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Revisiting reactionary terrorism: definitions, causes, and consequences

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ABSTRACT

Deriving a definition of terrorism has long been a focus of both academics and policymakers, but there have been few attempts to establish a clear definition of right-wing terrorism and its relationship to other variants of political violence. This brief forum article surveys the extant literature to better understand how right-wing terrorism is conceptualised and highlights the necessity of establishing a coherent definition in order to more effectively inform counterterrorism policymaking.

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Reactionary terrorism; right-wing extremism; ideology; hate crime; domestic terrorism

Introduction

The attempted coup d'état surrounding the 2020 United States presidential election is widely acknowledged to have been fuelled by right-wing extremism. The insurrectionists that stormed the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 included white supremacists, anti-Semites, and militia members. Yet the precise ideological conditions that led to one of the most shocking events in recent American history is often misunderstood and understudied by both academics and counterterrorism policymakers.

Right-wing terrorism should be conceptualised as reactionary. Ideological adherents are driven by their deep-seated desire to reverse socio-political changes. Such changes may be factual or fantasised, and often includes opposition to excessive government overreach, demographic shifts, and conspiratorial fears. Reactionary terrorism therefore stands in stark contrast to left-wing terrorism which is regarded as being radical or revolutionary by actively seeking to promote social change. Formulating a better understanding of reactionary terrorism while acknowledging its distinction from left-wing variants is critical for both scholars and practitioners of counterterrorism. It facilitates analytical assessments and the identification of threat, yields probabilistic estimates of future attacks, and ultimately enables the formulation of counterterrorism policy based on existing financial and human resources.

This brief forum article will proceed as follows. First, I provide a definition of reactionary terrorism and consider its relationship to left-wing variants. I then assess potential causes or catalysts of reactionary terrorism in the United States. The article concludes with a brief discussion of the implications for counterterrorism policymakers. My intention is to provide readers of the *Journal of Policing, Intelligence & Counter Terrorism* with a more

nuanced understanding of how right-wing terrorism is conceptualised and propose a basis for future research and analysis.

Defining reactionary terrorism

Although defining terrorism as a phenomenon of political violence has been notoriously contentious, there appears to be relative consensus among experts in differentiating between left-wing versus right-wing terrorism.

Left-wing terrorism is often regarded as being revolutionary or radical. Revolutionary terrorism, explains Benjamin Grob-Fitzgibbon, 'aims to change the philosophical or political nature of government and/or society' (2005, p. 239). Such proponents of political violence seek to dramatically alter existing social or institutional arrangements. As with most manifestations of terrorism, the ideological goals of revolutionary terrorists are quite broad but often entail anti-capitalist sentiments, opposition to imperialism, and demands for greater levels of social equality. Notable groups in recent history include the Black Liberation Army, Weather Underground, and the Earth Liberation Front.

The insurrectionists who stormed the US Capitol, however, were right-wing extremists with far different ideological goals than their left-wing counterparts. The phenomenon of right-wing terrorism is instead a violent reaction to change. 'Rather than a transformation of the system into something new,' explains Patrick O'Neil, 'reactionaries seek to restore political, social, and economic institutions' (2013, p. 73). This restoration may be an actual historical condition or an idealised fictional interpretation of the past. What is critical, however, is that reactionaries advocate the use of violence to achieve their aims.

Right-wing extremists deplore alterations to the existing order – be it the loss of a white majority political rule, the 'contamination' of society through immigration, or the decline of male chauvinism. Other groups in the United States affiliated with right-wing militias fiercely reject federal intrusion into local affairs and the perceived erosion of the Second Amendment. 'Whereas leftist groups seem more liberal, more egalitarian,' explains Gavin Cameron, 'right-wing groups, are reactionary by definition' (1999, p. 106).¹

The ultimate priority for reactionary terrorists is the preservation of a status quo in which they derive a greater level of benefits relative to others. According to Ehud Sprin-zak, right-wing groups will 'do its best to strengthen and perpetuate the existing social and cultural mechanisms of discrimination. Violence, and gradually terrorism, only emerge when the group involved feels increasingly insecure or threatened' (1995, p. 21). Stewart Tolnay et al. agree, finding that 'reactionary terrorism can be, and has been, used to maintain and to fortify the status quo' (1996, p. 788).

As a result, terrorism is rationalised as a defensive tactic in order to resist change. Mark Juergensmeyer has found that individuals including religious fanatics, anti-abortion activists, and right-wing militia members will all adopt political violence as a 'defense response' to threats that may challenge their way of life or what they deem to be acceptable standards for society (2000). By way of example, Juergensmeyer points out that Osama bin Laden, Paul Hill, and Timothy McVeigh all believed themselves to be acting defensively.

