



Welcome to Leith Discussion Guide

Directors: Michael Beach Nichols,
Christopher K. Walker
Year: 2015
Time: 85 min

You might know these directors from:

Michael Beach Nichols:
Flex Is Kings (2013)

This is Christopher K. Walker's feature-length directorial debut.

FILM SUMMARY

In the west, the appearance of a swastika on a flag or building's side is not a friendly sign and can instill insecurity in those who witness it. Skinheads, white supremacists and extremists are known to parade streets and propagate fear in big cities or small towns where violence already has a foothold. Yet many rural communities are known for their safe environments, where children freely roam and explore and everyone lifts a hand in greeting.

When notorious white supremacist Craig Cobb settles in the tiny village of Leith, North Dakota he was welcomed with open arms. Many of the town's 24 residents had never encountered racism, showing no bias between Caucasians, Native Americans, or African-Americans. Yet, when mayor Schock received a visit from the Southern Poverty Law Center informing him of Craig Cobb's extremist intentions, that all changed... for the worse. The townspeople were suddenly faced with an onslaught of bigotry and intimidation they could not have imagined and as they stood up against the newcomers they in turn were accused of intolerance.

Filmmakers Nichols and Walker grabbed onto the story once it was already well underway, and much of the footage they utilize to compile WELCOME TO LEITH was filmed by the citizens themselves. By gaining access to such a wealth of visual evidence and allowing both the white supremacists and the citizens ample screen time to express their side of the story, they craft a chronological tale of spine-chilling magnificence, a frightening snapshot of what happens when fear is left to its own devices and a lack of legal boundaries exists to not only protect citizens from one another but from their own poisonous ideologies. With masterful editing and a tension-filled soundtrack, WELCOME TO LEITH provides evidence of the fragility of our First Amendment rights, and that exercising them cannot be at the expense of another person's safety.

FILM THEMES

When the safe hearth of rural America is threatened by the tactics of renowned racist Craig Cobb, honoring civil liberties takes a back seat in the quest to rid the town of Leith of this new fatal fear.

RURAL AMERICA

The small town of Leith provides the picture-perfect example of rural America and the traditional values on which the U.S. was founded. A community working together, a place devoid of fear and violence, where people collect to carve out a wholesome life. “We live out here because we like the privacy and the secluded feel and the beauty of the country around us,” states the mayor’s wife. Hatred receives no invitation to settle in a place like Leith, where love and community rule. The arrival of white supremacy to this small slice of rural America hints at the decreasing potential to maintain the innocence of small communities.

GUIDED BY HATE

On a philosophical level, there isn’t much wrong in taking pride in one’s roots. Everyone needs to feel connected to something. Both majority and minority groups have long been encouraged to come together to strengthen their bond and honor their heritage, while at the same time embracing racial and cultural diversity. White supremacy, at its core, crosses the line of celebrating ourselves and our differences by preaching destruction, violence, and hate. By propagating extermination of one race for the benefit of another, hate becomes the guiding force.

CROSSING THE HAZY LINE OF CIVIL LIBERTIES

Many American hate groups cite the First Amendment as their greatest ally in their quest to spread their message. Claiming that American values are based on liberty and freedom of expression, their words are threatening, their actions spread fear, and their policies take lives. Simply put, their belief system affects the freedom of others to live their lives. White supremacists set out to stop the natural course of human evolution by bearing arms and encouraging acts of fatal consequence. When exercising one’s freedom directly threatens another’s, the definition of civil liberties becomes a hazy affair.

GUERRILLA WARFARE

Everyone involved in WELCOME TO LEITH felt threatened and provoked in some manner. From the formerly unchallenged residents of Leith, to the white supremacists, to the journalists working at the Southern Poverty Law Center. “We hate that which threatens what we love,” Craig Cobb purports. “We’re going to do everything we can legally using public information to destroy these groups,” Heidi Beirich of SPLC states. “Are we ever going to be safe again?” mayor Ryan Schock wonders. In this state of heightened anxiety and instability, where fear is left to its own devices and insecurities run rampant, a sort of guerrilla warfare unfolds. Each person takes it upon themselves to defend their opposing belief systems and families, to ensure that what they hold dear is protected.

“We think that white supremacy shouldn’t exist.”

Heidi Beirich, SPLC

“It (Leith) is very rural America. Everybody’s got each other’s backs.”

Ryan Schock, mayor of Leith

“No one has any right – no matter who you are or what you believe in – to make you leave just because they don’t like you.”

