

# **The Most Pressing Threat: Right-Wing Terrorism in the United States**

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## **Introduction**

Over the last three decades, the United States has had a hard focus on terroristic threats. Specifically, threats and acts of terrorism mainly sourced from terror groups outside the U.S., those from Middle Eastern-based groups. This stigma comes as no surprise following the day that many say changed the nation, September 11, 2001. The terrorist attacks aimed for New York City and Washington, D.C., were a result of Al Qaeda's aggression. This attack, as well as a line of others in similar nature, even contributed to the war that American troops continue to fight today. Moreover, this created a fear of terrorism sourced in groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS. However, as we move into a new decade, this threat has come into question, are these groups the greatest terrorist threat facing the United States?

The United States today faces a much different threat than that of the previous decades—one that resides within our borders. The threats and acts that come with the violence of far-right extremism are often taught as things of the past, focusing on those acts and groups that were prevalent during the times of slavery through the civil rights movement. Today, white supremacy and far-right extremism have come to the forefront of current threats to American national security. Though this category of terrorism is vastly overlooked by the United States' government, it has reemerged as a huge issue in today's world. The frequency of these attacks and plots, as well as loss of life and broadening recruitment tactics, have allowed for far-right extremism terrorism to become the most pressing threat to the United States' national security.

## Background

Terrorism is a term that has no one blanket definition and is even more difficult to identify. A basis for the concept would be “the deliberate use—or threat—of violence by non-state actors to achieve political goals and create a broad psychological impact” (Hoffman 2017). There are four main categories of terrorism: right-wing, left-wing, religious, and ethnonationalism. A majority of the current counterterrorism focus and strategies the U.S. has in place deals with religious terrorism. However, the shift in right-wing extremism is the most threatening to the U.S. has come.

Right-wing extremism is largely an umbrella term used to encompass groups and acts of far-right or racially and ethnically motivated terrorism. Right-wing extremism has existed inside and outside the United States for centuries. The United Nations’ Security Council identifies right-wing extremism as “a unique form of political violence with often fluid boundaries between hate crime and organized terrorism. It is not a coherent or easily defined movement, but rather a shifting, complex and overlapping milieu of individuals, groups, and movements (online and offline) espousing different but related ideologies, often linked by hatred and racism toward minorities, xenophobia, islamophobia or anti-Semitism” (United Nations Security Council 2017). This definition adds some level of clarity but again cannot give you a clean-cut line as to what right wing extremism is or rather isn’t. In general, the right-wing extremism in the U.S. is to identify white supremacists, anti-government extremists, and incels. The Center for Strategic and International Studies defined it best as, “Far-right terrorism refers to the use or threat of violence by subnational or non-state entities whose goals may include racial or ethnic supremacy; opposition to government authority; anger at women, including from the involuntary

celibate (or “incel”) movement; belief in certain conspiracy theories, such as QAnon; and outrage against certain policies, such as abortion” (Jones, Doxsee, and Harrington 2020).

### **Frequency of the Attacks and Plots**

The current rise of far-right extremism is considered to be on an up-tick, not a peak. However, several attacks within the U.S. borders have made this form of terrorism the greatest domestic threat. Of the 893 attacks the U.S. saw between 1994 and 2020, 57% of them were carried out by right-wing terrorists (Jones, et al 2020). The most active year before the last decade in the data presented is 1995. One of the most significant terrorist attacks in U.S. history, the Oklahoma City bombing occurred on April 19th, 1995, was just one of the far-right attacks of that year. 1995 held the most active year in terms of far-right terroristic acts until 2016, 2017, and 2019. As of today, 2019 holds the most spot for most right-wing terrorist events at 53 (Jones, Doxsee, and Harrington 2020). The increase in attacks is alarming in itself, but even more alarming is the international trend that also supports a growing trend of right-wing extremism of 320% increase over the last five years (United Nations Security Council 2017).

According to a 2020 report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, “white supremacists and other like-minded extremists conducted 67 percent of terrorist plots and attacks in the United States in 2020” (Jones, Doxsee, and Harrington 2020). This trend follows a string of increases in previous years as previously discussed. In the last few months alone, the U.S. has had several headlining cases involving far-right extremists and white supremacists. In the case of most criminal or terrorist activities, not every case is brought to the public’s attention by the media; it is uncommon in the daily news. This makes it even more

notable to emphasize these headliners, like the racially motivated killing of Ahmaud Arbery, the killing of two protesters at a social justice protest for Jacob Blake by Kyle Rittenhouse, the plot to kidnap Governor Whitmer of Michigan by the Wolverine Watchmen, or a plot that is still unknown but tied to a QAnon van being driven to the post-election rallies in Philadelphia. These acts are only a few of many carried out this year but do showcase the increase in right-wing extremist acts large enough to draw national attention.