Other scholars consider reactionary terrorism as operating at the international level of analysis. In particular, political violence is regarded as a direct consequence of globalisation and the spread of Western culture that often displaces indigenous values. According

to Martha Crenshaw, 'terrorism should be seen as a strategic reaction to American power' (2001, p. 425). It is therefore not surprising that many scholars have concluded the concept of reactionary terrorism is closely associated with the modernisation thesis of political violence (Bergesen & Lizardo, 2004; Robison, Crenshaw, & Craig Jenkins, 2006).

When we specifically evaluate the United States there are several ideologies that are common to reactionary terrorism. These may entail opposition to potential changes in Second Amendment gun rights, policies that alter national demographics, extension of civil liberties to minority groups, or a return to some other fanaticised interpretation of a previous socio-political order. Racially motivated hate groups, militias, anti-government activists, and religious fanatics all fall within this ideological rubric. In fact, many of these groups have even acknowledged their reactionary tendencies. For example, Richard Spencer, a self-avowed neo-Nazi and founder of the National Policy Institute, has reputedly described his ideology as neo-reactionary (NRx).²

Many right-wing extremists often articulate the policies or social conditions which they seek to restore. White nationalists, for example, wish to return the United States to the era prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Others aspire to re-establish the demographic and political dominance of the white race. It is important for counterterrorist experts to acknowledge, however, that extremists' fears of a demographic and political decline are substantiated by empirical evidence. Census Bureau estimates indicate that whites are now projected to become a minority by the year 2045 (Frey 2018). Additional scholarship has found that whites continue to lose their monopolisation on political power in the United States (Vogt et al., 2015).

Anti-government extremists also fall within the category of reactionary terrorism.³ The primary objective of such groups is to oppose what they believe to be increasing government intrusion into the private affairs of citizens. The dramatic 1993 siege of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas served as flagrant evidence that the federal government had become the enemy of the people. These extremists also fear increasing liberal policies on gun control and immigration.

With the advent of the internet and social media, the FBI declared conspiracy theories to be yet another form of anti-government terrorism (2019). Individuals are reacting to what they believe are government attempts to impose martial law, antisemitic beliefs that Jews secretly control western governments, the 'new world order' theory that the United States is relinquishing its sovereignty to an authoritarian world government, and broader fears concerning government corruption. Several recent conspiracy theories have proven to be particularly contentious. For example, conspirators insist that the 2012 shooting at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut was a hoax orchestrated by the government to rescind Second Amendment gun rights.

To be fair, some scholars acknowledge that the notion of reactionary terrorism is not always appropriate as an empirical tool for classification. O'Neil concedes that in many cases radical extremism may have more in common with reactionary terrorism (2013, pp. 73–74). For example, left-wing ecoterrorists seek to revert the environment back to a previous condition and reacting to harmful environmental policies. Others define reactionary terrorism in a manner similar to what most would instead regard as revolutionary terrorism. Jason Franks, for example, defines reactionary terrorism as violence 'intended to instigate change and reform of the existing system' (2006, p. 26).

The catalyst of reactionary terrorism

Beyond the political psychology literature on radicalisation, several additional social science theories can help scholars and counterterrorism policymakers identify catalysts for reactionary terrorism. For example, alterations in how political power is distributed and the inclusion of previously marginalised groups may result in violence. 'The status reversal in which members of a previously dominant group find themselves in a subordinate political or economic position,' explains Yuhki Tajima, may engender resentment and 'motivate the newly subordinate group to mobilize for violence' (2014, p. 19). This dynamic is quite salient when studying reactionary terrorism in the United States as radicalised right-wing extremists fear the decline of white males relative to rival minority groups.

Other scholarship suggests that changes in the degree of political liberalisation may also serve as a catalyst for widespread violence. Broad comparative theories on democratisation and the 'more murder in the middle' (MMM) hypothesis have been used to determine the probability of intrastate conflict (Hegre, Ellingsen, Gates, & Gleditsch, 2001; Gurr, 1970). I argue that such concepts are also applicable to the study of domestic terrorism. Within the context of reactionary terrorism, political liberalisation that extends civil liberties to marginalised groups or the curtailing of perceived benefits and access to scarce resources may increase the probability of right-wing violence. In other words, reversals that are perceived to negatively affect the dominant group will engender resentment, radicalisation, and potentially violence.

