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United States: polarization and violent extremism

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United States: polarization and violent extremism

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Abstract

In recent years, coinciding with Donald Trump's term as president of the United States, polarization in the country has increased and with it we have also seen violence in the streets. Some have even spoken of the possibility of a civil war. The outgoing president is reluctant to accept his defeat to the winner, the Democrat Joe Biden. There have been demonstrations by his supporters and it cannot be ruled out that at some point they will use violence. They maintain, like Trump, that there has been fraud, though they do not provide evidence to prove it. This document analyses the extreme right-wing groups -some of which support Trump- and their use of violence and their opponents, the Antifa or the Black Lives Matter movement.

Keywords

United States, far right, far left, militias, Q Movement, polarization, Donald Trump, Black Live Matters

Introduction

Since the 9/11 attacks the United States has been more focused on fighting Jihadist terrorism than on the violence of various far-right groups. Some of them have already been described by the FBI as a threat of domestic terrorism. On the other hand, Trump's four years presidency have only increased polarization. He leaves behind a divided country. And there is concern about some far-right groups from which the populist president has never clearly and categorically distanced himself. What is more, he has flirted with them and let himself be loved by them. It cannot be ruled out that the most Trumpist groups and those opposed to the federal government, whatever their color, will use violence. The Antifa movement has also emerged from the far-left, which has taken advantage of some Black Lives Matter demonstrations to show its more violent face by provoking riots and looting on some occasions.

The violence of the far-right is not new, it has been there for decades, the militias are the best example¹. In these months of the pandemic, moreover, the protests have been joined by denialists emboldened by a president who advocates the non-use of masks and refuses to acknowledge the seriousness of the virus and take drastic measures to stem its spread.

The rise of white supremacism, especially in the ranks of the army, appears to be a serious threat. The armed forces are a kind of hotbed in which supremacists find support and new recruits. Since the 1990s, supremacists have seen the US army and military service as an opportunity to improve their combat techniques and recruit new recruits. The Oklahoma bombing in 1995 and the shooting at a Sikh temple in Wisconsin in 2012 were committed by white supremacists who are veterans of the army.

In this divided America there are two groups at the extremes of the political spectrum fighting online and in the streets: The far-right and the Antifa who have found in the nationalists an enemy to fight. And some are not averse to the use of violence.

There is no official list of national terrorist organizations, only of foreign ones. For this reason, the government does not usually classify domestic extremist groups, including white supremacist groups such as The Base or the Atomwaffen Division, as terrorist organizations. However, in April 2020 the Trump administration designated the Imperial Russian Movement, a Russian-based ultra-nationalist white supremacist group, as a terrorist organisation. This allowed the US Treasury Department's Office

¹ It can already be seen in "Betrayed", a 1988 film by director Costa-Gavras and starring Tom Berenger and Debra Winger that reflects the workings of a militia in a rural and conservative area of Nebraska. Tom Berenger plays a farmer and former soldier in Vietnam. Debra Winger is an FBI agent who is sent to investigate him because he is a suspect in the murder of a Chicago radio host. The film shows how a far-right group, a paramilitary and racist militia, trains with total impunity in forests and mounts manhunts and is supported by influential figures. It reflects ideological intolerance. The protagonist is a faithful exponent of white supremacism.

of Foreign Assets Control to block any US property or assets belonging to the Imperial Russian Movement².

Trump also raised the possibility of designating the Antifa as a terrorist organization, but this would be problematic given the failure to label other more extremist and violent groups as terrorists. And it would cause serious problems under the First Amendment. Moreover, the Antifa are not themselves a group but rather a decentralized network of individuals.

If we take into consideration the use of violence, a study by the CSIS (Centre for Strategic and International Studies) in Washington has established that of the 893 “terrorist” or violent incidents that occurred in the United States between January 1994 and May 2020, those perpetrated by the Antifa constituted a tiny percentage of the total number of attacks and plots and victims caused. The majority, 57%, were carried out by far-right militants and more specifically by white supremacists and anti-government extremists. The far-left orchestrated 25% of the incidents, followed by 15% by religious terrorists, 3% by ethno-nationalists and 0.7% by others. In terms of deaths, the majority were caused by religious terrorists, 3,086 deaths, including 2,977 on 9/11, followed by far-right militants, 335 deaths, far left militants, 22, and ethno-nationalists, 5³.

Looking at 2020 alone, this same study concludes that white supremacists and like-minded extremists have been the perpetrators of 67% of the plots and attacks in the US. Their targets were protesters and people from racial, ethnic, religious or political backgrounds, such as African Americans, immigrants, Muslims and Jews. There has also been an increase in the number of anarchists, anti-fascists or similarly minded attacks compared to previous years. They account for 20% of violent incidents (last year 8%). They target police, military and government personnel and various facilities. During a Democratic administration, the threat of specific attacks by radicalized white supremacists, militias and other related individuals could increase, as has already occurred in the plot to kidnap and even assassinate the governor of Michigan⁴.

² JONES, Seth G. Who are Antifa, and are they a threat?, Center for Strategic & International Studies, 4/06/2020. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/who-are-antifa-and-are-they-threat>.

³ JONES, Seth G. Who are Antifa, and are they a threat?, Center for Strategic & International Studies, 4/06/2020. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/who-are-antifa-and-are-they-threat>.

⁴ Just a few weeks before the elections in October, six men were arrested and charged with conspiracy to kidnap the governor of Michigan, the Democrat Gretchen Whitmer. The men arrested are nationalist extremists, Adam Fox, Barry Croft and their accomplices did not rule out even murdering the governor. The members of this militia, Wolverine Watchmen, had relations with other militias in Michigan and other states and described Whitmer as a “tyrant” with uncontrolled power. They had also discussed the possibility of kidnapping the governor of Virginia, Ralph Northam, because of the confinement decreed to combat the expansion of the Covid.19 They sought to instigate a kind of civil war.

