underappreciated role, frankly, that women have played in right wing extremist movements throughout US history, with a particular focus on the last couple of years during the the Trump era.

K

Kelly Sampson 01:51

Does that topic, as you said, I think it is so important. And so I'm wondering, What prompted you to write the very good book ,"Sisters in Hate?"

S

Seyward Darby 02:00

Yeah, it's a, it was a confluence of things. I was, you know, two or so weeks, two or three weeks after the presidential election in 2016. I, like a lot of people was really casting about, you know, trying to make sense of things, trying to decide how, as a journalist in particular, I wanted to respond to the moment. And simultaneous to that my husband and I went to Virginia to see family for Thanksgiving, and a lot of Trump signs, a lot of Confederate flags, we actually witnessed someone or I witnessed someone, you know, using a racial slur toward another person publicly, you know, which I would consider a hate crime. And in the midst of all that, I was reading a lot about the alt-right, they have the so called alt-right. And the thing I was really struck by and reading about the movement was that people kept describing it as a lot of angry white men. It's this hyper masculine space, you know, a lot of toxic masculinity, no women were really ever discussed, quoted, just they were just not there.

S

Seyward Darby 03:02

And so I think all of those factors together made me wonder why, like, Why was I not seeing, especially given what exit polls were showing about, you know, how white women had voted in the election? Why were we not seeing white women as a piece of the puzzle in this rising extremist movement, and so I just went looking for them. So I guess a short way of putting all

this is, I started based on an absence. I wasn't seeing them. So I went looking for them to try to figure out, you know, if they were there, which they very much were, who they were, but then why people weren't talking about them or talking to them. So that was the genesis of everything.

S Seyward Darby 03:41

And that was like I said, you know, late 2016. And in 2017, early 2017, I was lucky to get an assignment from Harper's Magazine to, to write about this topic. And I never thought, I mean, I never thought of myself as a person who would write a book at all, I was always like, "That's my husband. He's the fiction writer. He's gonna write novels." And then things just kind of snowballed. You know, the, the Harper's piece was a really great, tough experience given the subject matter. But I also think that something was gnawing at me, which was that there were so many questions, I still wanted to examine so many people, I still wanted to talk to so much history I still wanted to delve into. And luckily, there was an appetite for a book project. So I was able to spend, you know, the next couple of years working on working on this, in addition to my day job, I should say, it wasn't all white nationalism all the time, just I don't know, half the time.

 JJ Janflone 04:31

Well, and what I think is so important to highlight is that, you know, hate and extremism, they don't have to be overt to be present. It doesn't it doesn't need to be in your face.

S Seyward Darby 04:41

I think that that's right. Absolutely. And I also think that, you know, pre-2016 especially, we as a country, and I think we're still not doing a great job getting past this, you know, really thought of extremism as you know, men with guns, people who want to do terrible violence. People who want to be terrorists. And I think that the problem with that is that if you look at the history of extremism, not just in the United States, but across cultures, and you know, across countries, you know, extremism is something that infiltrates everything, like, it's not just what people decide to do violently, it's, you know, the choices they make day to day with regard to the way they live their lives, the way they raise their families, you know, the personal very much becomes political.

S Seyward Darby 05:26

And so I think it was also a matter of, what was I looking for? What kind of rhetoric what kind of, you know, expressions of ideology, and there's a lot of coded language out there that, especially amongst female extremists can seem pretty benign and banal, but is actually, you know, looped into this ideology of white nationalism, that also, you know, violence is at the core of it. And so a great piece of advice I got early on was from Kathleen Belew, who's a historian of right-wing extremism, who wrote "Bring the War Home." And she said, you know, this is a problem with, with the academy. And, you know, I think reporting as well journalism as well, where the framework is the problem, right, where people are not looking, they're not widening

it enough to see what, you know, the the factors and the individuals and the trends that are influencing extremism, because they tend to dismiss things that women do, they tend to dismiss the roles that women play, because they don't involve leading organizations or, you know, actually committing violence. To be clear, women do lead organizations, and they do commit violence. But if you're talking about, you know, sheer percentage wise, you know, there are fewer of them than there are men.