Elementary descriptive statistics support the claim that alterations to the status quo that undermine the dominant group may correlate to increases in reactionary terrorism. As seen in Figure 1, increases in right-wing terrorism in the United States corresponded to what many extremists perceived as threats to the status quo (Jones, Doxsee, & Harrington, 2020). In the early 1990s, right-wing groups objected to President Bush's 'new world order' which they equated to the relinquishment of America's sovereignty to international

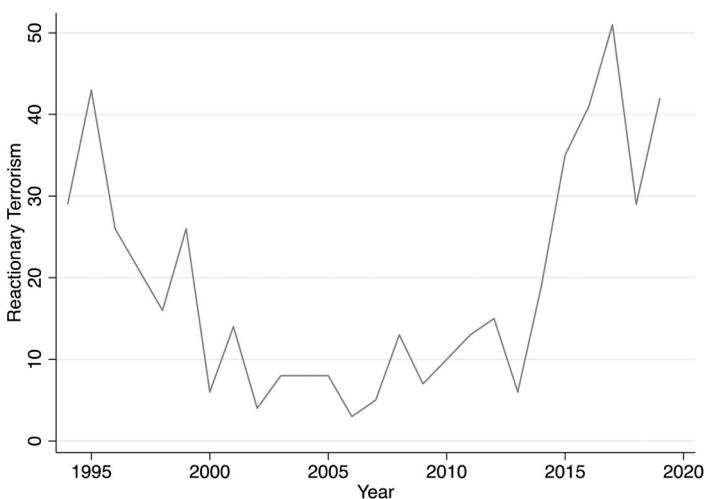


Figure 1. Reactionary terrorism in the United States.

organisations. Several dramatic events also punctuated this period including the siege at Ruby Ridge and Waco, as well as the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City. The Brady Bill which mandated background checks on the purchase of firearms also engendered a great deal of fear among anti-government extremists that the federal government actively sought to curb their constitutional rights. Nearly a decade later, the 2008 election of President Obama served as a catalyst for a dramatic increase in hate crimes and white supremacist activity among groups who were deeply unsettled by the election of a black man to the presidency. Hate groups were further emboldened by the 2016 election of President Trump who not only refused to condemn right-wing activities, but blithely amplified extremist ideologies and conspiratorial beliefs. These two distinct eras – the 1990s and the period beginning with the election of Obama – are often referred to as the ‘two waves’ of right-wing militias in the United States (Potok, Keller, & Holthouse, 2009).

Ultimately, perceived alterations to the status quo are a major catalyst of reactionary terrorism. As previously marginalised groups secure greater levels of political resources, incumbents will resort to violence in order to stem the erosion of their monopoly on power. As Ehud Sprinzak explains, reactionary terrorism is perpetrated by ‘organizations which have either lost their positions of power and social status or are fearful of such a development’ (1995, p. 26). Benjamin Grob-Fitzgibbon concurs, noting that reactionary terrorism ‘seeks to prevent change in government or society or both. It is concerned with either preserving the present structures or returning to a “golden age” that it views as tainted by revolutionary or evolutionary change’ (2005, p. 240).

Counterterrorism policy & implications

Although establishing a clear definition of reactionary terrorism is critical for purposes of both research and policymaking, a notable drawback quickly emerges in its application. In particular, many right-wing tactics and activities do not satisfy the high threshold of terrorism. As a result, a great deal of behaviour is omitted from analysis and hinders our collective understanding of the phenomenon.

This drawback may be resolved, however, by employing the much broader terminology of ‘extremism’ rather than terrorism. Violent extremism thus acts as an umbrella that incorporates a wider range of violence in which terrorism is a subset. According to the United Nations General Assembly, ‘violent extremism encompasses a wider category of manifestations’ since it includes ideologically motivated violence that often falls short of constituting terrorist acts (2015, p. 2/22). The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) similarly relies upon the term violent extremism which it defines as ‘promoting views which foment and incite violence in furtherance of particular beliefs, and foster hatred which might lead to inter-community violence’ (2016, p. 16n19). The term is ultimately far more comprehensive by explicitly recognising that hateful ideologies and processes of radicalisation often lead to terrorism.⁴

When studying the United States, reference to violent extremism can be more effective in capturing the range of right-wing activities that are otherwise excluded from analysis since they do not satisfy the higher threshold for consideration as acts of political terrorism. Hate crimes, vandalism, assault, harassment, dissemination of propaganda, and

general acts of bigotry are common methods domestic reactionary groups employ to target its opposition.

