

The Rise of Domestic Terrorism in the United States with the Emergence of Political Motives

Jacob FALCK

Abstract: Over the last few years, terrorism has been on the rise in the United States of America. Most people in the United States would think of foreign agents as the largest catalysts for terrorism in the country. In reality, domestic agents were and still are the largest threat to America and likely to remain as such for the foreseeable future. These domestic agents are part of terrorist groups that have diverse goals and motives that are very similar yet different from one another. One such motive that is shared amongst these groups is politics. Domestic extremist groups, predominantly from the far right, want to influence change in politics so that their views can be included in the public sphere. This aim is hardly new, already dating back to the nineteenth century, but there has been a sharp increase since the start COVID-19 pandemic. This paper provides a brief historical examination of the roots of domestic terrorism in the United States and analyzes how it has increased over time. It will also use examples of active right-wing extremist groups to look at whether or not political motives pose a potential threat for increasing domestic terrorism. The end goal of this research is to make people aware of the prevalence of domestic terrorism, showcase the different political motives of domestic terrorist extremist groups in the United States and give recommendations on how to limit the threat of domestic terrorism.

Keywords: terrorism, domestic terrorism, driving factors, political motives, political violence

Introduction

The Federal Bureau of Investigation defines domestic terrorism as, “violent, criminal acts committed by individuals and/or groups to further ideological goals stemming from domestic influences, such as those of a political, religious, social, racial, or environmental nature”²⁰⁰ The political threats for terrorism have only grown larger over time through issues involving race and other factors. The threat of domestic terrorism dates back to 1871, when right wing extremists were motivated to fight back against the government due to public policy and taxes²⁰¹. Politically motivated attacks grew in response to the US government’s initiative to build highways and hospitals which were perceived of as “socialist” policies²⁰². The focus of this fight against “socialism” blossomed into something greater at the turn of the twentieth century.

History of Domestic Terrorism

Domestic terrorism in the twentieth century was fueled by the resistance of black rights and unionization. These issues surrounding race are still prevalent today with right wing extremists and serve as a source of motivation for political change. The beginning of modern right wing domestic terrorist groups started with Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal²⁰³. These white domestic terrorists were against the government using their money as handouts for black men and they thought that it would bring socialism to the United States²⁰⁴. This theme is one that is often brought up by right wing extremists that has still stayed

²⁰⁰ “Terrorism,” FBI, 3 May 2016, www.fbi.gov/investigate/terrorism.

²⁰¹ Heather Cox Richardson, “January 16, 2021,” 17 Jan. 2021, heathercoxrichardson.substack.com/p/january-16-2021.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

relevant in recent decades. In 1987, the Fairness Doctrine ended which saw the rise of talk radio that gave right wing extremists a platform to share their opinions and ideas with citizens surrounding the government taking “white money” and giving it to black people. The end of the fairness doctrine promptly accelerated the rise of domestic terrorism in the United States and continued to bring many different political motives to light²⁰⁵.

Domestic terrorism was prominent in the United States before the 90’s but this was when the number of attacks and death toll started to increase. One of the first of such attacks occurred in 1992 when a man from Idaho got involved in a shootout with police over a fire-arms charge. The man, Randy Weaver, was in Idaho trying to get away from the “corrupt” American society. The shootout between Weaver and the police ignited the role of domestic extremists getting involved in politics. There were numerous right-wing extremists protesting what happened with Weaver and a similar situation happened a year later in Waco, Texas, with seventy six people left dead after a 51-day blockade²⁰⁶. This would all eventually boil over to the most deadly domestic attack to this day. In 1995, former soldier Timothy McVeigh set off a bomb in a truck outside the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City that killed 168 people²⁰⁷. McVeigh’s had his own strong political motives for the attack, and they were based around the idea of reforming the government to prevent taxes and government maladministration²⁰⁸. Right before the domestic attack in Oklahoma City, The Center for Strategic and International Studies started to keep data on

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ O’Harrow, Robert, et al. “The Rise of Domestic Extremism in America”. The Washington Post, WP Company, 12 Apr. 2021, www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2021/domestic-terrorism-data/.

²⁰⁸ Heather Cox Richardson, “January 16, 2021”.

domestic terrorism in the United States²⁰⁹. The numbers in their data shed light to a large surge in domestic terrorism due to evolving political motives. Table 1 below provides a visual example to show the large increase in the number of attacks.

Table 1. Domestic Terror Incidents by Year in the Twenty-First Century

Years	Number of Incidents
1994–1999	225
2000–2005	171
2006–2010	74
2011–2015	147
2016–2019	238
2020–2021	127

Source: O’Harrow, Robert, et al. “The Rise of Domestic Extremism in America”.