S Seyward Darby 06:44

But I just, I this is a long way of saying I think that, you know, part of my project was definitely working to expand, you know, my understanding of extremism. And I think that that's something that, you know, socially, culturally, politically, you know, the United States writ large is still working toward to a certain degree, you know, has made some progress, I think, but, you know, we're still baffled when women show up at the Capitol, we're still baffled when women, you know, fund the rallies that lead to things like the coup attempt at the Capitol. And why is that? Why? It's because people are not looking, or they don't want to look at the roles women play and have played.

K Kelly Sampson 07:23

Yeah. And kind of before we get into the rest of the conversation, we wanted to define some terms for our listeners. So how do you sort of define white nationalism?

S Seyward Darby 07:34

Yeah, and this is a such a fair question. And the amount of time I spent, especially at the beginning of the project, kind of to myself, because there at the time, especially, you know, this is something that has become much more a part of the vernacular, I think, in the last couple of years. But, you know, a lot of the definitions were very academic, and people had competing definitions. For me, what white nationalism is, is a belief that the United States should be a white majority country, and that it was intended to be that way by the founders. And that any effort to keep it that way, is virtuous, because of, you know, what the intended makeup and power structure in the United States should be.

S Seyward Darby 08:22

And so it is a racist ideology. And it really, if you hold that ideology, it permeates everything, you know, it permeates what you think should happen voting wise, that permeates what you think should happen, you know, in the home, it permeates everything. And I think that, you know, with regard to the home, for instance, if you think of white nationalism as a project of ensuring that the United States remains, you know, a white dominated country, numbers come into play. And so it is a very pro-natal movement. It believes in the importance of having white children. It believes in the idea that women's bodies are political spaces, because they are necessary to produce the white children that will keep the country as white nationalists want it to be, although I should say, they very much believe that it is not what they want the country to be they believe and have long believed that, you know, they're the United States is slipping

into multiculturalism into, you know, white people are actually the ones who are the targets of racism, there's this very sort of, "Through the Looking-Glass" way of seeing the country that they have. So there's a lost cause aspect to all of this, where you know, America is supposed to be one way it is not that way in their eyes and the project of white nationalism for them is restoring that version of America.

JJ Janflone 09:54

Well, and I'd love if you could share, maybe just some examples of what this particular form of white nationalism, womanhood, you know, what, what does this look like?

S

Seyward Darby 10:06

And I think that, you know, most notably over the last 25 years, you are looking at the rise of the Internet and iconography on the internet. And so iconography that used to be, you know, much more confined to things like Klan pamphlets, or, you know, in later phases of white nationalism, you know, Aryan Nations' books and things, posters, things like that. You're now able to find them everywhere. And they've started to, you know, really slide into various social media platforms. And, you know, within that there's kind of this kind of classic iconography of like, the beautiful white woman who is pure, who is wholesome, who is a mother, who's also strong. And, you know, you're seeing that now, you know, across Instagram, for instance, certainly, you know, across Twitter, although they've kind of moved away from Twitter to a certain extent. And on the one hand, I understand why that might seem like new in some way.

S

Seyward Darby 11:05

But it's really just a new manifestation of this older ideal that is, quite frankly, foundational to white nationalism, because women are, again, vessels, and you know, they are important to the fabric of the white nationalist movement. But they are also key symbols, right? Because they are the thing on a pedestal, that people are being told must be protected. They, you know, women are the mothers of the nation, if you will. And so, you know, everything we're seeing now looks new, looks slick, but it's really just, you know, an iteration on an old theme.

