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Domestic Terrorism

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Terrorism describes any use of violence, intimidation, or coercion to achieve political or ideological gains. If such actions are taken or influenced by forces outside of a nation's borders, it is referred to as international terrorism, while actions taken or influenced by forces within a nation's borders are called domestic terrorism. In the United States, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) are the primary government agencies responsible for addressing domestic terrorism. The FBI defines domestic terrorism as "violent, criminal acts committed by individuals and/or groups to further ideological goals stemming from domestic influences." Extremist groups have perpetrated or threatened violence in support of political, environmental, and religious causes. Hatred and prejudice against racial and religious groups and women have also motivated acts of domestic terrorism.

Main Ideas

- Domestic terrorism refers to instances of violence against a nation and is typically perpetrated by citizens of that nation with the intent to further a political goal.
- The history of domestic terrorism within the United States dates to the nineteenth century, and groups such as the Ku Klux Klan have been cited as examples of US-based terrorist organizations.
- In the twenty-first century, instances of domestic terrorism against those with different political beliefs has been correlated to the polarization of political debate within the United States.
- The rise of the internet, particularly in the twenty-first century, has also created a rise in instances of violence by lone offenders who often are introduced to or reinforce their beliefs with others online.
- The FBI is charged with combating and preventing terrorism in the United States. However, the ability of the FBI to do so is not without limitations.

Background

In the nineteenth century, notable acts of domestic terrorism occurred in the United States due to clashing ideologies. One early instance occurred in 1857 when a militia of Mormons and Paiute Native Americans in the state of Utah massacred a group of California-bound immigrants. The Mormons had already faced persecution due to their religious beliefs and were clashing with the US government, creating unrest among the group. The actions of abolitionist John Brown (1800-1859), including the murders of proslavery settlers in 1856 and the seizure of an armory in 1859, have also been interpreted as early acts of domestic terrorism.

Following the defeat of Confederate forces in the US Civil War (1861–1865), lingering resentment remained among many Southerners. Some held on to ideals of white supremacy over Black Americans. These factors contributed to the formation of the Ku Klux Klan in 1865. The Klan perpetrated acts of intimidation, violence, and lynching, primarily on Black Americans, but also on white Americans who sympathized with Black Americans. Resistance and legislation from the US government eventually led to the dissolution of the Klan in the 1870s. However, other white supremacist groups continued similar tactics to intimidate those who voted against a white supremacist agenda. The Klan reemerged in the early twentieth century with a greater focus on racist ideology and religious extremism and continued acts of domestic terrorism including cross burning, lynching, and bombings into the 1960s.

Other acts of domestic terrorism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries centered on labor disputes and the rise of socialist, communist, and anarchic ideals. Mistreatment of labor forces by US industrialists left many workers jaded with capitalist ideology, and the rise of labor disputes and anarchist bombings throughout Europe and Russia provided examples that many would follow. In 1886 a high-profile incident occurred in Chicago's Haymarket Square where a bomb thrown amidst a labor rally led to the wounding and death of several people, including several policemen.

During the 1960s and 1970s, several groups opposed to the Vietnam War or espousing discontent with the US government rose in prominence and fueled violence either directly or indirectly. These groups include the Black Liberation Army, the Weathermen (later called the Weather Underground Organization), the Armed Forces of Puerto Rican National Liberation (Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional Puertorriqueña, or FALN), the United Freedom Front, Revolutionary Force 9, the Symbionese Liberation Army, and the New Year's Gang. These and other left-wing and right-wing groups were responsible for instances of property destruction, kidnapping, murders, and bombings that killed multiple people throughout the nation during this period.

Left-wing extremism was responsible for most acts of domestic terrorism through 1985. This began to shift in 1990s, though a few well-publicized instances of ecoterrorism in the name of animal and environmental rights occurred. The Animal Liberation Front (ALF) and Environmental Liberation Front (ELF) participated in bombings and arson attacks with a focus on property destruction of slaughterhouses, lumber mills, and other industries they saw as oppressive to animals and the environment. No people were killed in any ALF or ELF attacks, and since the late 2000s, acts by such environmental activist groups have been nonviolent or included sabotage rather than violence.

As left-wing extremist terrorism began to fade, right-wing terrorism was on the rise. Beginning in the 1970s, right-wing extremists began to engage in arson attacks, firebombings, and vandalism at abortion clinics around the country. By the mid-1980s, violent right-wing extremism came to pose the greatest domestic terrorist threat in the United States. According to the FBI, the emerging brand of right-wing extremism often espoused white supremacy but was primarily focused on opposition to the federal government. A notorious act of right-wing domestic terrorism in the United States occurred in 1995 when Timothy McVeigh bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, killing 168 people. As his motivation, McVeigh cited the FBI siege of the property of Randy Weaver in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, in 1992 and the federal raid against the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, in 1993. McVeigh was arrested and admitted his responsibility. He was executed by the US government in 2001.

During the second decade of the 2000s, there had been another shift in groups perpetrating domestic terrorism. By 2020 DHS considered racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists, specifically white supremacist extremists, "the most persistent and lethal threat" in US domestic terrorism. White supremacist extremists conducted more domestic lethal attacks than any other extremist movement between 2018 and 2020.

Political Polarization

The continued polarization of political parties in the United States has contributed to groups being labeled as terrorists by their political opponents. Those attributing the terrorist label to organizations and movements tend to focus on acts of violence that they claim are indicative of the movement's overall ideologies. Political unrest within the United States is also a factor to consider when protests and counterprotests turn violent, as those participating are increasingly arming themselves in the interest of confrontation or self-defense. In 2020 protests in cities like Portland, Oregon, and Louisville, Kentucky, resulted in shootings and property damage. Organizations on both sides of the divide have been blamed for instances of political violence.

