Turning Point USA (TPUSA) is an Illinois-based right-wing student organization founded by Charlie Kirk, 25, who now serves as executive director, and William Montgomery, the group's treasurer. Kirk was 18 when he met Montgomery, who was then in his late 60s, after Kirk gave a speech at Benedictine University in Illinois in 2012.[3]

The organization’s stated mission is to “identify educate, train, and organize students to promote the principles of freedom, free markets, and limited government.” TPUSA claims to have representation at more than 1,300 high schools and college campuses nationwide. It also runs the controversial “Professor Watchlist,” which seeks to “expose” professors who allegedly
“discriminate against conservative students and advance leftist propaganda in the classroom.” The group has raised millions of dollars from conservative donors since its founding.[4] In the group’s six-year history, TPUSA’s leadership and activists have made multiple racist or bigoted comments and have been linked to a variety of extremists.

Kirk and Candace Owens, 29, are the public face of TPUSA. They often appear at public events together. Owens became communications director and director of “urban outreach” after she emerged as a right-wing activist during Gamergate, a debate over journalistic ethics in videogame review which devolved into vicious harassment campaign against people (mostly women) who spoke out against misogyny and sexism in the videogaming community.[5]

Owens, who is black, is no stranger to controversial statements; she frequently claims that Democrats have brainwashed black people.[6]

Looking beyond American campuses, TPUSA is expanding its activities abroad. Owens made her December 2018 comments about Hitler during an event to help establish a British version of the group, Turning Point UK.[7]

TPUSA and Right-Wing Extremists

TPUSA has received considerable support from conservatives and pro-Trump organizations. Right-wing extremists’ reactions to the group have been varied, but generally positive. TPUSA has generated support from anti-Muslim bigots and alt-lite activists, and from some corners of the white supremacist alt right. However, other white supremacists have criticized TPUSA for distancing itself from controversial stances on racism, and for the group’s connections to non-white right-wing activists.

In 2018, white supremacist James Dunphy (possibly a pseudonym) wrote an article for the racist website Counter-Currents neatly capturing the prevailing
mixed feelings about TPUSA. Dunphy criticized Kirk's “compliance with political correctness” but praised him for doing “wonderful things” with TPUSA, saying that “group members have openly supported building Trump's wall, deporting illegal immigrants, ending affirmative action, defunding sanctuary cities, and stopping unassimilable Muslims from immigrating to Europe.” Dunphy also claimed that “despite having many differences with white nationalists,” TPUSA will nevertheless benefit them “because the number of people who will migrate from its platform to a white nationalist one will be far larger than those who do the reverse.”[8]

White supremacists do occasionally show up at TPUSA events, sometimes to hear the speakers and other times to linger outside in the hopes of confronting left-wing activists. Charlie Kirk has spoken out against such incidents, which can attract significant negative publicity. When white supremacists appeared outside an event at Colorado State University in early 2018, Kirk told attendees, “it's not who we are, it's not what we believe, it's not what Turning Point believes.”[9]

However, in spite of such statements and attempts by TPUSA to manage some of its scandals, the controversies keep bubbling up, with most falling into one or more of these categories:

1. Problematic comments by TPUSA spokespeople or activists

2. TPUSA spokespeople appearing alongside extremists at events, on their shows

3. TPUSA activists making racist or bigoted social media posts, texts or other statements

4. Connections between TPUSA members or activists and known extremists or extremist groups

Controversies
The past three years have seen many controversial and problematic incidents connected to TPUSA.

Note: in the list that follows, several individuals are described as associated with the “alt lite.” The “alt lite” is a spin-off movement from the white supremacist alt right. Its adherents typically eschew the explicit white supremacy of the alt right but otherwise share its extremism and its prejudices, including against Muslims, immigrants, LGBTQ people (especially transgender people), and women.

- May 2019: Left-wing website "It's Going Down" posted a cellphone video of Riley Gisar, the president of the TPUSA chapter at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, shouting "white power." The video also shows the woman standing next to Gisar and the person shooting the video making racist comments and shouting, "white power." Gisar and the woman also make the okay hand gesture, which has been used as a trolling technique by people falsely claiming the gesture represents the letters "wp," for "white power." However, more recently, a number of people have used the gesture as a sincere expression of white supremacy. It is unclear when the video was recorded; TPUSA responded by announcing that Gisar had been permanently removed from the organization.