K

Kelly Sampson 11:39

Yeah, thank you for outlining that. Because I think it's a really important point, especially how, you know, white women are centered as this sort of pure essence of womanhood. And, of course, the flip side of that is the ways that, you know, Black women have been treated as sex objects, vessels, and all sorts of things. And I think it's a really important point that you're raising. And one of the things that you do in your book is you follow the lives of three women in alt-right movements. And one of them, Corinna, decided to actually leave the movement. And she's actually been on the podcast to tell her story, but I'm wondering, what made you pick these three particular women?

S

Seyward Darby 12:19

It's a great question. And I think that, you know, I, there's so many women who I spent time, you know, tracking on the internet, women I spoke to. And I ended up choosing these three women, because from a purely sort of practical standpoint, they were all born within three months of each other, I believe, in 1979. I know, they were all born in 1979, I think January, and then two of them in March. And, you know, once upon a time, I was a grad student and took social science classes. And, and to some degree, there was this nice like symmetry. So when you're comparing stories, you're also comparing lives that happened over the same time span. So the same world events, you know, not that they've experienced them the same way, but the world that they inhabit is literally the same world. And so that was a big part of the choice. But then the other aspects of, the way the book is structured, you know, is around their, their stories. So it's in three main parts.

S Seyward Darby 13:15

But each of those parts is also intended to reflect different themes. So in the case of Corinna who, you know, is the first person in the book. She is a really, her story is a great narrative for describing the arc of radicalization and deradicalization. Why these things happen, you know, the, the trends we've identified in terms of, you know, what might be going on in someone's life or in the world that might lead to radicalization, and also, you know, eventually to deradicalization. And her story also, you know, allowed for an examination of some of the almost just kind of basic history of white nationalist movements, because she was affiliated with at different times, some of the key players and organizations or offspring of organizations that really shaped the white nationalist movement, particularly in the latter half of the 20th century.

S Seyward Darby 14:07

And then I chose Ayla Stewart, who was known for a time on the internet as "Wife With a Purpose," because she really reflected this idealized notion of a mother. She practices something called Trad life, traditional life, she considers herself a Trad wife. So you know, her most important calling in life is to be a wife and mother, but also to be a traditional wife and mother, which is a very loaded word, which, you know, has to do with trying to eat organic and trying to be more resourceful, you know, making her own clothes, homeschooling her children, things like that. But also embracing whiteness, and, you know, the history of whiteness in America and celebrating that, that's considered, you know, part of the tradition, quote, unquote. And I thought that she reflected that aspect of things better than anybody that I came across in my research and she also allowed me to then delve into some of the history that I just spoke to actually about, you know, the representations of women as wives and mothers in this movement.

S Seyward Darby 15:10

And then the third person, Lana Lokteff, is quite interesting, because I think in some ways, she feels like a curveball, because she, I mean, all three of them are people who radicalized, like, they were not people who were raised in the movement, so to speak, which is actually not that common, like people more often, you know, come to this at some point in their lives. But she is interesting, because she kind of once upon a time considered herself lefty, and, you know, it

was more than anything kind of this wanna-be a free spirit, who, you know, just liked challenging conventional wisdom, she believed in conspiracy theories, but, you know, she was kind of a kid of the 90s, if you will, and sort of the alt 90s, alt culture, the 90s, I should say, and what she found in white nationalism was a business. She and her husband started a platform that initially sort of embraced conspiracy theories writ large, and then ultimately, you know, found that it could make its mark by embracing white nationalism, because the thing is, at root white nationalism is a conspiracy theory, right? This idea that white people are under threat in America, that there's some kind of organized effort to, you know, breed them out of existence to, you know, marginalize them. And so they really started to build up their reputation, embracing that. And, and so I thought that her story represented the ways in which economic factors do come into play in white nationalism more than people sometimes realize. That this is a way that people gain power and gain money and gain influence. And we've seen over time that that is something that women have gotten out of it.