### **Casualties**

The loss of life is often looked at to measure the threat or effect of any attack or group. It is important to acknowledge that from January 1994 to May 2020, the subcategory of terrorism groups responsible for the most deaths in the U.S. would be religious terrorism, mainly because of the 2,977 individuals that lost their lives on September 11th, 2001 (Jones, Doxsee, and Harrington 2020). However, it is more significant to look at the distribution of loss of life. During this time, 3,086 people were killed by religious terrorism and 334 were caused by right-wing extremist acts. This means that aside from 9/11, only 109 people were killed by religiously motivated terrorism, the arguably most targeted form of terrorism by the U.S. government, during that time frame. Additionally, casualties from terrorist attacks in 1996, 1998, 1999, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2011, and 2012 were a result of right-wing terrorist attacks. They were responsible for more than 90 percent of fatalities related to terrorism in the U.S. in 1995, 2018, and 2019 (Jones, Doxsee, and Harrington 2020). This demonstrated a clear significance in the number of casualties as a result of terrorism and furthers the notion that right-wing terrorism stands as the biggest terrorist threat to the United States.

## Recruitment

The recruitment process for any terrorist group or organization has grown significantly since the internet and social media evolved. These tools have opened access for these groups to recruit outside of their surroundings and further expand their following. A 2009 report estimated that more states have more far-right militia groups (92%), neo-Nazis (89%), and racist skinheads (89%) than Jihadi extremist groups (65%) (Freilich, Chermak, and Simone, 2009). This commonality of these groups has only grown with the tools the internet has provided.

The seemingly important role in all of this is the role that social media plays. The 1990s and early 2000s were full of forums that were used for radicalization and spreading propaganda within groups of like-minded individuals (Scrivener, Conway, and Macnair 2019). The recruitment aspect itself didn't take the shape that is currently used until major social media platforms developed like MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and eventually Instagram, and an array of others (Davey and Ebner 2017). These spaces created massive ways of communication and outreach to like-minded people to grow their base. Following the Christchurch mosque shootings in New Zealand, there was a large flood to far-right social media accounts, especially because of the intent and carrying out of the shooting that was documented on Facebook by the shooter. Similar trends occurred following the Pittsburgh mosque shooting in 2018, and the El Paso Walmart shooting later in 2019 (Scrivener, Conway, and Macnair 2019). This drew people to their sites and profiles, some out of curiosity, but more importantly, others interested in joining the cause could have an open line of communication via other profiles associated with the accounts.

Right-wing extremist groups often require their members to be involved in some level of recruitment. National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) identified three different populations these groups try to recruit:

(1) frustrated and angry youth looking for solutions to their problems; (2) individuals looking for intimate relationships outside of their families and (3) younger adolescents who typically lacked maturity and may have been unable to fully comprehend the ramifications of a group's radical ideology. (Semi, Windisch, Sporer 2016).

All of these groups can be identified and aligned with that of a typical internet user, engaged in social media, and also video games. A new trend outside of traditional communication means via social media has been chatrooms and game sharing capabilities through gaming consoles. An emerging strategy that targets violent shooter video games is being used as pathways for recruitment to find angry young men (Kamenetz 2018).

The focus of these strategies is to point out the accessibility of these organizations to others outside of their immediate community, opening the possibilities for recruitment. This strategy in itself has brought more "blind" recruits in, meaning those who didn't necessarily align themselves with these groups before, as well as allowed for these groups of like-minded individuals to have open lines of communication. This is a major threat to national security as it allows for the growth of far-right extremist groups and violence, which is already quite dominant in our nation.

## **Conclusion**

The United States has spent far too long focusing on the threat of religious terrorism. Mainly, this is due to the massive loss of life that occurred as a result of the 9/11 attacks. However, while the focus has been on religious terrorism, far-right extremism has become the biggest threat to national security. The motivations, as well as this form of terrorism, is not new to the United States. Many would argue it is planted in the roots of our nation and darkens our history. The frequency of these attacks has only increased since 1995. In fact, within the last five years, we've seen the most active years for right-wing terrorism. The casualty rates support this trend as well. Aside from the lives lost because of 9/11, far-white extremists have claimed more lives since 1995. Additionally, recruitment and radicalization for these groups have only grown substantially easier as the internet has grown and evolved to include massive means of communication, like social media. The accessibility to these channels and networks have allowed for these groups to expand their following and grow in members. Despite knowing this, right extremism is still downplayed in the United States. The most pressing threat to the United States government has been alive and well on U.S. soil for a significant period. Right-wing extremism stands as the biggest threat to the security of the United States.

## Citations

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