By comparison, in 2019, right-wing extremists killed at least 42 people in 17 separate incidents, making it the sixth deadliest year of domestic extremist killings since 1970. In 2018, there were 53 and in 2017, 41. And the 2019 killings related to extremism were overwhelmingly, 90%, linked to right-wing extremists. That year a white supremacist killed 22 people and injured 24 others at a Walmart supermarket in El Paso, Texas. He targeted Hispanics and it was the most deadly in modern times against the Hispanic community in the United States⁵. It should not be forgotten that the murders are the tip of the iceberg of extremist violence. For every person killed, many more are injured. There are also plots, conspiracies, hate attacks, terrorist threats, campaigns of intimidation and harassment and other crimes. The perpetrators are mostly white supremacists, right-wing anti-government extremists or followers of conspiracy theories⁶.

From all these data one can conclude, as Seth Jones, an expert on counterterrorism, says, that “violence from the left is not a major terrorist threat. The most significant threat from domestic terrorism comes from white supremacists, anti-government militias and a handful of individuals associated with the boogaloo movement trying to create a civil war in the United States⁷.”

In the first presidential debate between Trump and Biden, the president was asked to condemn the white supremacist militia group Proud Boys. Trump first pretended not to know the group and then said, “Take a step back and stand firm”. The group interpreted this as a call to be vigilant. Two days later, Trump said that what he had done was to “condemn” it, in a further sign of his attitude of not clearly distancing himself from such violent groups.

Heritage for Biden

The United States faces deep divisions over racial inequality, the role of the police and economic crisis exacerbated by an ineffective response to the pandemic. The Trump

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⁵ Murder and Extremism in the United States in 2019. A report from the Center on Extremism. <https://www.adl.org/murder-and-extremism-2019>.

⁶ Further information, analysis and data on domestic extremism in the United States can be found on the websites of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) <https://www.splcenter.org/> and the Center on Extremism (COE) of the ADL (Anti-Defamation League) <https://www.adl.org/who-we-are/our-organization/advocacy-centers/center-on-extremism>. They are considered the most authoritative non-governmental organizations in this field.

⁷ PASLEY, James. Trump frequently accuses the far-left of inciting violence, yet right-wing extremists have killed 329 victims in the last 25 years, while antifa members haven't killed any, according to a new study. Business Insider, 31/07/2020. <https://www.businessinsider.com/right-wing-extremists-kill-329-since-1994-antifa-killed-none-2020-7>.

administration, instead of trying to ease tensions, inflamed them with measures such as the announcement of the deployment of the Feds in Democratic-led cities like Chicago and Albuquerque or even the threat of postponing elections⁸.

Biden thus inherits a country in crisis that faces a multitude of concurrent and overlapping risks, from police abuse and racial injustice to pandemic-related unrest and others exacerbated by growing polarization. The death of George Floyd by police violence led to a resurgence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement which must also solve its problem with violence because, although violence is minor in the movement, it is food for the adversary. Most of the demonstrations have been peaceful and attempts have been made to limit violence and looting.

For New York Times columnist Charles Blow, this street violence and looting is ironically keeping with an American tradition: “There has been a long tendency towards destruction in this country, an insatiable thirst for blood, which the country likes to conveniently forget. American violence is learned violence. It is the American way. White riots have often, historically, been directed at blacks, while blacks have rioted to protest injustice. On both sides, racism is at the root. And we have refused to address it sufficiently”⁹.

The ideologues of Trumpism could now opt, following the president’s departure from the White House, to delegitimize the democratic system, as is already happening with the non-recognition of the defeat and the accusations of alleged electoral fraud. Donald Trump himself warned of this in an interview with Fox News on 19 July when he answered the question of whether he would accept an unfavorable election result. “I’m simply not going to say yes and neither did I last time,” he said, referring to his allegations that Hillary Clinton had received in 2016 millions of votes from immigrants who were not entitled to vote, which is false.

Trump and his government further presented the demonstrations and social upheavals over the death of Afro-American George Floyd as war and chaos. They used them to try to further divide Democrats and Republicans but also the government and the federal states and even threatened to withdraw state subsidies to states that did not follow their recommendations. The president even claimed that the violence in Chicago was worse than in Afghanistan. And he tried to violently suppress demonstrations that were peaceful. Another of his strategies has been to generate doubts about the electoral system, such as those surrounding postal voting.

And he has also devoted himself to encouraging the most radical bases of his electorate, such as the militias, to defend him and free the country. In 2019, the

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⁸ Demonstrations & Political Violence in America: New Data for Summer 2020. <https://acleddata.com/2020/09/03/demonstrations-political-violence-in-america-new-data-for-summer-2020/>

⁹ ETZIONI, Amitai. The Black Lives Matter Movement Must Solve Its Violence Problem. *The National Interest*, 29/06/2020. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/black-lives-matter-movement-must-solve-its-violence-problem-163732>.

Southern Poverty Law Center identified 576 militias of which 181 are violent. Many of them have been active in recent months harassing authorities who imposed isolation because of Covid19 and protesters against police violence¹⁰.

In fact, Trump has laid siege to all state institutions: Congress, judges, the Supreme Court, intelligence agencies, media and members of his own government. After his inauguration, Biden will have to face an ideologically fragmented and polarized country in economic crisis and with fierce opposition from post-Trump Trumpism, which has also secured almost 11 million more votes than four years ago. Trump has clearly lost the elections but Trumpism has emerged strengthened.

Even so, it should not be forgotten that the number of deaths from domestic “terrorism” is relatively low today and the possibility of a civil war is negligible. The United States has endured more violent periods in the past, such as white supremacist terrorism in the 1950s and 1960s (with the Ku Klux Klan), black nationalist violence in the 1960s (with the Black Liberation Army), leftist revolutionary violence in the 1960s and 1970s (with the Weather Underground or Weathermen) and Puerto Rican nationalist violence in the late 1960s and 1970s (with the Armed Forces for National Liberation or FALN). In addition to Jihadist terrorism and the attacks of 9/11.

In a memo from late June 2020, Attorney General William Barr warns: “There is evidence that extremists belonging to the extreme right-wing boogaloo movement and those who self-identify as Antifa are responsible for some of the violence in the protests across the country. Some extremists may have received support from foreign entities. Although these extremists profess a variety of ideologies, they are united in their opposition to the core constitutional values of a democratic society governed by law¹¹.”

