



Confronting the Domestic Right-Wing Terrorist Threat

By Simon Clark March 7, 2019

Within the United States, violent extremism driven by right-wing, racially motivated ideologies is growing at an alarming pace, but neither public understanding nor government action has kept pace to combat it. Jonathan Greenblatt, CEO of the Anti-Defamation League, correctly observed:

It's time for our nation's leaders to appropriately recognize the severity of the threat and to devote the necessary resources to address the scourge of right-wing extremism.¹

Any effort to take up Greenblatt's challenge requires a serious strategy. The Trump administration must acknowledge the threat and reverse course from a policy of ignoring all but Islamic extremism.² It needs to understand how overheated rhetoric—including the president's own words—can lead to violence.³ Fortunately, these threats have been defeated before; a wise administration would seek to learn the lessons from previous efforts—in the United States and abroad—to combat far-right extremist violence. Until it does so, the danger will only increase.

The murder of 11 Jewish worshippers at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh more than four months ago was the most deadly U.S. domestic extremist attack since the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, but it was far from an isolated incident. The University of Maryland's Global Terrorism Database showed that, from 2010 to 2016, right-wing inspired terrorist acts in the United States have grown from 6 percent of total domestic terror attacks to 35 percent. The Anti-Defamation League's report, "A Dark and Constant Rage," catalogued 150 right-wing attacks from 1993 to 2017, noting that "right-wing extremists have been one of the largest and most consistent sources of domestic terror incidents in the United States for many years."⁴ The Center for Strategic and International Studies also reported that, between 2016 and 2017 alone, right-wing inspired violence had quadrupled in the United States.⁵

In the latest example, Christopher Hasson—a self-described white nationalist Coast Guard officer—was arrested in February for planning attacks on a target list of prominent Democratic politicians and cable news journalists.⁶ For at least two years,

Lt. Hasson visited white supremacist and neo-Nazi websites; researched biological weapons and improvised explosives; and studied far-right extremist manifestos. Hasson's arrest came only a few months after white nationalist Robert Bowers murdered 11 people and injured 7 more at the shooting inside the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, an attack that appears to have been motivated by anti-Semitism and inspired by his extensive involvement in white supremacist and alt-right online networks.⁷ From the Charlottesville Unite the Right rally⁸ in August 2017 to Cesar Sayoc's attempted mail bomb attacks on several of President Donald Trump's most prominent critics,⁹ the spread of far-right ideology is inspiring an increasing number of violent attacks that put the safety of Americans at risk.

For the first time in U.S. history, the number of open FBI cases into domestic terrorism equals the number of foreign terrorist cases being investigated—a startling trend that FBI Director Christopher Wray first acknowledged last year.¹⁰

The Trump administration must do more to combat this threat

President Trump's 2018 counterterrorism strategy accepts that threats from domestic extremists are on the rise. Although the administration has been criticized for not taking this threat seriously,¹¹ President Trump's "National Strategy for Counterterrorism" acknowledged that:

*[T]he United States has long faced a persistent security threat from domestic terrorists who are ... motivated by other forms of violent extremism, such as racially motivated extremism, animal rights extremism, environmental extremism, sovereign citizen extremism, and militia extremism. ... Domestic terrorism in the United States is on the rise.*¹²

Elsewhere in the report, the administration correctly notes the transnational links between dangerous European and U.S. right-wing extremist groups. Equating animal rights and environmental extremism with the racially motivated and militia extremism that has inspired recent violence is misleading, however, as there is no evidence of an increase in violence—or lives lost—due to animal rights and environmental extremists. In contrast, there is ample evidence that extreme right-wing ideologies are inspiring violent—and even deadly—attacks. Indeed, according to the Anti-Defamation League, all 50 deaths due to domestic extremism in the U.S. in 2018 can be traced to right-wing ideologies.¹³

Accepting that the United States has a growing domestic terrorism problem is a start, but developing a playbook to confront this threat effectively will require strategic planning and careful execution. The United States must draw from the counterterrorism lessons of its past and that of other democracies to build a

consensus around a set of tools to address the current domestic threat. Such a consensus will require a careful examination of countermeasures based on evidence of what has worked; a serious analysis of the ideology, motivation and techniques of these violent groups; and an understanding of the American legal and policing structures to inform the policy ideas that are developed.

6 ways to prevent far-right extremist violence

Law enforcement agencies—from the FBI to local police forces—elected officials, and researchers on counterterrorism can turn to the lessons of previous counterterrorism campaigns to find solutions to today’s threat. Here are six complementary approaches that should be further explored.