Violent methods used by domestic terrorists have also included vehicular assaults, with two high-profile cases occurring in 2017. A man claiming allegiance to ISIS killed eight people and injured twelve when he ran his car into a group of cyclists and runners in Manhattan, New York. And, during a 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, responding to a counterprotest of left-wing demonstrators, a white nationalist drove his vehicle into the group, resulting in the death of Heather Heyer. US attorney general William Barr described the driver's actions as an example of domestic terrorism.

Responding to the violence in Charlottesville, President Donald Trump cited guilt on "many sides," leading to criticism that the president was refusing to denounce violence from right-wing groups. This claim emerged again in 2020 when President Trump made ambiguous statements and appeared not to denounce the far-right Proud Boys organization during a debate with Democratic nominee Joe Biden. The Proud Boys has been linked to several instances of political violence. The issue of far-right domestic terrorism arose again following a foiled attempt by an armed group of men in 2020 to abduct and kill Michigan governor Gretchen Whitmer; the governor had been a frequent target of criticism from President Trump and other political opponents throughout the year.

Following the rise of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, opponents in the media, government, and law enforcement depicted the movement as being primarily focused on violence and property destruction rather than their stated goal of furthering equal treatment for Black Americans. Supporters of BLM state that the group does not advocate or engage in violence and that instances of such are outlier examples. Similarly, the terrorist label is often used by opponents to describe the antifa ("antifascist") movement that rose in visibility following the events in Charlottesville and has been linked to instances of violent counterprotesting. President Trump announced in 2020 that he planned to designate both antifa and the Ku Klux Klan as terrorist organizations.

Lone Offenders

According to the FBI, most domestic terror attacks are conducted by lone offenders who are motivated by their personal grievances or sense of purpose. Some of these lone offenders are considered isolated, meaning they have no connection with nor receive support from a network of supporters or terrorist organizations. Other lone offenders are considered connected, meaning that while they operate alone, they are inspired by or directly connected to terrorist organizations. These offenders are sometimes referred to as "lone wolves." The unpredictable nature of where, when, and how lone offenders will strike has been cited as a key difficulty in stopping their attacks.

Eric Robert Rudolph—a domestic terrorist motivated by white supremacist, antiabortion, and antigay sentiments—detonated a bomb in Centennial Olympic Park during the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, Georgia. Rudolph also carried out the bombings of an

abortion clinic in suburban Atlanta in January 1997, an LGBTQ bar in Atlanta in February 1997, and an abortion clinic in Birmingham, Alabama, in January 1998. Other antiabortion, lone-wolf domestic terror incidents include the murders of abortion providers Dr. Barnett Slepian at his home near Buffalo, New York, in 1998, and Dr. George Tiller in a church in Wichita, Kansas, in 2009.

Many lone offenders have either become self-radicalized by their beliefs or had their beliefs influenced by material on the internet, resulting in attacks such as mass shootings or other forms of violence. The power of the internet to spread the ideas of radicalized individuals and groups is seen as having had a dramatic effect on the rise of terrorist attacks by lone offenders. Many of the deadliest domestic terrorist events in the United States are examples of attacks by lone offenders that displayed evidence of them being radicalized online. In 2016 a man who had pledged allegiance to the radical Islamist group ISIS conducted a mass shooting at an LGBTQ nightclub in Orlando, Florida, that left forty-nine people dead and fifty wounded. Other attacks include the 2015 mass shooting of churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina, by a white supremacist; the mass shooting that killed eleven people and injured others in a Jewish synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2018 by a man espousing antisemitic beliefs; a mass shooting that killed twenty-three people and injured dozens in El Paso, Texas, which targeted Hispanic people and was motivated by white supremacist ideologies; and the mailing of multiple explosive devices to figures critical of President Donald Trump.

Critical Thinking Questions

- Under what circumstances have Americans sought domestic terrorism as a political strategy?
- For what reasons do you think acts of domestic terrorism in the United States are more commonly committed by individuals rather than coordinated groups? Explain your answer.
- Do you believe that the government should classify organizations or groupings of like-minded individuals such as antifa or the Ku Klux Klan as terrorist organizations? Why or why not?

Combating Domestic Terrorism

The FBI is the lead federal agency for investigating and preventing domestic terrorism. The agency uses investigative techniques and conducts surveillance on groups and individuals associated with domestic terrorist acts. While the FBI may initiate preliminary investigations based on information of possible criminal or threatening activity, full investigations proceed only after groups or individuals break the law by issuing threats or engaging in violence or destruction.

In 2014 the United States relaunched a task force dedicated to combating domestic terrorism. The Domestic Terrorism Executive Committee consists of officials the Department of Justice, the FBI, and the Offices of the United States Attorneys, and its mission is to prevent and stop attacks "from individuals within our own borders who may be motivated by a variety of other causes from antigovernment animus to racial prejudice." However, during Trump's presidency from 2017 to 2021, many critics noted that the administration did not focus on the issue of violent white nationalist or far right-wing domestic terrorist groups, even after warnings by numerous government and academic experts. The FBI warned in 2020 that the "top threat we face from domestic violent extremists is from racially- and ethnically-motivated violent extremists, including white supremacists." A DHS report the same year noted that the most deadly terrorist threat in the United States came from "racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists—specifically white supremacist extremists." According to the Center for Strategic and International studies, such groups accounted for two-thirds of the terrorist plots and attacks in the United States in 2020.

In 2020 the DHS was widely criticized for the deployment of federal agents to several cities, including Portland, Oregon, and Seattle, Washington, to address violence during political protests against police violence and racial injustice. The governor of Oregon called the DHS actions, which included the use of unmarked vehicles and military-style uniforms, "a blatant abuse of power by the federal government."

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