The threat of a fractured far-right

The fracture of the extreme right is not new in the United States. The country has always faced a diffuse militia and anti-government threat. At the end of the 20th century, intense police pressure prevented the far-right from uniting. But the result is a disparate and splintered movement, with skinheads, National Socialist movements and militias competing with each other for recruits and attention. Today, the movement is also different because of the connectivity offered by the internet and social networks and because of the populist discontent that is increasingly widespread in the United

¹⁰ AGUIRRE, Mariano. What if Trump doesn't accept the election result? Esglobal, 11/08/2020. <https://www.esglobal.org/y-si-trump-no-acepta-el-resultado-electoral/>

¹¹ PHILIPPS, Kristine. Attorney General Barr creates task force to investigate anti-government extremists. USA Today, 26/06/2020. <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2020/06/26/william-barr-says-boogaloo-group-antifa-tied-violence-protests/3268527001/>

States and other Western countries and legitimized by some political leaders¹².

The Ku Klux Klan was the forerunner of today's supremacist and racist extreme right. It was born in 1866 and was a terrorist sect/organization that terrorized the country. It attacked black people in the south of the country, a few years after the end of the civil war and the abolition of slavery. And although you don't see now white hoods in public, their message of hate is still very much alive on the internet and among supremacist groups. Since the formation of the KKK, the white supremacist groups have spread racism, hate and violence. They have been accused of crimes including civil rights violations, extortion, calls for violence, violation of the law on firearms and explosives and witness tampering.

Even the US Congress, in 2019, considered white supremacists and other far-right extremists to be the most important domestic terrorism threat the United States faces. Over the past 25 years the security forces, both federal and state, have not responded promptly and effectively enough to this phenomenon, perhaps because having almost exclusively centered on Jihadist terrorism. As a result, murders committed by the extreme right have increased considerably. Of the 85 incidents of extreme violence with deaths since 12 September 2001, far-right groups have been responsible for 62 (73%), while the radical Islamists were responsible for 23 (27%) and more people have been killed by extreme right-wing terrorism than by Jihadist terrorism. The United States has a long way to go to address the threat of white supremacy that it cannot continue to ignore.

In this amalgamation of right-wing extremists there are groups like The Base, the Atomwaffen Division or the Feuerkrieg Division that have some leadership structure and command and control arrangements. There are also movements with a limited structure but lacking a clear hierarchy and ideology, such as the Three Percenters, the Oath Keepers, the boogaloo or the QAnon. And a wide range of a fractured extreme right that challenges the secret services and security forces: white supremacists, anti-government extremism, militias (Proud Boys), neo-luddites and "salad bar" ideologies.

"In recent years, and especially in recent months, the far-right has become more fractured. It now represents a more disparate, amorphous and possibly more dangerous threat than before¹³. The threat has been further complicated by the global pandemic and the protests against police brutality. The perpetrators are not just lone wolves. A heterogeneous set of extremists has emerged and, most worryingly, it is now much more difficult and even impossible to know which group or individual in the network represents the threat. And there is a pressing need to know which communities are in imminent danger and against whom resources should be used most urgently.

¹² HOFFMAN, Bruce & WARE, Jacob. The Terrorist Threat from the Fractured Far Right. Lawfare, 1/11/2020. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/terrorist-threat-fractured-far-right>.

¹³ HOFFMAN, Bruce & WARE, Jacob. The Terrorist Threat from the Fractured Far Right. Lawfare, 1/11/2020. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/terrorist-threat-fractured-far-right>.

Militias and patriots

Anti-government extremists and radical right-wing groups have, as we have seen, a long history in the United States. Militias and paramilitary movements reached their peak in the 1990s. But with the election of Barack Obama and the economic recession the number of militias increased from about 50 groups to more than 276.

The term “patriotic movement” encompasses a whole range of conservative and nationalist political movements, especially armed far-right militias or sovereign citizens. Their ideologies are often based on conspiracy theories. The movement emerged in 1994, during the Clinton administration, in response to what its members saw as “the government’s violent repression” of dissident groups, along with increased arms control. But patriots have existed since the late 19th and early 20th centuries. All groups in this movement share a general resentment against the US government, whatever color it may be. And several of them have committed or supported violence and are described as dangerous, delusional and sometimes violent.

The militias are in fact organized paramilitary groups and almost all of them belong to the patriotic movement. They maintain that the United States does not fulfil or defend the vision of those who founded the country in the 18th century and that the government is increasingly tyrannical and threatens citizens’ rights and freedoms. They therefore declare themselves ready to defend the nation. For them the answers to today’s political problems can be found in the thoughts and writings of the 18th and 19th centuries. They defend the guns and the Second Amendment because they believe that the best way to defend themselves from a tyrannical government is an armed citizenry.

Heavily armed militia members have been seen at Black Lives Matter protests. These are groups that are prone to violence, although lone extremists, often more dangerous than organized groups, are almost more worrying. But coordination between them for joint action could be a serious security threat and risk.

There is much talk of the connection of these militias to Trump. There is no doubt that the right-wing militants love Trump and his coming to power and above all his way of acting has emboldened many of them, who love a president who shares their disdain for the federal government and institutions. But for the most purist patriots it is difficult to reconcile their traditional anti-government ideology with that reality and some believe that anyone at the head of the federal government is the enemy, including Donald Trump.

The patriot movement is not united in promoting a political idea in an organized way. They are often motivated by a wide range of causes, from the right to the possession and use of arms to immigration, privacy, payment of taxes or government overreach. Not infrequently, they are united by the protection of citizenship from what they see as a tyrannical federal government. Far-right militants are predominantly male and white and racist, though not all militias are racist motivated. But after Trump’s election, there was an increase in anti-Muslim and anti-Latino online activity among patriots.