Deborah Henderson, Kynan Dutton’s wife

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Describe WELCOME TO LEITH in five words. What struck you as the central theme of the film?
2. What do you think about the directors allowing the various characters in the film to have as much space as they did to tell their of the story? Do you think it makes for a more or less powerful documentary to allow equal coverage to both sides of the debate?
3. What are some of the motivating factors behind intolerance and hate? What are some the motivating factors behind tolerance and inclusion? Which do you think is more of a guiding force in your life?
4. Are you in the racial majority or minority where you live? Have you ever had any racially motivated hate directed at you? Is racism or intolerance apparent in your community?
5. The directors have said they wanted to infuse the film with a horror-like feel. Do you think they succeeded in this aspect? If so, what devices did they utilize to make the storytelling horror-like?
6. Discuss the connection between militarism and extremism? Why do you think physical violence and warfare are such a large part of extremist movements?
7. Discuss the notion of pride in relation to race. Are there any positive aspects of taking pride in one’s race? Where is the line drawn between pride and prejudice?
8. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution states: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” Do you think the white supremacists in the film invoke their First Amendment rights in an appropriate way when they set out to spread a campaign of hate and to actively encourage violence against non-whites?
9. A great deal of the footage used in WELCOME TO LEITH was filmed by residents of Leith and was captured before co-directors Nichols and Walker even began working on the film. Did the differing footage distract from or add to the overall feel of the film?
10. What is your definition of civil liberty? What are the civil liberties provided to citizens of your community/nation? Where is the line drawn between being granted freedom to embrace your own belief system and infringing on the civil liberties of others?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- WELCOME TO LEITH premiered at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival, where it was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize. The film went on to win a host of awards, including the Filmmaker-to-Filmmaker Award at Hot Docs and the Special Jury Award at the Florida Film Festival.
- Co-directors Nichols and Walker started Brooklyn-based production company No Weather in 2013, after having worked together on numerous film projects, with Nichols in the role of director and Walker editor/producer.
- Kynan Dutton and Deborah Henderson home-school their children, as they don't believe in public education "due to the vast multiculturalism." Dutton's parents are devout Mormons and disowned him due to his lack of religious views and his past military involvement.
- The co-directors first read about Cobb's plans to take over Leith in "The New York Times." Once Dutton moved with his family to Leith, they felt the story was something worth following. They made three trips to Leith over the course of filming, staying 70 miles away in Bismarck. The first time they met Craig Cobb was when he was in prison, and a great deal of the footage used in the film was shot by citizens of Leith and then edited together chronologically.
- Nichols is a huge horror fan - one of his favorite films is "The Shining." He hoped to infuse WELCOME TO LEITH with elements of this genre.
- In order to secure funding, co-directors posted a teaser of their first trip to Leith online, which received 22,000 views the first day and helped finance their next two production trips.
- The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) was founded in 1971 by two civil rights' lawyers, "to ensure that the promise of the civil rights movement became a reality for all." They also built the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama, where their headquarters are located. In the 1980s their offices were fire-bombed and destroyed by the Ku Klux Klan, and they built an office across the street, where they are now located. Many of the journalists who work for the SPLC receive constant death threats.
- Craig Cobb was born in 1951 in Boston, his father a wealthy businessman and his mother a teacher. After inheriting a large sum of money in 2005, he moved to Estonia and started a white supremacy network, which led to his being banned from the country for 10 years. Deported to Canada, he then returned to the U.S. in 2010. After being released from jail in North Dakota, he bought a house in Sherwood, about 180 miles from Leith, where he is serving his probation.
- The Creativity religion - a white supremacist movement followed by Cobb - has "Nature's Eternal Religion" as their founding text.
- In 2014, 47% of the 5,479 hate crimes reported in the U.S. were racially motivated.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Learn** more about the work of the Southern Poverty Law Center, "dedicated to fighting hate and bigotry and to seeking justice for the most vulnerable members of our society." Consider offering support.
2. **Learn** more about Partners Against Hate - an initiative aimed at raising youth not to hate. Their website comes complete with many useful resources and tools for educators, parents, and community and business leaders.
3. **Head** over to About Education for this list of practical ways to end racism on an individual, community, and national level, including having "hard conversations with yourself about the racism that lives within you."
4. **Support** the International Network for Hate Studies, an organization run by academics and practitioners, that has worked since 2013 to facilitate the exchange of hate study information.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.