S Seyward Darby 16:44

And there are other I should say, there are other themes, you know, within each of these sections, but I really liked how the stories, you know, they were reflective of each other in interesting ways. But then they also diverged in interesting ways. And I think, you know, my goal with that was to really reflect the surprising, I think, to some people diversity of this movement, I don't mean that racially speaking, obviously. But you know, that people kind of come from different backgrounds, they come for different reasons. And, you know, Ayla, for instance, is devoutly Christian. And Lana is not, like Lana, I want to say she's more or less atheist. And, you know, sort of grouping these women together and showing that any assumption of commonality, that might seem as though it would help us organize and understand this movement, a lot of them, a lot of them are bad assumptions. And so we need to do away with those, if we're to think about tackling, you know, this problem in any meaningful way.

 JJ Janflone 17:41

That being said, is there something in common or that these women have in common in terms of their reasons for joining, or how they joined?

S Seyward Darby 17:50

When I started working on this project? Let me put it this way, I think anecdotally might be helpful. And I would tell people what I was working on, and that I was interested in understanding why right? Why do people, white women, especially, you know, get involved in these movements? Like, how does that make any sense? And a lot of people, friends, family, whatever would respond and say, "Well, I mean, obviously, they're racist," like, they're, they're more meaning like, they're more racist than I am. They're more racist than anyone I know, right? This idea that there was something like kind of toxic and wrong with them to begin with. And just time and again, studies and you know, whether qualitative or quantitative has shown that, that's not true. It's a way of comforting ourselves and thinking of, you know, these people, quote, unquote, as "very different" than us, but my God, like, if, if nothing else, like January 6th

should make us see that this is everywhere. That it is neighbors, teachers, you know, wives, fathers brothers, like, it's just this idea that it's kind of some crazies or something is is a really unhelpful way of framing it from a sort of productivity standpoint.

K Kelly Sampson 18:56

I want to talk a little bit about violence for a second, because, as you mentioned earlier, a lot of the coverage sometimes of extremist movements or white nationalism sort focuses on men and men and their guns. But we know that women in these movements, sometimes, also engage in violent rhetoric or even violent action. And so I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about the role that women play in terms of the violent rhetoric or the actual violence associated with white nationalism, and in particular, women and guns and firearms and how those might overlap.

S Seyward Darby 19:36

Yeah, violence in this space is, you know, when people think about white nationalist violence, I think you know, probably what comes to mind first, and please correct me if I'm wrong, you know, for the two of you, at least. You know, you think about cross burnings and lynchings and you think about Dylann Roof, you know, murdering people at a church in Charleston. You think about the mosque shooting in New Zealand and certainly, you know, you think about January 6, and you know, all of those instances are important. All of those instances are devastating. You know, some are bigger than others. But you know, they're all horrible, right? But I also think that it's important to think about violence in a broader sense, not just these one off instances, but the ways in which white nationalism can seed violence in day to day lives.

S Seyward Darby 20:23

And women especially, I mean, here's a good example, I guess. Lana Lokteff, who I profiled in the book, she has never, as far as I know, committed any acts of violence. But when the mass shooting happened in New Zealand, there was a I want to say sociologist, but it could be wrong, an academic person smarter than I am, who compared the rhetoric and the manner in the shooters manifesto, to the rhetoric of a number of far-right online personalities. And I want to say Lana was like the first or second match, if you will. It's kind of like lining up DNA coding, right? Where you're trying to see like, is this the same DNA and basically, their DNA was the same, right? That her rhetoric was remarkably similar to his rhetoric. Now, did he read "Red Ice," did he watch "Red Ice," because they mostly do videos, I don't know, right. And I, I don't know that anybody knows, maybe, maybe somebody does. But anyway, point being, she can say like, "I don't advocate violence, like I do not commit violence, I'm not telling anyone to go shoot anyone." And yet, the rhetoric that she is espousing day after day, year after year, at this point, with relatively few interventions by social media platforms, or you know, other institutions, is clearly, clearly being picked up by and I think, you know, it doesn't, it's not even interpreted by like, it's just clear, when you're talking about threats to white people, threats that must be overcome.