There are also a number of conspiratorial beliefs that permeate the patriotic and militia movement. Many revolve around the idea that the government will try to subdue large numbers of Americans in detention camps, with the help of American special operations forces and foreign troops. This highly conspiratorial ideology fears a shadowy elite cabal and has a millennial-old view of history. They are heavily armed and often glorify previous incidents such as those involving confrontation with members of the movement, as the siege of Ruby Ridge in Idaho in 1992 or the confrontation at Branch Davidian in Waco, Texas, in 1993 or the 1995 attack by Timothy McVeigh on a federal building in Oklahoma.

For their part, sovereigntists are different from patriots, although the latter use certain language, concepts and conspiracy theory drawn from sovereign ideas. Sovereignists are less cohesive and organized and their ideas are historically closely linked to white nationalism.

The pandemic has also provided the far-right with the opportunity to impose its worldview and ideology on its members and potential recruits. They blame the spread of the virus on habitual scapegoats, such as Jews, minorities and immigrants.

White supremacists and neo-Nazis

The US Department of Homeland Security recently declared that white supremacist and neo-Nazi terrorists represent the clearest terrorist danger to the country¹⁴. This growing threat has been seen in the shootings in Pittsburgh, El Paso, Christchurch and elsewhere. Although these attacks were perpetrated by so-called lone wolves, the parallel emergence of several neo-Nazi groups and networks, particularly the Atomwaffen Division and The Base, are a source of concern to the security forces.

Many anti-government groups and militias such as the Three Percenters and the Oath Keepers have actively sought recruits in the US army. After the protests and shootings in Kenosha and Portland, the Oath Keepers' leader declared that "the civil war is here, right now", a call to arms that led to the closure of the group's affiliated sites on various social networks. Three Percenters, meanwhile, was founded in 2008 and takes its name from the false claim that only 3% of the population of the American colonies fought the British during the War of Independence. Its website denies that the group is racist or white supremacist, or even a militia, and claims that it is not a seditious movement, but that its "aim is to use the security measures put in place by our founders to stop a government that is overstepping the mark and thus to reverse the tyranny".

¹⁴ HOFFMAN, Bruce & WARE, Jacob. *The Terrorist Threat from the Fractured Far Right*. Lawfare, 1/11/2020. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/terrorist-threat-fractured-far-right>.

Boogaloo Bois and anti-government extremism

The boogaloo Bois or Boys or simply boogaloo is a movement motivated by hatred to law enforcement agencies. They are highly visible in protests and demonstrations, often dressed in brand name Hawaiian shirts. Many of their members have conspiratorial beliefs and often refer to false flag incidents, the deep state and misinformation related to the coronavirus.

The boogaloo¹⁵ has played a more visible role in the wake of the protests over the death of George Floyd. They have attended heavily armed demonstrations. They are actively planning what they call the next boogaloo (or “big luau” or “big igloo”), in reference to a new American civil war. Although the ideology first emerged around 2012, until recently the movement practically functioned only on the internet and was not popularly known. But a growing number of boogaloo supporters have protested the closures imposed by the government in some states and municipalities to fight the coronavirus. And they are responsible for the worst terrorist incidents and plots this summer.

Not all boogaloo militants are white supremacists or extreme right-wingers; many joined the Black Lives Matter protesters, emphasizing shared opposition to law enforcement across racial lines. All boogaloo people are united by their disdain for the authority of the government and their hatred of the police. Their common goal is to overthrow the existing government and replace it with an anarcho-capitalist system. They represent a considerable threat that may intensify with current events. They often appear at rallies and protests wearing bulletproof vests and headbands and carrying assault weapons and knives.

Its members believe that the United States will enter a second civil war. They anticipate that the government will try to confiscate people’s weapons. Their ideology itself is not white supremacist and they have grown in popularity online in the last year.

Proud Boys

The Proud Boys are a militant far-right group known for provoking street fights with far-left rivals and anti-fascists. They have not yet committed any terrorist actions but became a focus of attention following President Trump’s comments on them during the first presidential debate, which has led to an increase in their membership, which includes former combatants and active-duty soldiers.

¹⁵ HOFFMAN, Bruce & WARE, Jacob. *The Terrorist Threat from the Fractured Far Right*. Lawfare, 1/11/2020. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/terrorist-threat-fractured-far-right>.

It is a neo-fascist and supremacist organization. It was created in 2016 by Canadian journalist and right-wing activist Gavin McInnes, who co-founded Vice magazine and Vice Media, although he no longer has anything to do with that company. In recent years, Proud Boys has become known for its attacks on indigenous people, people of color, Muslims and women. It is considered by the FBI as “extremist with links to white nationalism” and has been designated as a “hate group”. The Proud Boys are famous for their misogynist and anti-Islamic rhetoric. They describe themselves as “Western chauvinists who refuse to apologize for creating the modern world”. They say they defend freedom of expression and support Trump in his attempts to “restore law and order, in the face of the racial marches of the Black Lives Matter movement. They are anti-immigrant and male and face their left-wing opponents, such as the Antifa, on the streets with violence. Members often wear black and yellow Fred Perry polo shirts along with red “Make America Great Again” hats.

Their platform includes Trumpist ideas (“glorify the entrepreneur”, “close the border”), libertarian ideas (“give everyone a weapon”, “end welfare”) and traditional gender roles (“worship the housewife”). Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube have banned the group from their platforms. Enrique Tarrío is its current president. McInnes publicly disassociated himself from the group in 2018, saying he was following the advice of his lawyers.

The leader of the Proud Boys has already warned: “We are deploying. The standby order has been rescinded,” referring to Donald Trump’s words to step back and remain vigilant in the first election debate. Members of the Proud Boys, some armed, attended demonstrations questioning the legitimacy of the elections and participated in altercations. Like several extreme right-wing groups, such as Patriot Prayer, Oath Keepers and Three Percenters, they have taken advantage of this year’s social tensions to organize and attend protests against the anti-Covid19 measures or by mobilizing for the Black Lives Matter demonstrations, which have ended in violence.¹⁶

“It’s been a very violent year so far and Trump was the president, but many of the issues that have precipitated this violence have nothing directly to do with Trump”¹⁷, warns Vegas Tenold, a researcher at the Anti-Defamation League’s Center on Extremism. Lindsay Schubiner, director of the Momentum program at the Western States Center, says the threat from the violent far-right is real, particularly if “they perceive that there is a green light from the highest office on earth. “Trump used a tense moment, poured gasoline on it and is now playing with matches”¹⁸, Schubiner

¹⁶ PALMER, Ewan. Proud Boys Standing By as Trump Disputes Election Defeat, Raising Fears of Far-right Violence. Newsweek, 11/11/2020. <https://www.newsweek.com/proud-boys-standby-trump-election-1545981>.