According to the CSIS data, there have been around 980 domestic terrorist attacks in the United States since 1994. Of this number, ten percent of the attacks occurred in 2020 with 73 being far-right disturbances and the remaining 25 being far-left. This would seem to coincide with the increasing political tension in the United States. Barack Obama’s historical win in the 2008 presidential campaign was a large contributing factor for the tension between far-right white supremacists and the government. The campaign win itself can be seen as a motivating call to action for many domestic extremists with far-right views.

Political Motivations of Right-Wing Extremists

Of the many politically polarizing motives for domestic terrorism, white supremacy and other racist ideas are some of the most abundant that

²⁰⁹ O’Harrow, Robert, et al. “The Rise of Domestic Extremism in America”.

are seen in the country today. Many of these attacks have been covered by the news and social media since the start of the Black Lives Matter movement. Like Obama's presidency, the Black Lives Matter movement contains lots of politically tied motives that have sparked a string of domestic attacks in the United States. In fact, over a quarter of right-wing extremist attacks and more than half of the deaths in the attacks were motivated by the ideology of white supremacy²¹⁰. This politically-racial motive also led to the plotting of some attacks on fifteen mostly black churches all over the country with one such church, New Shiloh Christian Center, being set on fire three times. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic also caused a stir among right-wing extremists which can correlate to the spike in domestic terrorist attacks in 2020.

With the spread of the coronavirus increasing in the beginning of 2020, many nonessential businesses were forced to close down indefinitely and a stay-at-home order was put in effect. The large focus of many citizens during that time was on the pandemic through all of the coverage on the news and social media. This in turn could be seen as an easy way for domestic terrorists to get noticed by hundreds of thousands of people. An example of one such attempted attack would be the planned bombing of a hospital in Missouri by Timothy Wilson²¹¹. Wilson was a far right-wing extremist and white supremacist who was motivated to commit a terroristic act by his hatred for government policy²¹². His plan to detonate a bomb outside of a hospital was very similar to the attack carried out by Timothy McVeigh back in 1995. Wilson chose to try and bomb a hospital during the COVID-19 pandemic because he wanted to get more publicity for his attack²¹³. If he had been successful

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ CSIS Briefs. "The Escalating Terrorism Problem in the United States". *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 26 July 2021, www.csis.org/analysis/escalating-terrorism-problem-united-states.

²¹² "FBI: Government's Response to Virus Spurred Would-Be Bomber". *AP News*, Associated Press, 15 Apr. 2020, apnews.com/article/ad891a0e69f0e3d285c397a1626d1e0d.

²¹³ CSIS Briefs. "The Escalating Terrorism Problem in the United States".

in his attempt, he might have triggered more civil unrest in the country during the pandemic which other domestic terrorists could have taken advantage of. The pandemic has also created more polarization among citizens of the United States when it comes to masks and vaccinations. CSIS reported that both of these topics could lead to more violence by right-wing extremists²¹⁴. This kind of violence has already been seen in January 2021 with the attack on the United States Capitol. Even though COVID-19 has been used as a large source of political motivation for domestic terrorists, it is not the only factor contributing to the upswing in attacks.

The increasing popularity of social media over the last decade has helped many domestic terrorists share their political views and organize attacks around the country. Over the last five years, right-wing extremists have been using social media platforms more and more to communicate with one another and share ideas²¹⁵. The rise in online communication has unsurprisingly led to more conspiring about potential attacks and targets and the media presence of such extremists peaked in 2020. Bruce Hoffman, an expert in counterterrorism and professor at Georgetown University, said that social media acts as the propellant for domestic terrorism in the United States.¹² This would make sense since the use of technology is expanding more and more by the year. The Washington Post also reported that 24 incidents of terrorism related violence in 2020 had some sort of social media involvement with right-wing extremists. That number is also equivalent to one in five occurrences of right-wing violence in the year. Besides the Washington Post, the White House also released a strategy on how to combat domestic terrorism relating to social media. They talk about social media and technology as one of the largest threats that the country has in regard to domestic terrorism and the online platforms serve as a way

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ O'Harrow, Robert, et al. "The Rise of Domestic Extremism in America".

to mobilize violent extremists²¹⁶. The strategy details how to limit the effect of social media on the threat domestic terrorism by imposing harsher terms of service on online platforms as well as sharing relevant information with countries. That being said, there are still many different domestic terrorist groups operating through the use of online social media platforms with unorthodox politically motivated goals in mind.

