

# US Counter-Terrorism and Right-Wing Fundamentalism

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A state's pursuit of 'terrorism', in its basic terms, should not be aimed at one specific political or individual target, but encompass all groups regardless of ethnicity, religion, sex, race or gender. On the 20th September 2001, in the wake of the 9/11 New York, White House and Pentagon terrorist attacks, George W Bush addressed Congress stating that "our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated"<sup>[1]</sup>. In contrast, this analysis sees that America's radicalisation and counter-terrorism approach to the discourse of domestic terrorism has been through a very narrow 'racial' lens. It has placed emphasis on the Muslim 'suspect community' as the main target, allowing the direct and indirect growth of other forms of terrorism including 'right-wing' supremacism. Furthermore, this essay goes as far as to suggest that fascist terrorism proves to be a greater threat within the United States than any other form of politically motivated hate crime. It will analyse three aspects which flaw America's current radicalisation model and counter-radicalisation policy. First this essay argues that within US law, terrorism should not be personified by one ethnic group, but encompass all politically motivated ideologies and individuals due to its multifaceted nature. Secondly this analysis will critique the current radicalisation model and discuss the theoretical concept of the 'suspect community' which has drawn political and media attention away from right-wing terrorists, allowing the movement to expand within contemporary society. Thirdly it argues that the same model of Islamic radicalisation can be applied to the right-wing movement, but that it should be policed differently.

While terrorism has proven hard to define, its core foundations are illegal violent acts, aiming to achieve a political goal by capturing public attention through mass destruction of ordinary citizens. The definition of what constitutes either an act of terror or a hate crime in American law, is the reason why right-wing supremacists are largely labelled extremists, not terrorists. The first amendment to their constitution protects the right to free speech irrespective of racial beliefs. An example of this is Clarence Brandenburg, a Ku Klux Klan leader, who during the 1960s would incite racial hatred and violence at his rallies. His prosecution was overturned by the supreme court due to their interpretation of free speech. In contemporary politics this example still applies because the "government is not allowed to impose prior restrictions – advance censorship – on speech unless it can prove that the speech will cause direct, immediate and irreparable harm to the national security"<sup>[2]</sup>. It seems therefore that to be advocating terrorist violence in America you must be above all 'anti-American'. In contrast, in the UK it is illegal to demonstrate or protest if your intentions are motivated by racial hatred. Section 15 of the Crown Prosecution services' 'Crime and Disorder Act' shows that "any potential offence of incitement to racial or religious hatred ... should be referred to the Special Crime and Counter-Terrorism Division for review"<sup>[3]</sup>. Even before the radicalisation process has begun, right-wing fundamentalists are seen to be protected by law in America. However as discussed below, racially and politically motivated violence committed by white supremacists should be considered under the broad range of emerging terror threats in America. Theorist Schanzer argues that white supremacists could easily be "prosecuted for domestic terrorism, which federal law defines as violent crimes that appear to be intended to intimidate or coerce civilian populations"<sup>[4]</sup>.

In order to understand why right-wing supremacism should be considered by the US counter-terrorism unit, it is necessary to critique their model of radicalisation. Firstly, radicalisation is the necessary process which takes place as a precursor to supporting extremism, leading to terrorist actions. During a US Homeland Security Committee speech, terrorist consultant Sageman argued that "terrorists are idealistic young people, who seek glory and thrills by trying to build a utopia ... radicalisation is not the production of poverty or various forms of brainwashing"<sup>[5]</sup>. This

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speech was made entirely for the purposes of dealing with Islamic fundamentalists, however most right-wing extremists share a similar pattern of radicalisation. Right-wing supremacists fit one of three profiles; those who produce racist graffiti and rhetoric, those who commit individual or sporadic acts of violence and those who are 'mission-orientated' attackers with the intention of harming people to fulfil a political goal. It is only this last stage, the 'mission orientated attackers', where society could deem them to be terrorists. Yet a jihadist extremist living in America following a similar paradigm of pre-radicalisation, self-identification, indoctrination, jihadization and attack, might be labelled a terrorist during all of these radicalisation stages. Thus, the process of radicalisation leading onto terrorism can be attributed to more than one group, not just Islamic extremism. Theorist Stampnitzky points out that "the questions of who is 'the enemy' and when the violence is legitimate or illegitimate are both central to conceptualising terrorism, and are themselves highly contested"<sup>[6]</sup>.

There is a noticeable disparity in what American media outlets define as 'terror'. So much of their articles have coined foreign white supremacism to be different to domestic right-wing terrorism. Due to its changing nature, they must broaden the concept of what was previously seen as 'political violence' into the American terror nexus. Using the *New York Times* as an example, in the wake of the Christchurch massacre in 2019 they reported that "forty-nine people were killed in shootings at two mosques in central Christchurch, New Zealand on Friday, in a terrorist attack"<sup>[7]</sup>. In contrast to this after the Charleston massacre in 2015 they reported that white supremacist Dylann Roof "had been charged with 33 counts, including hate crimes resulting in death"<sup>[8]</sup>. Since this, neither the *New York Times* nor the federal government have labelled the Charleston massacre a terrorist incident, despite believing the Christchurch incident was the result of terrorist actions. The rhetoric used by the media in America, when discussing far-right activists, is that the perpetrator is either a lone wolf, a sick person or a psychopath. In contrast the victimisation of the Muslim 'suspect community' since 9/11 has led to terrorists being singled out because they 'look different'. What happened in Charleston, like many violent right-wing massacres in America, shares almost identical motives to Islamic terrorist acts. This includes the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, which was described by *Boston Globe's* front page as 'Marathon Terror'. Academic Anees takes this further arguing "the reason is that their [western media outlets] interest lies only in knowing Muslim and Islam as terrorists, and no one else regardless of the scale of the brutality"<sup>[9]</sup>.