¹⁷ PALMER, Ewan. Proud Boys Standing By as Trump Disputes Election Defeat, Raising Fears of Far-right Violence. Newsweek, 11/11/2020. <https://www.newsweek.com/proud-boys-standby-trump-election-1545981>.

¹⁸ PALMER, Ewan. Proud Boys Standing By as Trump Disputes Election Defeat, Raising Fears of

says. Throughout his presidency, Trump has been accused of emboldening the extreme right and not denouncing it because it is part of his base. These criticisms go back to his comments that they are “good people” following the 2017 neo-Nazi rally Unite the Right in Charlottesville and also to his failure to disprove the QAnon conspiracy theory, which is linked to far-right violence and which the FBI has included on the list of threats of domestic terrorism.

Neoluddites and “Salad Bar”

Neoluddites are motivated by Unabomber-like theories¹⁹ of technological advance and societal degradation and may also pose a terrorist threat. In recent months several violent incidents have been attributed to these extremists. They have organized attacks on hospitals and health centers. 5G technology, which some extremists link to the spread of the virus, is also being targeted. The coronavirus has had a strong impact on the empowerment and publicity of anti-modern causes, most clearly seen in the emergence of armed protests against measures to curb the virus and against the use of masks. They are enemies of technology, considering technological and scientific advances to be harmful to humans, nature and society as a whole.

Denialist groups have sometimes been encouraged by the president, especially by his tweets. They benefit from a confluence with anti-government movements that see in the obligation to wear a mask another proof of the tyrannical government’s overreaching. The threat from neoluddites, including the anti-vaccine movement, may intensify as the Covid19 vaccine becomes available or if new closures or mandatory masks are decreed.

One of the defining features of the current wave of far-right violence is what we can call ideological convergence or what Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Madeleine Blackman call “marginal fluidity” and a senior FBI official has described as “salad bar” ideologies²⁰. These terms describe the mixture of different extremist ideologies: unwitting celibates who adopt the language and iconography of white supremacy, fascists who complain about environmental degradation, the far-left and the far-right that unite to protest against police violence and advance militant anti-government

Far-right Violence. Newsweek, 11/11/2020. <https://www.newsweek.com/proud-boys-standby-trump-election-1545981>.

¹⁹ Unabomber is the name of Ted Kaczynski, a gifted mathematical genius who abandoned his brilliant scientific career to live as a hermit in a Montana forest and fight against the modern industrial society he hated so much. He did this by sending letter bombs to universities and airlines, in which 3 people were killed and 23 others injured. It took the FBI 18 years to find him and arrest him in 1996. He is currently serving a sentence of eight life sentences in a Colorado prison. He was what we now call a “lone wolf” terrorist.

²⁰ HOFFMAN, Bruce & WARE, Jacob. The Terrorist Threat from the Fractured Far Right. Lawfare, 1/11/2020. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/terrorist-threat-fractured-far-right>.

positions and even neo-Nazis who worship Jihadists like Osama bin Laden.

Convergence has continued amid protests over the coronavirus and for social justice. For example, in September, two boogaloo were arrested for providing material support to the Palestinian organization Hamas. Perhaps the most imminent threat in this category is eco-fascism, an ideological mix that has already inspired major attacks of white supremacy as in Christchurch and El Paso. Eco-fascists argue that only white supremacy can stop environmental degradation and save the planet. They propose limiting Western societies to the white race in order to reduce the population and the burden on the climate and embrace Nazi concepts such as Lebensraum (living space) for the white race. They are obsessed with the survival of the Nordic race and often worship the ancient gods of Thor (lightning, storms and trees) and Sunna (the sun). They are clearly anti-Semitic and deny the Holocaust.

*QAnon*²¹

During the US election campaign signs of the Q movement and slogans on banners with typical messages of the movement were seen in demonstrations in favor of Donald Trump in the United States and in the protests against the anti-Covid measures in that and other countries. This movement was born on 28 October 2017, when an anonymous user now known as Q first appeared on the 4chan forum. He predicted the imminent arrest of Hillary Clinton and a violent uprising all over the country. And he let it be believed that he was an intelligence or military officer with Q clearance, a level of access to classified information, an informant within the government. Q remains anonymous, hence his followers are “QAnon”, Anon for Anonymus (anonymous). It became a conspiracy theory in the networks that has been gaining followers and has spread to other countries, including Spain.

The journalist and expert in conspiracy theories, the American Mike Rothschild, has been analyzing its slogans and supporters since its appearance and assures that “conspiracy theories fill a need in the lives of people who believe in them. They provide answers and clarity. Many times they provide someone to fix the anger and to blame for the problems in your life”. Myriam Redondo from VerificaRTVE adds that “people are very insecure, they don’t know what is going on, they have lost a lot of trust in institutions, parties and the media. They cling to any theory that gives them an explanation, however rare, about what is going on in the world”.

The QAnon maintain that there is a hidden state that controls power. They call it the Deep State, Satan, and say its members are corrupt and pedophiles, even cannibals. Mike Rains, an American researcher into conspiracy theories, warns that they are

²¹ A large part of this section is part of Informe Semanal’s report “Q, Conspiración en la Red”, broadcasted on 24 October 2020 on TVE’s La1, and the research carried out for that report. <https://www.rtve.es/alacarta/videos/informe-semanal/informe-semanal-conspiracion-red/5693333/>

very dangerous “to people because they simply evade reality, disconnect from their families, from their friends. They no longer believe in the same reality that we believe in”. Furthermore, they have taken advantage of the pandemic to gain visibility and followers among people who are afraid of instability and crisis. And they have added the World Health Organization (WHO) to that deep state. For fans of this theory, Trump is the chosen one, the savior, their ally in the fight against evil.