Influential Right-Wing Extremists and Domestic Terrorists

One of the many politically motivated domestic terrorist groups in the country during 2020 was the Wolverine Watchmen. Like many other right-wing extremist groups, they share a hatred for the government and its policies. This Michigan-based extremist group was behind the conspiracy to kidnap Gretchen Whitmer, the governor of Michigan during the 2020 pandemic. These domestic terrorists were politically motivated to carry out their kidnapping of the governor because they were not happy with all of the shutdowns caused by the spread of the coronavirus²¹⁷. Not only did the Wolverine Watchmen plan to kidnap the governor, but they also planned to attack the state capitol building in Michigan to abduct more politicians as well as targeting different members of law enforcement.¹⁴ The Wolverine Watchmen blamed the government for the way the pandemic was being handled because the group members thought that politicians were using too much power to control their lives by imposing lockdowns. Moreover, the group used the momentum of polarizing tensions in politics during the lockdown to their advantage since lots of people were not happy with the way the

²¹⁶ "National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism". White House, June 2021, www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/National-Strategy-for-Countering-Domestic-Terrorism.pdf.

²¹⁷ Knowles, Hannah. "Wolverine Watchmen, Extremist Group Implicated in Michigan Kidnapping Plot, Trained for 'Civil War'". The Washington Post, WP Company, 9 Oct. 2020, www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/10/08/wolverine-watchmen-michigan-militia/.

pandemic was being handled. Dana Nessel, Michigan's attorney general, underlined how the group used the civil unrest as a jump start to bring publicity and awareness to their far-right extremist views. The Wolverine Watchmen also saw civil war as a way of revamping society so that they could hopefully influence policy with their own ideology. This small group of people posed such a great threat through their political motivations that they were willing to go to great lengths to fight against their own government. There are also a lot more right-wing extremist groups in the United States with their own political goals in mind that present threats to the country today.

One of the largest right-wing antigovernment extremist groups in the United States is the Oath Keepers. They were founded in 2009 and most of its 30,000 members are current and former employees of the military, law enforcement, and emergency services²¹⁸. The members of the Oath Keepers are politically motivated through the means of stopping the "New World Order," the theory that talks about the formation of a socialist government. This extremist group has had a large contribution to domestic terrorism since its beginning. A man from Oklahoma named Daniel Knight Hayden threatened to attack state government officials in 2010 as a way of trying to prevent the "New World Order". One of the members of this organization, Matthew Fairfield, was motivated to store bombs to use for a potential domestic attack in 2011. The Oath Keepers have also tried other plans to try and promote their political ideas. The organization's political ideology was seen with the formation of Citizen Preparedness Teams in 2013. These militias could be seen as a way to protect civilians and neighborhoods from the government, but the organization had other underlying political motives. The Oath Keepers are motivated to revive the American militia movement as a way of combating the government and political

²¹⁸ "Oath Keepers". Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed July 12, 2021, www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/oath-keepers.

policy²¹⁹. The creation of such militias poses a large threat to domestic terrorist attacks across the nation and especially with those that are politically motivated through their own ideals. In more recent years, the Oath Keepers have been more active and vocal in their support for former president Donald Trump. Many of the members share the same idea that the 2020 presidential election was rigged against Trump and this motivated them to get involved in the riots that took place in the U.S. Capitol in early 2021²²⁰. The Oath Keepers were inspired to attack the Capitol building with the goal of disrupting the electoral vote count that would confirm President Biden's victory. The organization contributed to one of the most public domestic terrorist attacks known to date and the Oath Keepers motivations showcase how large of a threat domestic terrorism has become.

Another extremist group that has been making headlines in recent years is the Proud Boys. They have been active since 2016, but former President Trump gave them a boost when he told the right-wing extremist members to "stand back and stand by". Trump's mention of the group resulted in a large escalation of support resulting in 6,000 members and 20,000 followers on both Facebook and Twitter²²¹. The Proud Boys political motivation is rooted in anti-immigrant and white supremacist beliefs. Both of these motives coincide with many other far-right organizations that pose as a threat to the upward trend of domestic terrorism through their violent actions. One such incident that occurred with the group was when they attacked a group of left-wing protesters in New York City in 2018. Their pro-violence stance also continued after this event when chat logs were leaked of members talking to other militia groups about how and when they should use violence during protests.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Lucas, Ryan. "Who Are The Oath Keepers? Militia Group, Founder Scrutinized In Capitol Riot Probe". NPR, NPR, 10 Apr. 2021, www.npr.org/2021/04/10/985428402/who-are-the-oath-keepers-militia-group-founder-scrutinized-in-capitol-riot-probe.

²²¹ "Proud Boys". Southern Poverty Law Center accessed July 12, 2021, www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys.

