

The Nation

With His South Africa Tweet, Trump Became a Megaphone for a White-Supremacist Talking Point

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In a segment this Wednesday night, Tucker Carlson ranted that South African president Cyril Ramaphosa has begun “seizing land from his own citizens because they are the wrong skin color”—“wrong” meaning white.

“That is literally the definition of racism,” Carlson continued. “Racism is what our elites say they hate most—Donald Trump is a racist, they say. But they have paid no attention to this at all.” The segment quickly turns into a tired gripe against Obama, with Carlson noting that Ramaphosa is one of Obama’s “favorite leaders in the world.”

With this “exclusive report” on South African farm seizures this week, Carlson killed a few birds with one stone.

The gears turning in Carlson’s head are practically audible, his salivation over this story is palpable. It hits every play in his ratings book: reverse racism, the liberal media’s blind eye, and a swing at Obama and the “elites.” Interviewing an analyst from the Cato Institute, Carlson slammed the “communists” of the South African government. The segment seemingly inspired President Donald Trump to tweet that he had ordered Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to “closely study the South Africa land and farm seizures and expropriations and the large scale killing of farmers.”

Trump is not exactly known for his unwavering commitment to human rights, which he has on multiple occasions blithely waved away in favor of overtures to international dictators. So of all the injustices that plague our globe, or even just the African continent, why this one? To those that are familiar with the extreme right and Trump’s cozy relationship to it, the answer is simple: because it’s about white people. The plight of South African farmers is a common histrionic wail from white supremacists, who argue that it is evidence that the most brutal global injustices are, actually, against whites in a forgotten campaign of “white genocide.”

Earlier this week, a petition calling on Trump to give immigration priority to white South African farmers fleeing “violent confiscation of their lands” was circulated on the neo-Nazi site Stormfront. On a site called Infostormer, a recent post begins: “If you want to know why I became a neo-Nazi, White supremacist, it is because of what is happening in places like South Africa.” So when Trump, after watching the Carlson segment, tweeted that he had ordered the full weight of America’s top diplomat into the matter, the Internet far-right erupted in applause.

Mike Peinovich, host of the podcast *The Daily Shoah* (a play on *The Daily Show* and “Shoah,” the Hebrew word for the Holocaust), tweeted that “this is how we chip away at the all consuming anti-white discourse. Let’s hope this is followed with action.” David Duke, the former KKK grand wizard, chimed in as well, citing an unconfirmed news story that Russia has “already agreed to take in 15,000 White South Africans,” followed by “your move, Mr. President” and “Thank you!” With inspiration from Carlson, Trump had just pushed into United States foreign policy a white-supremacist talking point that had until now just floated on the far-right fringes of the Internet.

Debates over land ownership have roiled South Africa in recent months, where President Ramaphosa has proposed a constitutional amendment to allow the government to repossess land from white farmers, or “Boers.” White South Africans make up roughly 9 percent of the total population of South Africa, yet own roughly 72 percent of the 37 million hectares of private farmland, according to government statistics. Meanwhile, blacks own just 4 percent of farms, despite making up 78 percent of the population. Ramaphosa’s government has argued that the measure is necessary to balance deep scars of inequality left from generations of apartheid, but critics have called this plan “expropriation without compensation.”

But never mind those details. To Carlson and Trump, the ease with which the story morphs into a salaciously gruesome tale of innocent farmers slaughtered and robbed for no reason other than their race is what matters. This also wasn’t just a one-off goof on the part of Carlson—it’s the second segment like it he has aired in just a few months.

In May this year, Carlson had Ernst Roets of the nonprofit group AfriForum on his show, a group described by the former US ambassador to South Africa as “a predominantly Afrikaner extremist group that describes apartheid as a ‘so-called’ injustice.” Carlson introduced Roets by claiming that white South African farmers faced “barbaric and horrifying murders,” and the indifference of their government. Carlson did not seem to mind that Roets had links to some of the far right’s biggest conspiracy theorists, like Stefan Molyneux, who regularly uses his platform to argue that blacks are genetically inferior intellectually to whites. On Carlson’s segment, Roets claimed that there were “two farm attacks every day, and two farm murders every week”—assertions that not at all reflected by government statistics.

Murder rates for South African Boers are at best uncertain and unreliable. Police statistics, which don’t track the race of victims, indicate that 74 people were murdered on farms between April 2016 and March 2017, during a time period when there were 19,016 murders overall. According to statistics compiled by AgriSA, one of the largest agricultural associations in the country, while South Africa’s crime rate remains high, violence against farmers is at a 20-year low.

The driving animus of Carlson's coverage is his outrage at the alleged conspiracy of it all, and as such he invokes the catch-all, versatile villain that seems to bind many white supremacists to the larger body of Trump supporters—a hypocritical, holier-than-thou enemy that silences inconvenient truths with sneaky tactics. And in what has arguably been the most damning week of his presidency, Trump has responded with one of his loudest dog whistles yet to white supremacists in the United States and abroad. When Trump is in trouble, he reliably embraces his most loyal fan base, whom he encourages to see enemies around every corner.

“The idea of a silent, worldwide genocide against white people has long been a lodestar for white supremacist groups at home and abroad,” said Heidi Beirich, head of the Southern Poverty Law Center's Intelligence Project, in a statement posted to the SPLC website on Thursday. It speaks to the success of white supremacists that this kind of thinking has entered the mainstream.

Prior to Charlottesville, the “alt-right,” despite its obvious racism, continued to carefully wink and nod to white supremacy's most obvious signifiers in an attempt to appeal to a more mainstream audience. Instead of “white supremacists,” they were “white nationalists,” or, even more euphemistically, “alt-right”—eager to frame their position as “white identity politics” worthy of debate in the public sphere. That they've made the jump to Fox prime time seems that their maneuvering has worked. Carlson, never a master of subtlety, has not issued coded or coy declaration—it is a full clarion call. And Trump has willfully followed suit.