One of its followers, the theologian and journalist Daniel Ponce²² assures that Q is a movement that seeks to return to the fundamentals and that the main foundation is God. He adds that people are asleep and have to wake up and that there are going to be many arrests among the corrupt elites, such as the former director of the FBI, who will end up imprisoned in Guantanamo. He also said that there are secret tunnels where children are kidnapped, mistreated and sexually abused and their blood is taken to produce a life elixir. That deep state and the paedophile network would be led by Democrats, especially Hillary Clinton and Obama, and there would also be the billionaire investor George Soros and the Rotschild and others.

They considered themselves digital soldiers and receive instructions and information through so-called drops, whose author or authors are unknown. Mike Rotschild explains that “many of the elements of Q are very US-centric, but there are also universal ones such as distrust of power, global bankers, scientists and experts. Mike Rains warns that “it is very important to be proactive about what QAnon really are and what they really believe in and to present them for what they are. And they are a very violent movement that really wants a far-right Christian theocracy, a dictatorship with Donald Trump at its head. It’s very important to explain to people the truth about Q and also to tell the many times that Q has lied or been wrong about different things”.

Trump has never clearly disassociated himself from Q. At a press conference he was asked what he thought of the group. “I don’t know much about the movement except that I understand that they like me a lot. And I appreciate that,” he replied. For the Q, the elections have pitted good, represented by Republican Trump, against evil, represented by Democrat Biden. For them, the defeat of the current president can only be explained by massive electoral fraud. Rotschild says that “they are scary because they are people who really love the president. And if he says publicly that the defeat was due to fraud, because he was deceived, that Biden did not win and that he is not going to leave, they will agree. They will totally support him. And they will do it online and offline”. Some have already taken to the streets and it is not ruled out that there will be more protests or even that they will become more radical when Trump leaves the White House and that they will even react with violence.

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²² He introduces himself as the representative of Q in Spain. He says he was elected by some Americans living in Valencia, although Q has no known structure or organization. He defines himself as a Christian and a conservative.

For them Trump is the one who will stop all the corrupt of the deep state and save the world. With his defeat, that Great Awakening they said was going to happen does not seem to be possible, but they will surely look for other explanations to maintain their conspiracy. In May 2019 the FBI stated in a report that these theories motivate some extremists to commit criminal or violent acts and that they are a possible threat of domestic terrorism. In fact, the pizzagate, Q's precursor, led a man to shoot at a Washington pizzeria in 2016 because an online conspiracy theory claimed that there was a child sex trafficking network with connections to the Democrats, particularly Hillary Clinton. And in another case, the accused of the murder in New York of an alleged Mafia boss, whom he considered part of that deep state, showed the Q and QAnon slogans painted on his hand during the trial in 2019.

Thousands of groups and fan pages have been identified on Facebook. It is estimated that there may be hundreds of thousands of followers, some even numbering in the millions. Without social networks, the phenomenon would never have become so important so quickly. At the end of July, Twitter suspended 7.000 accounts. TikTok announced that it would block words related to the movement. In August, Facebook removed almost 800 groups and 100 pages. But “unless there is some coordination between the platforms to get rid of the main QAnon influencers, they will reappear”²³, warns Joan Donovan, director of a Harvard research center.

There have also been countless nods from Donald Trump's entourage to the movement. His son Eric posted a message on Instagram with the Q and the hashtag #WWGIWGA, evoking its mantra “Where We Go One We Go All”. Retired General Michael Flynn, Donald Trump's former national security advisor, chose the 4th of July to record a video of him taking the QAnon oath. And one of the great promoters of Q ideas, Michael William Lebron, visited the Oval Office and posed with the President in August 2018. Two of the recently elected congressional candidates, Marjorie Taylor Greene for Georgia and Lauren Boebert for Colorado, declared themselves to be followers of Q and although they later said they disagreed, nobody believed them.

Q offers the promise that the elites will be defeated and the truth will be revealed. This movement is emblematic of modern America's permeability to and enthusiasm for conspiracy theories. It is a movement united in the mass rejection of reason, objectivity and other Enlightenment values²⁴. And we could be closer to the beginning of its history than to the end. It is like a new religion.

²³ ZAGDOUN, Benoît. American presidential election: how the plotters of the QAnon movement became Donald Trump's best allies. Franceinfo 27/08/20. https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/usa/presidentielle/donald-trump/presidentielle-americaine-comment-les-complotistes-du-mouvement-qanon-sont-devenus-les-meilleurs-allies-de-donald-trump_4083989.html.

²⁴ LAFRANCE, Adrienne. The Prophecies of Q. The Atlantic, 14/05/20. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/qanon-nothing-can-stop-what-is-coming/610567/>.

The Q have also kidnapped the slogan “Save The Children” belonging to an NGO that helps children and uses it to say that children who, according to them, are kidnapped from the deep state must be saved. And it has been mixed up with other conspiracy theories such as Plandemic, which claims that the pandemic has been planned by this secret elite.

The far-left, the Antifa movement and the BLM

The peak of left-wing extremism occurred during the “New Left” wave of terror in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. These terrorists opposed the Vietnam War and Western imperialism and stood in solidarity with left-wing revolutionaries such as Võ Nguyễn Giáp, Mao Zedong, Che Guevara and Carlos Marighella. The Weather Underground Organization claimed responsibility for 25 attacks, some on the Pentagon, the New York Police Department and the Capitol. In the 70s, the Symbiotic Liberation Army was active and committed bank robberies, murders and other violent acts and kidnapped the actress Patty Hearst, while the Communist May 19 Organization bombed an FBI office and the Capitol. They were united by the belief that they were taking reprisals against the oppression and injustice.