- February 2019: Video surfaced of the organization’s communications director, Candace Owens, appearing to defend both Adolf Hitler and nationalism. “If Hitler just wanted to make Germany great and have things run well—okay, fine. The problem is that he...had dreams outside of Germany [and] wanted to globalize,” she said. Her comments, made at a December 2018 event in London, sparked widespread criticism.[1] Owens later clarified her statement, saying it was an attempt to separate the term “nationalist” from its associations with Hitler, adding, "He wasn't a nationalist...He was a homicidal, psychotic maniac."[2]

- December 2018: In London, TPUSA’s director of communications, Candace Owens, defended nationalism against associations with Adolf Hitler, claiming Hitler was actually a “globalist” not a nationalist. “You know, he was
a National Socialist,” she said, “but if Hitler just wanted to make Germany great and have things run well—okay, fine. The problem is that he wanted, he had dreams outside of Germany, he wanted to globalize…” The event was a kickoff for Turning Point UK.[10]

- December 2018: In an interview with Business Insider, Candace Owens claimed that police brutality was not a major issue for black Americans, that black Americans are “worse off economically” today than under Jim Crow (a claim she had previously made on Twitter), and that the Ku Klux Klan was “one of those mirages” and less dangerous than Antifa.[11]

- November 2018: A Fox News host was forced to apologize to Hillary Clinton after guest Anna Paulina, TPUSA’s director of Hispanic engagement, compared the former secretary of state and presidential candidate to herpes. [12]

- October 2018: The Miami New Times revealed leaked messages from a TPUSA WhatsApp group connected to Florida International University that included a racist Pepe the Frog meme about Syrian refugees raping white women, as well as a joke about dressing up as ICE agents to “grapple Latinas and deport them.” The messages also included this advice on how to avoid scrutiny: “Just avoid saying the n word and don’t reference Richard Spencer too much and don’t Jew hate…all the time.”[13]

- September 2018: TPUSA leader Charlie Kirk spoke at the annual conference of the anti-Muslim group ACT for America. ACT for America has numerous connections to TPUSA; Jonathon Stack, an ACT for America grassroots coordinator, even describes himself on his LinkedIn profile as being “responsible for working with Turning Point USA student groups and student activists.” Thomas Hern, ACT for America’s national grassroots director, previously worked with Turning Point USA as a field director and deputy national field director.[14]

- July 2018: The Daily Beast reported that TPUSA had “courted” Bryan Sharpe, aka “Hotep Jesus,” a conspiracy theorist and anti-Semite, inviting him to
meetings and retreats. Among his many anti-Semitic references, Sharpe tweeted in 2017 that the term “Holocaust denier” was created “to hide the truth.” That same year, Sharpe, who is African-American, posted a YouTube video in which he said that the alt right “isn’t afraid to call out the Jews and their implications [sic] in the destruction of the black community in America.” In October 2018, apparently in response to The Daily Beast coverage of Sharpe's anti-Semitism, Sharpe tweeted that he had been “banned” from TPUSA's Young Black Leadership Summit.[15]

- April 2018: Marshall DeRosa, a former member of the neo-Confederate and racist group League of the South, was revealed to be the faculty advisor for Florida Atlantic University's TPUSA chapter. DeRosa told the Miami New Times that he had left the League of the South after it became too “radical.” While the League of the South did evolve into a hardcore white supremacist group over the past 10 years, even in its earliest years the group was implicitly racist, arguing that “Anglo-Celtic” (a code word for “white”) culture should dominate in the South. A TPUSA representative at the university subsequently told the New Times that its members stood by DeRosa.[16]

- December 2017: In a New Yorker article, former TPUSA employee Gabrielle Fequiere, who is black, called the group “racist,” claiming that speakers at one of the group’s annual student summits talked about “black women having all these babies out of wedlock.” TPUSA denied the claim. The article also revealed that in 2017 Crystal Clanton, TPUSA's national field director, sent this text message to another TPUSA employee: “i [sic] hate black people. Like fuck them all...I hate blacks. End of story.” Clanton left TPUSA shortly thereafter.[17]

