

'Replacement' fear looks weird



Opinion column by
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From a place like Tucson, you get a great view of the tragic absurdity of Great Replacement Theory as it spreads across the United States.

At base, this is the idea that white people around the world are being pushed to extinction by non-whites. In its recent U.S. version — embraced by the gunman who massacred 10 black

people in Buffalo last week — it's the conspiracy theory that Democrats or Jews are trying to replace white Americans with Third World immigrants who will vote Democratic.

The idea wouldn't really matter, except it has been the motive for at least four mass shootings in the United States since 2018, including one in El Paso targeting Hispanics that killed 23 people, and two at synagogues that killed 12 people. And now, about 30% of Americans think a deliberate great replacement is occurring, according to a detailed December poll by the Associated

Press and the NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

From here in Tucson, though, it's easier to see than in most of the country that the gradual demographic shift the United States is experiencing is nothing compared to the conquests, moving borders and demographic revolutions of relatively recent history.

The Tohono O'odham Nation as it exists now stands just to Tucson's south and west, home to a people who used to predominate in this region until they suffered replacement, or at least displacement, by other Indige-

nous people such as the Apache, Spanish settlers beginning in the 1700s, then Mexicans, and finally Anglo Americans.

We also live, of course, in the Gadsden Purchase, the last land added to the continental United States in 1854. Without moving, Mexican families living in the northwestern frontier of their country became residents of the southwestern borderlands of the United States.

Like it or not, they suddenly became Americans and part of a minority group in their new country. The presence of so many *Mexicanos* and Indigenous

people delayed the admission of Arizona and New Mexico to statehood, as Indiana Sen. Albert Beveridge questioned whether the states were American enough.

It wasn't until the railroad arrived in March 1880 that white Anglo residents moved to Tucson in great numbers, and they didn't become a majority of the city's population until the 1900s. Now, a century later, people of Hispanic origin, who may be of any race under U.S. Census guidelines, are gradually

Please see **STELLER**, Page B7

Steller

From B1

becoming the majority again. So it goes.

Whiteness, nationhood and borders

The underlying fear in today's great replacement panic is that the United States will unalterably change and white Anglos will no longer have control. This fear is older than the country itself.

Take this infamous observation made by Benjamin Franklin in 1755: "Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a Colony of Aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them, and will never adopt our Language or Customs, any more than they can acquire our Complexion?"

Yes, Franklin, one of the greatest geniuses of American history, was worried that Germans immigrants would bring not just their language and customs but their "swarthy complexion" to the English colonies. At this same time, years of war were beginning to expel Indigenous people from areas of Pennsylvania west of Franklin's Philadelphia.

He feared replacement by one group even as his fellow Pennsylvanians conducted it on another.

This pattern has repeated over and over, with some European nationalities — Irish and Italian

immigrants, for example — first being viewed as replacements and denied the attribute of whiteness, then eventually being incorporated into the American majority.

"Whiteness as a category is something that's constantly shifting throughout U.S. history," said Anita Huizar-Hernández, an associate professor of Spanish and Portuguese at the UA.

Her research focuses on late 19th and early 20th century literature in the U.S.-Mexico border region. I called her because I'd read about her 2019 nonfiction book, *Forging Arizona*, describing the efforts of a 19th Century American con artist to claim his wife was a Spanish heiress in an effort to obtain a massive land grant in this region newly belonging to the United States.

What Huizar-Hernández emphasized is how not just whiteness, but nationhood and borders themselves have been shifting concepts — the product of human will, not nature.

Feeding border hysteria

I suspect people like Tucker Carlson, the Fox News host who is likely the top spreader of the Great Replacement idea, would agree that our borders are human constructs. He just wants us to use them, as he frequently says, to keep Third-World migrants out.

He has repeatedly alleged, even after the Buffalo massacre, that President Joe Biden is deliberately letting migrants

across the U.S.-Mexico border so they will tip the electoral balance in favor of Democrats in the future.

Now, unlike some others on the left of the right-left political axis, I'm not opposed to border enforcement. That's why I think we should abandon Title 42, a public-health mandate, and return to enforcing normal immigration laws, with asylum seekers directed through the ports of entries, not giving themselves up en masse to Border Patrol agents between ports.

This is a way to create more order on the border. But it would not help feed the border hysteria that proves so politically profitable year after year.

When Carlson links border policies to the great replacement idea, millions of viewers think he is lifting the veil on a secret truth. But the claim doesn't stand up to scrutiny.

There is no way for people who sneak into the United States illegally now or who are admitted preliminarily as asylum seekers, to become a mass of citizens and voters in the foreseeable future. People shout "amnesty," but there is little chance of an amnesty passing Congress. They haven't even approved legal status for enrollees in the DACA program, let alone citizenship.

People living in the USA illegally, or in a tenuous status like DACA, or simply living here as non-citizen legal residents, can't vote, and they don't. There is no

realistic way many of them will.

But all the talk of foreigners invading and voting and taking over the country serves a political purpose. It agitates the largely older, conservative and Republican voters who watch Carlson's show. It builds suspicion among them about any votes that may go against Republicans, and about our voting system itself.

It builds belief that people in cities like Philadelphia, Detroit, Milwaukee and Phoenix — not coincidentally, all cities where many nonwhite voters live — must have cheated in 2020. If all the real Americans love Donald Trump, then how could he possibly have lost?

Demographic change gradual

This debate, like many in recent years, boils down to the age-old question of how you define an American and the country itself. If the slippery label of whiteness is inherent to your definition of a real American or of the USA, then you're going to be open to the Great Replacement idea.

Politicians like Trump have made the decline of American greatness and whiteness central to their appeal. Supporters like U.S. Senate candidate Blake Masters, a Tucson Republican, have continued the appeal to fear. But they usually imply the decline of white America without

saying it outright.

"America isn't just an idea. We're a country. We're a people with a history and a culture," Masters said in a February video. "When was the last time you heard a leftist say anything good at all about our people? They don't do it. If it were up to them, we wouldn't even exist."

As usual, the appeal to white existential fear was just below the surface.

But there is an alternative to fear — openness to change and even optimism about our burgeoning American multicultural democracy.

"This idea that we're trying to hold on so that nothing changes, it's a fool's errand," said Huizar-Hernández, who is moving to a new job at Arizona State this fall. "You can tell that from your own life. We all grow up. In some ways that is terrifying, but that is the human experience. You have to be OK with it, or it will drive you nuts."

Tucson's history shows this. The gradual demographic change happening in the United States today, all under the same American constitutional system, is nothing compared to the conquests and upheavals of relatively recent history here.

Far from a cause for fear, it is a cause for hope and celebration of the country's continual rebirth.

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