After 1985, following the dismantling of these groups, there were no confirmed acts of left-wing terrorism by similar groups. After the fall of communism in the early 1990s they lost strength, although left-wing terrorism attacks reached another peak at the beginning of this century when ecoterrorists such as the Animal Liberation Front and the Earth Liberation Front attacked research centers and companies, but have since decreased. Modern left-wing terrorist groups in the United States have developed from the remnants of groups like the Weather Underground and extremist elements of Students for a Democratic Society.

The Antifa

Antifa is the abbreviation for “anti-fascists”. They are activists of the far-left, among whom there are also anarchists, but also communists and some social democrats. They say they are ready to use violence in self-defense. After the election of Trump, they saw that the interest in them and also their opposition to Trump increased. They have been prominent during the Black Lives Matter protests in many important cities.

At the end of August, a self-styled anti-fascist, Michael Reinoehl, 48 years old, shot and killed a supporter of Patriot Prayer, a group from the Portland area that usually marches with the Proud Boys. Reinoehl was shot by police the following week. Both groups are relatively small and may have at most a few thousand active supporters. But the Antifa do not yet represent a terrorist threat because of their organization and activities, but rather are a highly decentralized social opposition movement.

It encompasses many autonomous groups, networks and individuals. What unites them is the rejection of fascism and fascist ideas, including white supremacy. It is not a homogenous entity and does not have an identifiable and significant command structure or a leadership apparatus or highly radicalized members.

Even so, not all Antifa activists are opposed to violence, as historian Mark Bray details in his book “Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook”. Activists are known to use noxious gases, projectiles and other forms of violence in protests. However, they have not traditionally committed lethal acts²⁵. So far, they have been involved in low-level violence, such as street skirmishes and confrontations with right-wing protesters, and lack organizational cohesion. This limits the likelihood of organized violence similar to terrorism but does not prevent lone wolves inspired by Antifa principles from committing or participating in attacks.

Trump has focused on them to attack the left, extreme or not, and warned about the threat of the Antifascists and extreme left “fascism” as a central part of the campaign for his re-election. But in reality, the attacks of the far-left have been less violent and deadly than those of the far’-right. The activists of this movement have not been linked to any deaths in decades. It is true that the peaceful protests against racist police action, which have spread throughout the country, have in many cases degenerated into a wave of looting and vandalism that the authorities have disassociated them from those responsible for the Black Lives Matter movement and on not a few occasions have attributed to the Antifa or similar.

In June, United Nations experts expressed deep concern about a statement by Attorney General William Barr calling anti-fascist activists national terrorists and claiming that this undermines the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. “It is regrettable that the United States has chosen to respond to the protests in a manner that undermines these fundamental rights”²⁶. Barr’s statements came in the wake of violence at some demonstrations over the death of Afro-American George Floyd.

In short, as the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) states, Antifa is an amorphous movement whose adherents oppose individuals or groups they consider authoritarian or racist. It encompasses a broad spectrum of groups and individuals of anarchist or far-left tendencies. It is a movement of “decentralized revolutionary self-defense” opposed to the far-right. Often, in street protests, activists dress in “black bloc” attire, including masks to hide their identity. Violence sometimes occurs between activists

²⁵ CAMPION, Kristy & WEST, Levi J. Trump claims ‘left-wing extremism’ is engulfing the US. Conflating protests with terrorism is the real danger. 4/09/2020. <https://theconversation.com/trump-claims-left-wing-extremism-is-engulfing-the-us-conflating-protests-with-terrorism-is-the-real-danger-142649>.

²⁶ UN experts decry US rhetoric on designation of terrorist groups. United Nations Human Rights. Office of the High Commissioner, 19/06/2020. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25980>.

and the police or with members of the far-right. They aim to “intimidate and deter racists,” but their aggressive tactics, which include physical confrontations, can create “a vicious and self-destructive cycle of attacks and counter-attacks”²⁷.

Its followers recognize that the movement is secret, has no official leaders and is organized into autonomous local cells. And they campaign against actions they consider authoritarian, homophobic, racist or xenophobic. Sometimes their members work with other local activist networks, such as the Occupy movement or Black Lives Matter. The FBI makes no secret of its concern about the violence of the Antifa.

But most of the deadly extremist attacks that CSIS investigators classified as “leftist” were killings of police officers by black men, many of them US army veterans, who said they were acting out of anger or in retaliation for the police killings of African Americans. Some had connections with black nationalist groups, which are often classified as leftist.

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement

The narrative of the media and experts is that Black Lives Matter (BLM) and its left allies have been largely peaceful. Since the acquittal of Trayvon Martin’s killer in 2013 and the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson in 2014, the slogan “black lives matter” has become a rallying cry in the long struggle for black freedom and rights. This year, the death of George Floyd, who suffocated on May 25 under the knee of a local policeman in Minneapolis, sparked a wave of protests across the United States and the Black Lives Matter was once again heard and seen across the country.

BLM is composed of many local leaders and organizations. Their demands include: prompt and transparent legal investigation of all police shootings of black people, official government monitoring of the number of citizens killed by the police, disaggregated by race, demilitarization of local police forces and community accountability mechanisms for rogue police officers.

Many of the movement’s organizers identify themselves as abolitionists, which in the context of the 21st century means abolishing prisons and ending the problem of mass incarceration of African Americans and Latinos. The Black Lives Matter movement demands that the country affirm the value of black life, which includes addressing the growing racial wealth gap, fixing failing public schools, combating problems of housing inequality, and gentrification that drives people of color out of the communities in which they have lived for generations. It is about recognizing that the system treats whites as more valuable and worthy of protection, safety, education

²⁷ WILSON, Jason. What is antifa and why is Donald Trump targeting it? *The Guardian*, 6/06/2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/06/what-is-antifa-trump-terrorist-designation>

and a better quality of life than blacks²⁸. And that this needs to be changed.

In July 2013, the movement began with the use of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on social networks following the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the shooting death of African American teenager Trayvon Martin in February 2012. Protest demonstrations under this slogan began to spread across the country after the deaths of two African Americans by police violence in 2014, Michael Brown and Eric Garner. The creators of the hashtag and calling to action in 2013, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, expanded their project into a national network of more than 30 local groups between 2014 and 2016. All three have been clear about their agenda, even before the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter first appeared. Cullors, who is also a prison abolitionist and LGBT activist, has publicly declared that she and Garza were “trained Marxists” and her rhetoric is made up of explicitly socialist ideas and phraseology.