Reconceptualizing reactionary terrorism in broader terms of extremism also elucidates the threat to domestic security. It constitutes a particularly deadly threat to local law enforcement, with research indicating that the majority of lethal attacks targeting police officers have been perpetrated by right-wing extremists (Parkin, Freilich, Chermak, & Gruenewald, 2016). It should be no surprise that law enforcement have identified right-wing extremism as the greatest threat to their communities. According to a nation-wide survey conducted by Charles Kurzman and David Schanzer, 'law enforcement agencies in the United States consider anti-government violent extremists ... to be the most severe threat of political violence that they face' (Kurzman & Schanzer, 2015; c.f. Freilich, Chermak, & Simone, 2009).

The threat of reactionary terrorism and right-wing extremism also exists in less physical manifestations, albeit no less dangerous. Anti-government and racist ideologies have flourished online and on social media platforms, allowing individuals to connect with one another and develop a sense of community. 'Online communities,' explain Thomas Holt et al., 'are a particularly vital resource among radical and extremist movements because they enable individuals to spread propaganda supporting their ideology to individuals who may be outside of their physical reach' (2020, p. 1; c.f. Gaudette, Scrivens, & Venkatesh, 2020; Youngblood, 2020). Although the majority of groups utilise the internet to spread their propaganda and recruit activists, it has also been used to share doctrines and manuals on how to actually carry out an attack.

The above discussion suggests several important implications for policymakers. First, it is clear that local law enforcement are on the front lines of combating domestic terrorism and require unconditional support. Indeed, Gary LaFree has insisted that 'the police are critical both in terms of preventing terrorism as well as calming public fears in the wake of a terrorist attack' (2012, p. 9). Ensuring adequate training and resources will be essential in their efforts to combat reactionary terrorism and violent extremism. Second, extremist ideologies and conspiracy theories must not be allowed to flourish online. Promotion of counter-narratives, labelling conspiracy theories, and removing hateful content will be critical in curbing the contagion of hateful ideologies. Early indications suggest this tactic can be successful. The Anti-Defamation League reported that Twitter's ban on QAnon affiliated accounts resulted in a significant drop in the dissemination of conspiracy theories (2021). Finally, political leaders must explicitly denounce the legitimacy of extremist ideologies and right-wing groups. The failure of former President Trump and Republican leaders to denounce right-wing extremism served to amplify hateful ideologies and allow them to flourish (Walters & Wilson, 2017; Burns, Martin, & Haberman, 2020). Moreover, the Trump administration made the erroneous decision to focus on Islamic and left-wing terrorism, while intentionally minimising the threat of domestic right-wing extremism (Kanno-Youngs & Fandos, 2020; Ainsley, Volz, & Cooke, 2017). The attempted coup of the US Capitol dramatically highlighted the failure of such decisions. Counterterrorism efforts must instead focus on right-wing extremism which constitutes the most urgent domestic threat.

Contemporary trends culminating in the dramatic insurrection at the US Capitol also highlighted several salient deficiencies in our collective understanding of right-wing extremism. First and foremost, government agencies must make a sincere effort to

better collaborate with academic researchers, particularly with respect to sharing empirical data. Relatedly, existing national-level data is inadequate and inconsistent between federal agencies.⁵ The FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program, for example, only collects data on a voluntary basis but many local and federal law enforcement agencies fail to provide the FBI with any information (Thompson & Schwencke, 2017). Second, the proliferation of extremist ideologies via online platforms necessitates better public-private partnerships to ensure that content moderation is both effective and done in accordance with domestic law. Finally, local communities must work to promote counter-narratives and collaborate with non-profit organisations that foster tolerance and diversity.

It should therefore be apparent that devising a precise definition of reactionary terrorism is not a futile semantic dispute. By specifying the characteristics of reactionary terrorism and right-wing extremism, analysts can better track domestic incidents and identify potential targets of future attacks. Indeed, scholars have long argued that ideology has a strong influence on how a terrorist group selects its target (Drake, 1998). Not only does ideology allow a group to decide who or what is a legitimate target for attack, but it also serves as a moral basis on which a terrorist group justifies its heinous actions. Defining and identifying the nature of reactionary terrorism also provides valuable information to key decision-makers who must allocate scarce resources in order to combat domestic terrorism. In sum, establishing a definition of reactionary terrorism and right-wing extremism facilitates counterterrorism policymaking.

