

## **“State of Hate”**

**Nominator:** Melanie Payne/Executive Producer of Investigations and Special Projects, WFTS /ABC Action News

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*Payne oversaw production of nine news stories and two long-format programs (a 30 minute and a 60 minute special) broadcast on ABC Action news, our station’s streaming channel ABC Action News +, the Florida 24 Network and on our website [State of Hate \(abcactionnews.com\)](http://StateofHate.abcactionnews.com)*

### **Reporting Team:**

Melanie Payne/Executive Producer ([melanie.payne@wfts.com](mailto:melanie.payne@wfts.com))

Adam Walser/Investigative Reporter ([adam.walser@wfts.com](mailto:adam.walser@wfts.com))

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### **Story Summary:**

The Sunshine State has long been a melting pot, attracting new residents from across the country and around the globe. But in recent years, Florida has seen a sharp uptick in hate groups and racially motivated hate incidents. More Floridians were arrested in the January 6th, 2021 Capitol insurrection than residents of any other state. Dozens of those charged were members of organized groups, including the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers. The ABC Action News I-Team took an in-depth look at what is causing a rise in extremism, what attracts people to these groups and what can be done to prevent violence. We sparked community conversations and undertook efforts to minimize attention given to hate groups, which often use media coverage to attract new members. This was a team effort, with all three reporters, two photographers and an executive producer assigned to our I-Team producing reports. Our goal was to equip our community with resources needed to identify, report and combat the growing "State of Hate."

Here is a link to our hour-long special:

<https://youtu.be/r-lrCH3BBwo>

**The three most important segments** for the Shadid Award judges to consider can be found at the following time codes:

00-8:13 -- Introducing the rise of extremism in Florida

18:18-22:32 -- Guidance from ethical experts and community leaders as to how to approach this sensitive topic

27:54-32:56 – An exclusive interview reveals how a hate crime victim was targeted by a violent racist. He was reluctant to talk at first and later ended up revealing how this attack affected him and his family.

### **Conflicting values in reporting the story:**

The Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics identifies the principles “seek the truth and report it” and “minimize harm” as the foundation of ethical journalism. But these important journalistic values potentially came into conflict when covering the rise of the white supremacy movement in Florida. The main reason... hate groups, including neo-Nazi organizations, the Ku Klux Klan and the Oath Keepers often operate in the shadows but thrive on media exposure. Documenting their cowardly acts in television reports served the purpose of educating the public and letting them know to look out for potential threats and violence. But at the same time, these reports could raise the stature of these fringe groups, drawing interest to their messaging and helping them recruit. We identified a local man who was the self-proclaimed commander of the largest neo-Nazi group in America. The 45-year-old, unemployed, former tow-truck driver was arrested for pulling a gun on an African-American family in Arizona and for assaulting a Jewish college student in Florida with pepper spray. As is often the case when we are reporting about someone who has been arrested for a crime, we contacted him and asked him for an interview. Unlike most cases, he asked reporter Adam Walser whether he was Jewish and said he would not do an interview if he was. After Walser told him he was not, he agreed to a Zoom interview and appeared on camera wearing a swastika armband and what appeared to be a Nazi uniform. He then went on to talk about how he became involved in hate groups, how much he hated black people, Jewish people and gay people, and how he wanted to see an all-white society. Do we report about Nazi flags, anti-Semitic materials being circulated and swastikas painted in school bathrooms or does that make matters worse?

### **Options considered to resolve the conflicts:**

Before we even did our first “State of Hate” broadcast, we held a series of meetings with newsroom leaders to discuss if we should even cover this topic and whether it was worth the risk of potentially alienating and upsetting some viewers. The motto of Scripps, our parent company, is “Give light and people will find their own way”. Ultimately, we decided it was important to shed light on the rise of extremism, to make our community aware of it, and provide viewers with how to recognize and report behavior that could lead to violence. We had to report the story in a way that exposed these groups and individuals but minimized harm. We considered whether or not to show swastikas painted on bathroom walls, on flags during demonstrations or on flyers scattered in our community. We also considered whether or not to show the evil, disturbed rants sent in a handwritten letter to the local NAACP office. And we had to decide whether or not to hold individuals and groups accountable by naming them.

### **Final decisions and rationales**

Our station has a Equity, Diversity and Inclusion task force composed of leaders of local organizations, including the NAACP, the Jewish Community Relations Board and the Florida Holocaust Museum. We

consulted those stakeholders to see how they thought these stories should be covered. We also turned to the Poynter Institute of Media Studies. We ultimately decided to blur all hateful images, including swastikas on flags, flyers and tattoos. We didn't name the Nazi leader or his group, so as not to send more viewers to his organization's website. We also decided not to use any sound from his interview, thus denying him a platform. We focused on the remedies to hate, like the tattoo parlor owner who refused to tattoo symbols of extremism and the Florida Holocaust Museum conducting outreach to schools and community groups and the former Oathkeeper who testified about the dangers of the growing white supremacy movement. We also interviewed a psychiatrist who is looking into the root causes of the growth in extremism and offered viewers ways to reach out to vulnerable people who may be susceptible to hateful messages. In the end, our station was not targeted by neo-Nazis as feared and we received positive feedback. Here is an excerpt from an email from the President of the Florida Holocaust Museum:

*"I wanted to take a moment to thank you immensely for the fabulous story. We are receiving tremendous feedback from every level of stakeholder. The Board was energized, patrons are talking about it, and the Jewish community feels supported. Home run! From the bottom of my heart, thank you for being part of this fight. We look forward to more discussions with you."*