The movement is a decentralized network of activists with no formal hierarchy that, as we have noted, made national headlines and gained greater international attention this year following the assassination of George Floyd. It is estimated that between 15 and 26 million people participated in the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests in the United States, making it one of the largest movements in US history.

In the first two weeks after George Floyd’s death, the protests caused between \$1 billion and \$2 billion in damage. In three months, more than 30 people were killed and 14,000 arrested. The loose structure of Black Lives Matter has contributed to confusion in the press and among activists, as actions or statements by groups or individuals are sometimes attributed to Black Lives Matter as a whole. Statues of colonial figures, slave owners and confederate leaders have also been brought down in the protests. These are considered violent incidents. “Since Floyd’s murder, there have been at least 38 incidents in which protesters have damaged or significantly destroyed memorials across the country”, states a report by The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)²⁹. The authors claim that the Trump administration has exacerbated tensions caused by racial inequality and police brutality. At the end of June, President Donald Trump issued an executive order authorizing federal agents to pursue protesters who knock down statues or damage federal property, prompting the creation of the Task Force to Protect American Communities (PACT) and the deployment of Department of Homeland Security (DHS) agents to protest sites across the United States.

The long crisis of police violence and structural racism in America has reached a new turning point this year. Between May 26, the day after Floyd’s death, and August 22, ACLED recorded over 7,750 demonstrations related to the BLM movement in over 2,440 locations throughout the United States.

²⁸ For more details on the demands and actions of this movement, please consult their website: <https://blacklivesmatter.com/>

²⁹ Demonstrations & Political Violence in America: New Data for Summer 2020. <https://acleddata.com/2020/09/03/demonstrations-political-violence-in-america-new-data-for-summer-2020/>

A mostly black militia, the United Pharaoh's Guard (UPG), has also grown up, highlighting its aim to "protect the demonstrators, patrol the neighborhoods and keep the peace". The UPG says they were formed in Louisville. There is little evidence to suggest that the protesters have been involved in the widespread violence. In some cases where demonstrations turned violent, there are reports that agents provocateurs or infiltrators may have instigated the violence.

The increasing use of force against demonstrators comes amidst a broader drive to militarize the government's response to internal unrest and in particular to demonstrations perceived to be linked to far-left groups such as Antifa.

Conclusions

Three characteristic tactics have allowed extremist groups to be influential online in recent years: They use memes as propaganda, employ sophisticated communication networks for both planning and recruitment, make use of both marginal and private online forums, and organize militias and inspire lone wolves for violent action. In the networks, the images, videos and/or slogans of their memes allow them to spread hateful, anti-Semitic and/or revolutionary ideas. Often, they are disguised with humor or through the use of coded language and originate from forums. Many extremist movements, including libertarian anarchists, use the messages through social networks and other propaganda to recruit followers for militias with apocalyptic and revolutionary ideology. All this has allowed extremists to gain support in these times of uncertainty and instability.

There is a convergence in this polarization between the far-left and the far-right. There is a dangerous amalgamation within the extreme right. And there is the possibility of violent outbursts and attacks, especially from this political spectrum after the Trump era, due to the disillusionment of not having the man who for many of them is their savior in power. Furthermore, for them, their departure from power is due to a fraudulent election and they are going to consider the Biden government as illegitimate, which will give impetus to beliefs against the federal government.

Until a few months ago, the violence of far-right was mostly predictable. The tragic cases were largely perpetrated by lone white supremacists against soft targets, places of worship or shopping malls, along with sporadic attacks by militias or sovereign citizens against the forces of law and order. Now there is a cacophony of violence, increasingly strong and coming from multiple collectives or groups that are similar in their ideologies and strategies but different in their different approaches and objectives as to complicate the work and efforts of the security and anti-terrorist forces.

Although these groups have so far inflicted a limited number of deaths, their violence has the potential to escalate suddenly. And there appears to be no clearly articulated strategy by the federal government or law enforcement to control them. Several of

these groups, including QAnon, are highly motivated by President Trump and his departure, together with accusations of electoral fraud without evidence, may trigger violence, especially if the president chooses to continue in his position of fomenting hoaxes.

In the absence of a clear and comprehensive national strategy, fear and anxiety are increasingly fueled by uncertainty and discord. It is not known where the next bullet or bomb will come from, but it could trigger a wave of internal terrorism, with a variety of actors armed and ready. In this scenario, the main targets could be the government, the army, official buildings or the security forces.

Digital platforms are likely to remain an important battleground. Left-right extremists will probably continue to use social networks, such as Reddit, Facebook and Twitter, to spread propaganda and incite violence against their far-right political opponents and against the forces of law and order, the military and the government.

The internal landscape could shift from a decentralized environment of extremists to more organized and hierarchically structured groups. And become a nightmare scenario. The United States could witness, in the worst case, acts of political violence, domestic terrorism and unrest such as have not been seen since the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, when protests against the Vietnam War destabilized the country.

Biden is thus inheriting a polarized country where violence, particularly on the far-right, has increased in recent times. The authorities seem not to have the necessary and appropriate policies and weapons to deal with it. The new president will have to make an effort to remedy these shortcomings if he is not to face a greater challenge from the violent extremists. And he will also have to make it one of his priorities to end racist police violence and the huge gap that exists in all respects between whites and African Americans. Only in this way can he avoid further protests by the Black Lives Matter movement which, although peaceful in principle, can be exploited by extremists on both sides to provoke violent incidents.

The logo for the Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos (ieeee.es) is centered within a white rounded rectangle with a blue border and a subtle drop shadow. The text 'ieeee.es' is rendered in a bold, lowercase sans-serif font, with the first four 'e's in black and the final 'e' and '.es' in blue. Below this, the full name 'Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos' is written in a smaller, black, uppercase sans-serif font.

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