This is rather alarming when thinking about how violent extremists could contribute to the already growing domestic terrorist landscape. Some group members also threatened Black Lives Matter protesters in Portland in August of 2020 and acted out violently. These members shot protesters with both paintball and airsoft guns and one protester named Skylor Jernigan drove a car into the crowd of protesters while firing two gunshots. One week later, Alan Swinney was motivated to carry out a similar assault on left-wing activists where he pointed a gun at protesters and used tear gas on them²²². The Proud Boys' violent attacks also mixed with their support of former President Trump when they joined other right-wing extremists in the riots in the U.S. Capitol. Like many other right-wing extremists, the Proud Boys falsely believed that the 2020 presidential election was rigged against Trump and that Joe Biden and the democrats were trying to steal the election. This was more than enough political motivation for group members to act out against the government. Two group members, Ethan Nordean and Joe Biggs, were arrested for their role in the attack on the Capitol and charged with obstructing an official proceeding, entering a restricted building, and aiding and abetting. After the domestic terrorist attack, the Canadian government officially labeled the Proud Boys as a terrorist entity because of the significant role they played in the violent riots. The actions of the Proud Boys go to show how driven they are to act out violently against different left-wing groups and minorities as well as the role they play in increasing the prevalence of domestic terrorism.

Recommendations for Change

After analyzing the progression of domestic terrorism in the United States, there are many ways in which people can slow its pervasiveness. Even though the threat for domestic terrorism is at an all-time

²²² *Southern Poverty Law Center, "Proud Boys".*

high, educating citizens on the political motives of different right-wing extremists can help to prevent violence. The 2020 presidential election, COVID-19, and social media all play a part in contributing to the increase of domestic terroristic threats. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter could flag specific posts related to different right-wing extremist groups and notify law enforcement of potential threats. Platforms that do this would limit the communication between extremists which could stop riots and attacks from being planned. Eliminating the online communication and educating citizens on social media threats would be a great start to halting the spike of domestic terrorism. People working in law enforcement could also be more proactive when monitoring social media to stop future threats from happening. They could do this by posing as right-wing extremists on various social media platforms in an effort to expose potential domestic terrorism related plots. Being proactive instead of reactive is crucial in order to reduce the risk of future threats related to violence and domestic terrorism all over the country. Groups highlighted earlier such as the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys would have a harder time coordinating violent politically motivated attacks which would make them easier to stop.

Furthermore, easing the political polarization of COVID-19 would also limit the danger of domestic terrorism. A recommendation for curbing the political motivations associated with the coronavirus would be educating people on the importance of following safety guidelines. Many right-wing extremists used their hatred of masks and lockdowns as motivation to advocate for political change, but educating people on the importance of safety could reduce the likelihood of people choosing to act out violently. Also, there might not be a need to wear masks or live in isolation when the country starts to go back to a state of normalcy in a post-pandemic world. This would take away one of the key political motivations that right-wing extremists could use to start violence. The easing of lockdown restrictions would also help to eliminate some of the polarization between both political sides and finding some

middle groups could help to eliminate some of the domestic threats. Even though the coronavirus pandemic is near the end, the motivation of violent extremists could be carried over to future problems associated with political policy.

Conclusion

In summary, the United States has seen a large rise in domestic terrorist threats in recent years due to many different political motives. Many of these motives were formulated over a century ago with the focus on a fear of socialism and black rights²²³. These ideas were the building blocks to some of the more prominent motivating factors of right-wing extremists in the 1990's²²⁴. The attacks carried out were in favor of the oppression of black rights that can still be seen today as a cornerstone for all right-wing white supremacists. Today, these extremists have political motives that lie in their antigovernment beliefs that their liberties are being taken and there are new factors that have kept their motives on the rise. The most abundant motivating factors found in the research that have caused such an increase in domestic terror incidents were social media, fallout of the 2020 presidential election, and COVID-19 related issues. The data supported the proposal of an increase of domestic terrorist attacks, and it was found that a staggering 110 attacks occurred in the year 2020²²⁵. Most of these attacks were also observed to be politically motivated by right-wing extremists²²⁶. Regarding the increase in domestic terrorism, social media was found to have played a crucial role with helping organize right-wing attacks as well as gaining publicity for their actions²²⁷. There were also many domestic

²²³ Heather Cox Richardson, "January 16, 2021".

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ O'Harrow, Robert, et al. "The Rise of Domestic Extremism in America".

²²⁶ CSIS Briefs. "The Escalating Terrorism Problem in the United States".

²²⁷ O'Harrow, Robert, et al. "The Rise of Domestic Extremism in America".

attacks carried out by right-wing extremists that were part of their own organizations. Some of the most active ones that were highlighted in the research were the Wolverine Watchmen, the Oath Keepers, and the Proud Boys. Each group had their own underlying motives that contributed to the increase of domestic terror attacks, but most of these concepts were influenced by their disgust with left activists and liberal political policies. Additionally, there are many different ways to reduce the surging number of domestic terror attacks starting with a more focused monitorization of social media and chat rooms. The censoring and flagging of comments related to domestic terrorism would reduce the threat and prevent attacks from occurring. Overall, the political motives from both the past and present are becoming more dangerous to the United States, but bringing awareness to the issue at hand can dampen the threat of right-wing extremists for years to come.