S Seyward Darby 21:57

And when you are, you know, associating yourself with people who associate themselves with, you know, violent actors, you become complicit in that violence. I'm not saying, you know, I'm not a lawyer, and I'm certainly not an international lawyer. And so, you know, I'm not suggesting that there is necessarily, you know, a legal case to be made, like in that instance. But I think it's a good example of the ways in which, like a person can be complicit in violence, without necessarily giving an order. Without necessarily, certainly without pulling the trigger. And, you know, there's that instance of, you know, being involved in violence and seeing violence. But then, so often, you see cases where women, especially, the vulnerability of women, the sanctity of women, white women, white women, white women, just say, white, white women's bodies, you know, really comes into play with regard to violence committed by white nationalists, certainly, but also, you know, the police, frankly, and you, you just see the ways in which women say, "I'm hurt, I'm under threat," or people, you know, especially right-wing news outlets hold up these stories about, you know, white women who, you know, have had been violated in some way they say, you know, not not by an individual, but by like a, you know, a system that is racist against white women.

S Seyward Darby 23:16

And, and those instances also then seed violence, because it seems as though something wrong has been done, and something must be done to stop it. And whether that's, you know, a family member, or you know, a friend, whatever, picking up a gun, of which there are far too many in the United States, and saying, "I'm going to go, you know, enact revenge", or whether it is, you know, assuming the worst about a person that you are arresting, and, you know, acting violent in turn toward them. And I, you know, the, the quintessential example of this is, obviously, Carolyn Bryant, and the Emmett Till case, it should not have mattered what he did or did not do, right. But she lied, it seems and, you know, recent reporting in the last couple of years, you know, reveals this, to say, "I felt threatened, I felt you know, that something wrong was done to me," and horrible violence was committed as a result. She did not kill Emmett Till, but she was complicit in the killing of Emmett Till. And I think that, again, just kind of expanding our idea of what it means to be complicit in violence is so so so important.

 JJ Janflone 24:27

No, no, I think it's I think it's so valid because we've seen you know, the gun lobby in particular, like if you just look at the ads, even that the different manufacturers have played, you know, that really weaponizes this idea of white womanhood under attack and so if you're a white woman, you need to purchase a gun, if you're a white man, you need to buy a gun to protect a white woman against this this racialized other and it's really explicit. But I think what you tease out, here in your work and I mean others have as well is that there's a buy-in that of white womanhood of like if I'm going to use my if I'm going to as a white lady if I'm gonna, like weaponize my tears, then like, I'm showing acceptance of that, like I'm buying into it as well. So I think that sort of awareness is really important for people to have, particularly as we as we talk about, you know, the role of firearms and white supremacy plays in firearms violence in the US, so.

S Seyward Darby 25:17

Absolutely. I know. I think that that's, that's totally right. And, you know, to your point, I should

Absolutely, I know, I think that that's, that's totally right. And, you know, to your point, I should say about, you know, the iconography of like white woman holding gigantic machine gun, you know, which is something that we absolutely, unfortunately have seen lately, including in Christmas cards from members of Congress, if I'm not mistaken. You know, there's this idea that white, ideal white femininity for people on the far-right, involves access to these tools of violence, right? And, and I think that, again, that's not necessarily a new, you know, if you were to look back at the iconography of womanhood, you know, as depicted by, you know, the Klan, or Aryan Nations, or the Nazis, quite frankly, you know, again, there's kind of this idea of soft and hard, that's expected of women or expected of depictions of women, that on the one hand, they are, you know, going to be beautiful, and they're gonna produce beautiful babies and all this stuff, but then at the same time that they will defend, right, like, they will defend themselves, they will defend their children.

S Seyward Darby 26:21

And, you know, like you said, there's the secondary aspect of that, which is that, you know, their "men," quote, unquote, should be defending them as well. And so, I think that that is something we do and have seen in the white nationalist space for a long time. And I think that, you know, frankly, I think there's probably not been enough research done on, you know, the intersection of gun violence. And again, not just gun violence, that's, you know, shooting up a church and murdering, you know, people, but, you know, gun violence that happens in, you know, a more I hate to say this, but like day to day way, because that's our reality in the United States, right? Like, that's how bad gun violence is, you know, looking at the ways that depictions of whiteness, expectations of whiteness, etc, are tied up with, you know, transit gun violence in the country.