To further critique America's stance on radicalisation, the concept of creating a 'suspect community' in high politics must be discussed. The 'suspect community' means a subgroup of the population which has been singled out as being problematic<sup>[10]</sup>. The 2016 election of Donald Trump has acted as a catalyst to the far-right movement because of the use and legitimisation of racist and aggressive rhetoric towards ethnic minorities. His lack of clarity on what defines a 'terrorist' has led to the radicalisation of right-wing activists, some of which have become 'mission orientated attackers'. Trump stated after the clash at the Neo-Nazi Charlottesville rally in 2017, that "you had very fine people, on both sides"<sup>[11]</sup>, provoking confusion. The leader of the 'National Political Institute', a far-right activist group, Richard Spencer said "his [Donald Trumps] arrow is pointing in our direction ... he's brought nationalism into the campaign"<sup>[12]</sup>. The right-wing narrative feeds off his anti-immigrant and aggressive rhetoric as a means of justifying their behaviour. This makes the right-wing supremacist movement a more dangerous ideology when discussing US domestic terrorism.

In contrast to this, on 4th April 2020 the Trump administration deemed the 'Russian Imperial Movement' (a Russian fascist organisation from St Petersburg), to be terrorists. US state counter-terrorism coordinator Nathan Salas said it was the "first time the US has ever designated white supremacists 'terrorists', illustrating how seriously this administration takes the threat"<sup>[13]</sup>. If the administration is willing to label foreign far right groups as terrorists, then the same should be applied to domestic terrorism within America. The conflicting nature of Trumps' and Salas' speeches prove that the 'suspect community' is a much broader notion than anticipated. Calls for an ideologically ecumenical foreign and domestic counter-terrorism policy are echoed by academics of terrorism. For example, Nguyen believes a 'big tent' approach is needed to address all forms of violent extremism, regardless of ideology and focusing not on radical thought or speech but preventing violence<sup>[14]</sup>. This leads onto why right-wing activism should be labelled terrorism but must be policed in a different manner.

White supremacism is the greatest terror threat to modern American society, yet the war on terror's attention has often pointed in the direction of the Muslim community. One reason for the rise in suspicion towards the US Muslim

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community, is because there is a lack of distinction between America's foreign terrorism policy and its pursuit of terrorists within its own borders. Theorist F. Ragazzi however, offers a different critical approach to counter right-wing terrorism. His method is still compatible with America's war on terror, in that it takes the threat of right-wing extremism seriously, but it can only be used in a domestic setting. This is to prevent counter-terror units from differentiating targets by race, religion or gender, and instead to pursue the motivations of the attackers. Ragazzi suggests that the 'policing through suspicion' concept of the Muslim community could be used in the case of right-wing extremists. 9/11 created a turning point in shifting the attention of terrorism in the public eye towards jihadist extremists, but it also legitimised the use of racist rhetoric for right-wing groups, making their movement more powerful and therefore more dangerous. Counter-terror has in one sense failed to reduce terrorism by stigmatising, criminalising and violating human rights of particular minority communities. The Washington Post recorded that in 2017 right-wing motivated terror incidents totalled 36, while Islamic extremists caused only 7. They added that "over the past decade attackers motivated by right-wing political ideologies have committed dozens of shootings, bombings... far more than any other category of domestic extremism"<sup>[15]</sup>. Their ease of access to weapons such as assault rifles in America, makes their movement even more powerful.

If right-wing fundamentalists were to be regarded as terrorists and as such be compared to Islamic extremism, there could be further racial divisions within US society. In order to police right-wing fundamentalism differently, the counter-terrorism strategy would have to depoliticise the use of terrorist language and security. Furthermore, it may seek to work with 'trusted' individuals within the right-wing community in order to pursue 'suspicious' fascist individuals. This method of dealing with radicalised supremacists would be what Ragazzi coins 'policed-multiculturalism'. This means policing within the traditional function of the multicultural welfare state acting through different categories of suspicion but also working with supporters of the movement allowing the government to enact 'soft' or 'hard' counter-terrorism measures<sup>[16]</sup>. The way of policing the right-wing movement in America is not to simply apply the same model of counter-terrorism as applied to Islamic extremists, but to "reassess the ways the country currently polices terrorism and probe more deeply into the social and political roots of ideological and racial violence"<sup>[17]</sup>.

To conclude, this analysis has evaluated three key stages of the American domestic terrorism framework, in order to highlight the similarities between Islamic fundamentalism and right-wing extremism. This similarity has led countries, like the UK, to now consider right-wing extremism as one of the main domestic terror threats under its 'Prevent' strategy. America's 'war on terror' has disproportionately engaged with the growing 'Muslim concept' since the 9/11 terror attacks and has neglected white supremacist violence. This essay first looked at the American constitution, which protected right-wing racist and aggressive rhetoric against minority ethnic groups in the US. This marks the beginning of their radicalisation concept and reveals similarities to Jihadist radicalisation. However, counter-terrorism organisations fail to recognise the group as terrorists because of their protection under US federal law. The incoherence of the Trump administrations' terrorism model highlights the flaws in pursuing only Islamic fundamentalism as part of their de-radicalisation strategy. His aggressive rhetoric, particularly against Muslim and South-American immigration, has almost legitimised the right-wing movement. This makes them a more dangerous terrorist threat than Islamic fundamentalism. The 'suspect community' concept has ingrained itself so deep into the American media, that it fails to see the similarities between white supremacism and Jihad violence. It is because of this growing danger, that right-wing extremists should be policed differently by the authorities. 'Policed multiculturalism' would allow counter-terrorism units to reconcile with individuals from the supremacist movement, in order to tackle the root causes of the radicalisation process.

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