Acknowledge the problem

When violent acts of right-wing extremism occur—or, as in the Hasson case, are prevented by good police work—public officials can use these as teachable moments to educate the public on the scale of the threat. Dismissing this violence as isolated incidents perpetrated by lone wolves or disturbed individuals—rather than recognizing them as manifestations of a genocidal ideology grounded in racism and white nationalism—is to lose an opportunity to focus the public’s and law enforcement’s attention on the problem.

Gather and publish credible statistics

The Southern Poverty Law Center, the Anti-Defamation League, and other nongovernmental groups monitor far-right extremist violence, but there are few government-issued statistics that keep track of the scale of the threat. Some have argued that a domestic-terrorism statute would create a mechanism to do so,¹⁴ while others worry that such a law would allow federal agencies to harass legitimate political movements.¹⁵ This fraught question of the legal approach to domestic terrorism is a longer debate, worthy of congressional investigation. However, finding a mechanism for keeping track of the scale and direction of the threat—and analyzing the ideologies that drive it—would help inform law enforcement and the public.

Collaborate with European and nongovernmental partners

The 2018 National Strategy for Counterterrorism refers briefly to the links between U.S. far-right extremists and the United Kingdom’s National Action group and the Nordic Resistance Movement. However, these transnational links deserve closer scrutiny, as the ideological, financial, and organizational connections would shed light on how these groups operate. Anti-fascist groups such as Hope Not Hate have long campaigned to expose these links, notably in their research on the international support for the Unite the Right riot in Charlottesville.¹⁶ Hope Not Hate also uncovered National Action’s plan to murder a Labour member of parliament, leading to

the arrest and conviction of the group's leadership.¹⁷ U.S. law enforcement should work closely with its European partners as well as nongovernmental organizations that follow far-right extremism to paint a more comprehensive picture of the threat.

Call out rhetoric that radicalizes

Political radicalization that leads to violence does not happen in a vacuum.

Overheated rhetoric, promotion of conspiracy theories, and demonization of minorities can and has encouraged violence. The Tree of Life gunman Robert Bowers, for instance, regularly trafficked in antisemitic conspiracy theories on extremist websites. In his last post before the attack, he accused a Jewish-run refugee charity of bringing “invaders in [to the United States] that kill our people.” This echoed the rhetoric of the great replacement theory of the right-wing, anti-Semitic identitarian movement, which claims that a secret conspiracy aims to replace white Europeans with alien others as part of a plot to destroy Christian, European culture.¹⁸ The First Amendment provides broad protections for the freedom of speech, but that does not mean that inflammatory, violent, or hateful speech does not deserve scrutiny. Congressional hearings on the dangers of far-right extremism should examine what role political rhetoric has played in its rise.

Remove hate content from private platforms

This year has seen a long overdue focus on reducing online radicalization. Social media companies have finally begun to respond to public pressure to remove content that incites violence. In addition, payment, hosting, and other platforms have declined to serve extremist clients. The social media activism organization Sleeping Giants, for example, tried to convince advertisers to blacklist far-right extremist websites as well as to pressure YouTube to remove advertising from racist content, preventing the far-right groups from earning revenue from their propaganda. These efforts can go a long way toward breaking the cycle of online radicalization and are worth exploring further. There may also be avenues for collaboration between the government and the private sector in order to create a safer online space while respecting free speech rights.

Ensure that law enforcement has the tools it needs to combat domestic terrorists

When a new threat emerges, it is only sensible to review the existing tools that law enforcement can use to make sure that they remain relevant and useful. After the Oklahoma City bombing, for example, the FBI focused effectively on the threat from the far-right to head off future attacks, suggesting that, at the time, its tools and authorities were sufficient to handle the problem. After 9/11, the United States developed a broad set of counterterrorism tools. Some of these tools may be relevant in the domestic context, but many were aimed at a different type of campaign in ungoverned spaces. There may well be existing tools, techniques, and authorities that could be helpful in the fight against far-right violent extremism while respecting civil rights. Collaboration across agencies that are focused on domestic and foreign threats may provide useful insights in tracing financial, operational, and ideological cross-border links.

Conclusion

Violent right-wing extremism is a serious and growing threat—but one that can be contained and defeated with the correct approach. Movements rooted in extremist ideologies have inherent weaknesses, including their tendency to fragment; their reliance on scams and criminal activities for much of their funding; and the fact that the absurdity of their ideologies and arguments make them vulnerable. Good police work can expose the extremist networks and head off the threat of violence, while public pressure can discredit their ideas. These groups can be stopped. The challenge, however, is stopping them before more Americans are harmed.

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Endnotes

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