 JJ Janflone 27:12

Well, and just speaking of untangling, how do people get out of these groups?

S Seyward Darby 27:17

I think that the key takeaway really, though, is that it's not that they magically saw the light. It's not that they were argued into it. And I think that people who are studying deradicalization now, especially in the academy will tell you that in looking at people who deradicalize, trying to argue someone out of what they believe, is almost certainly not going to work. So saying, "No, that's not what the data shows," or "No, you're wrong about that." People do not like confrontation in that way. And so, you know, it would be nice if, and we've actually seen this with regard to January 6, I should also say, you know, all of these anecdotes of, you know, "My uncle was at the Capitol, and he says this, and I told him, that's not true. And he told me, you know, I'm wrong, like, I'm the liar," or, you know, double down in some way. And so I think that, you know, deradicalization very much needs to be seen as a personal choice. And something that, I'm not obviously we should improve, you know, the state of information in the country and minimize the amount of misinformation out there. But at the end of the day, you know, it's not about re-educating people or something ridiculous like that. And it's not about you know, insisting on telling people that they're wrong all the time. It's, it's a, it's a more, I don't know, holistic way of thinking about the person and, you know, the, the factors that lead them in and the factors that might lead them out. I will also just say that I think deradicalization is a really

understudied phenomenon. And I, you know, I think that people who do study it would agree with me, but I think it's something that people are turning their attention to more and more now.

S Seyward Darby 28:54

And, you know, you have seen NGOs crop up that are, you know, working to sort of provide resources for people who want to leave white nationalism behind. But there have also been studies, you know, about what does that even mean, right? Because in this day and age, if you're not leaving the commune, where you know, all of the Neo-Nazis live, or if you're not turning in your Klan hood, like, what does it mean to leave if leaving is all about, you know, changing your daily behavior. You know, where you where you get your news, what you believe about your news, the ways you engage with social media, things like that. And there's one really interesting study that I read in the course of working on the book that likens being a part of right-wing extremism as being addicted to something. And that just because you leave an addiction behind, just because you stop, you know, actively taking part in that, you know, using the substance or whatever it is that you're addicted to, doesn't mean that you don't feel drawn to the substance. And so sort of studying white nationalism's residual facts on people, I think could also be and I think is like, you know, a frontier in understanding the the levers of deradicalization that we might have at our disposal.

 JJ Janflone 30:11

And Seyward, we would keep you forever. You've been amazing. But where can people find you, find your book?

S Seyward Darby 30:18

Absolutely. Well, you can find me on Twitter, probably the best place, I'm a journalist. So unfortunately, that is where I do have to spend a good amount of my professional time. So I'm just @SeywardDarby on Twitter. And my book is, you know, available everywhere. I would say, you know, in this day and age, please order from your local bookstore or independent shop,

 JJ Janflone 30:43

And I'll link, of course, to not just your book, but to some of the other resources you've shared with us offline, for folks who want to learn more, who want to push back against this. So thank you so much.

 JJ Janflone 30:57

So Kelly, I gotta be honest, "Sisters in Hate" was in my favorite books of last year, it was one of the highlights of 2021, because I think it outlines in a very accessible and human way the role white women have played within these groups.

Kelly Sampson 31:11

Yeah, Seyward did an amazing job. And I really appreciate how she also details the process of deradicalization. You know, how folks can get out of these movements, or how a loved one can help them to leave these hate groups and fight back against that violence.

JJ Janflone 31:27

100% I think especially what this whole series has done, is just laid out how these conspiracy groups, these hate groups, and gun violence, how all three of these things sort of feed off of each other, and how to really fight back about gun violence, we have to educate ourselves on what's happening out there.

JJ Janflone 31:47

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Kelly Sampson 32:01

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