Conclusion

Articulating and defining reactionary terrorism allows experts to better understand its implications and how to formulate more pragmatic counterterrorism policy. Right-wing groups will seek to preserve their political hegemony over existing institutional arrangements and will resort to violence when their privileged position is threatened. Indeed, Charles Tilly famously described the notion of 'collective reaction' as violence intended to forcibly resist agents of change (Tilly, 1978). As a group begins to lose its elite social standing and monopoly of power it will increasingly turn to political violence in order to retain its status.

Despite the wide diversity of ideological beliefs of reactionary terrorists – especially in the United States – they are unified by their common fear of change. They may fear the extension of civil liberties to certain minority groups, alterations to a country's demographics, conspiratorial beliefs of a government takeover, or loss of a monopolisation of economic or political resources. Online social media platforms and policies of the former Trump administration fuelled the rapid proliferation of such fears, resulting in an exponential increase in the number of right-wing extremist incidents in the United States. As seen in [Figure 2](#), there has been over an 800% increase in white supremacist incidents between 2017 and 2020 (ADL, 2021).⁶

The phenomenon is not unique to the United States as countries throughout Europe have also experienced a similarly exponential increase in reactionary violence. According to the German Institute for Human Rights, Germany witnessed a 77% increase in the number of hate crimes between 2014 and 2015, and an astonishing 117% increase in the number of 'crimes with a right-wing motive' (2016, p. 13). Meanwhile, Amnesty

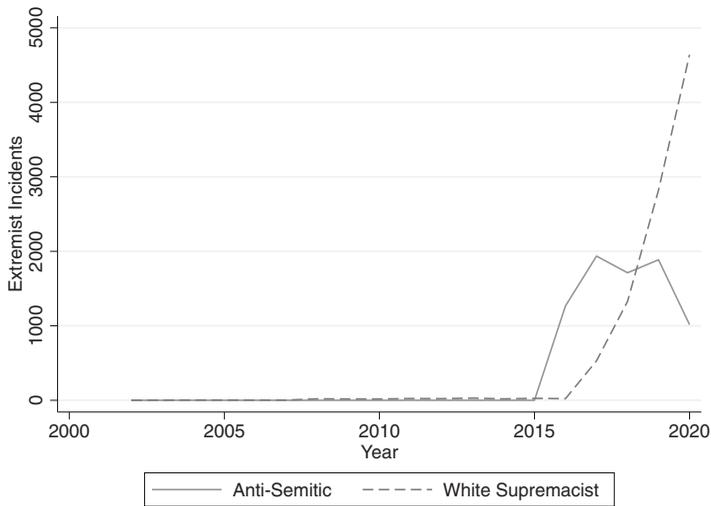


Figure 2. Right-wing extremism in the United States.

International has found that race-based violence in Europe has reached its highest level since the end of World War II (Al Jazeera, 2016). More recent scholarship has found that increases in European immigration has led to a rise in right-wing terrorism (McAlexander, 2020). In other words, domestic right-wing groups have turned to political violence as a means of expressing animosity toward immigrant communities.

When trust in political institutions and rule of law decline, there is a higher probability that contests for elected positions and political power will be resolved through violence (Mueller, 2011). The volatile combination of hateful right-wing ideologies and the uncertainty surrounding the 2020 presidential election resulted in the dramatic siege of the US Capitol. There is an urgent need for both practitioners and scholars to not only understand the nature of reactionary terrorism, but formulate expedient counterterrorism policies that quickly mitigate the threat. Failure to do so may prove catastrophic for the 'great experiment' that is American democracy.

Notes

1. Cameron adds that right-wing terrorism is 'mainly perpetrated by those who have lost political power or fear that they are in imminent danger of doing so' (99).
2. The neo-reactionary movement is also sometimes referred to as the 'dark enlightenment.'
3. The Sovereign Citizen movement can be considered a subset of anti-government extremism as it objects to perceived illegitimate laws at both the federal and local level.
4. The FBI and DHS also use the term 'domestic violent extremism' (DVE) which they acknowledge is used interchangeably with 'domestic terrorism' (FBI, 2020).
5. The Southern Poverty Law Center has also identified data collection and reporting as a critical step in addressing domestic hate crimes. To be fair, the Department of Homeland Security has recognized such drawbacks and pledged to rectify existing limitations (DHS, 2019). The Senate proposal (116th Congress, S.3142) for an information sharing commission with the DNI also needs to be approved.
6. Additional micro-level research has found that President Trump's political rallies corresponded to a 226% increase in local hate crimes (Feinberg, Branton, & Martinez-Ebers, 2019).

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