- December 2017: While attending a TPUSA conference in West Palm Beach, Florida, Juan Pablo Andrade, a policy advisor for the pro-Trump group America First Policies, was captured on a Snapchat video claiming that “the only thing the Nazis didn’t get right is they didn’t keep fucking going!” After Mediaite wrote about the video, Andrade released a statement saying that
the video was incomplete and failed to tell the whole story. Another video uncovered by Mediaite showed Cesar Subervi attended the conference; Subervi allegedly also attended the Unite the Right white supremacist event in Charlottesville in August 2017. Citing anonymous sources, Mediaite said that in an effort to avoid controversy, Subervi had originally been placed on a “blacklist” for the TPUSA event, but that the list was later abandoned.[18]

- November 2017: TPUSA activists from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign appeared on Gavin McInnes’ “Get Off My Lawn” podcast. McInnes is the founder of the Proud Boys, a violent right-wing extremist group.[19]

- August 2017: After the Unite the Right white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, and three months before she was hired by TPUSA, Candace Owens posted a video to YouTube titled “I Don't Care About Charlottesville, the KKK, or White Supremacy,” the last of which she referred to as an “almost endangered species.” She was later interviewed by right-wing conspiracy theorists Paul Joseph Watson and Alex Jones (the first of several occasions), which she defended by saying, “I simply really like Paul Joseph Watson.” Watson has returned the favor, promoting Owens’ events as recently as January 2019.[20]

- August 2017: Alt lite activist Kyle “Based Stickman” Chapman announced he would be working with to help the Kent State University chapter of TPUSA put on a week of events. Chapman rose to fame in March 2017 when he was videotaped assaulting protesters in Berkeley; in 2018 he was charged with felony assault with a deadly weapon for an alleged assault in Texas. The head of the Kent State TPUSA chapter, Kaitlin Bennett, who had invited Chapman, later angrily claimed that TPUSA member Frankie O’Laughlin had stopped the chapter from working with Chapman even though, Bennett claimed, “Frankie was liking tweets from notorious Charlottesville attendee and white nationalist icon, James Allsup.”[21]

- April 2017: The Huffington Post reported that TPUSA field operations manager Shialee Grooman had a history of posting racist and homophobic
tweets, and that she admitted in 2012 that she loved “making racist jokes” and “if you're a race other than white I promise to make racist jokes towards you.” The article also revealed that former TPUSA Midwest regional manager Timon Prax was forced to leave the organization because of tweeting bigoted "jokes" about Muslims, Jews, and Mormons. A source claimed to The Huffington Post that Prax had made even more explicitly racist comments in text messages.[22]

- January 2017: At the invitation of the local TPUSA chapter, alt lite activist Milo Yiannopoulos brought his “Dangerous Faggot” speaking tour to the University of Colorado-Boulder. This was just one of Yiannopoulos’s TPUSA-sponsored campus appearances nationwide.[23]

- January 2015: TPUSA activist Lauren Cooley, speaking at a Tea Party event in South Carolina, called civil rights leader Jesse Jackson a “race baiter,” according to a report from the Institute for Research & Education on Human Rights, echoing a comment she’d made as a student at Fuhrman University. As a student she also brought Larry Pratt to campus; Pratt, then-head of the radical gun rights group Gun Owners of America, was forced in 1996 to resign his position as co-chair of Pat Buchanan’s presidential campaign because of his ties to militia and white supremacist groups.[24]

[2] Ibid.


[11] John Haltiwanger, “Candace Owens says Trump will ‘crack the black vote’ because he loves America and ‘the left hates’ it,” Business Insider, January 6, 2019;


[14] Jack Smith IV, “‘We have a president that likes us’: Anti-Islam group brags about weekly meetings at White House,” Mic, September 11, 2018; accessed at https://mic.com/articles/191238/we-have-a-president-that-likes-us-anti-islam-group-brags-about-weekly-meetings-at-white-house#.js6BUEmCC; Jonathon Stack LinkedIn profile; accessed at https://www.linkedin.com/in/jonathon-stack-93669ab5/; Thomas Hern LinkedIn profile; accessed at https://www.linkedin.com/in/thomas-hern-2125097a/.


[20] Candace Owens, “I don’t care about Charlottesville, the KKK, or White Supremacy [video],” August 16, 2017; accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4S2TZOdXAtQ.


[22] Ashley Feinberg, “Turning Point USA keeps accidentally hiring racists,” Huffington Post, April 25, 2018; accessed at https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/turning-point-usa-racist-tweets_us_5ad65b06e4b029ebe01ed1ac.
