



# The Rise of Far-Right Extremism in the United States

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## THE ISSUE

*Right-wing extremism in the United States appears to be growing. The number of terrorist attacks by far-right perpetrators rose over the past decade, more than quadrupling between 2016 and 2017. The recent pipe bombs and the October 27, 2018, synagogue attack in Pittsburgh are symptomatic of this trend. U.S. federal and local agencies need to quickly double down to counter this threat. There has also been a rise in far-right attacks in Europe, jumping 43 percent between 2016 and 2017.*

The threat from right-wing terrorism in the United States—and Europe—appears to be rising. Of particular concern are white supremacists and anti-government extremists, such as militia groups and so-called sovereign citizens interested in plotting attacks against government, racial, religious, and political targets in the United States.<sup>1</sup> The October 27, 2018, Pittsburgh synagogue shooting by Robert Bowers, and the arrest a day earlier of Cesar Sayoc who sent pipe bombs to prominent Democrats, appear to be the most recent manifestations of this trend. Both perpetrators were far-right extremists. Although violent left-wing groups and individuals also present a threat, far-right networks appear to be better armed and larger. There also is a continuing threat from extremists inspired by the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. But the number of attacks from right-wing extremists since 2014 has been greater than attacks from Islamic extremists.<sup>2</sup>

With the rising trend in right-wing extremism, U.S. federal and local agencies need to shift some of their focus and intelligence resources to penetrating far-right networks and preventing future attacks. To be clear, the terms “right-wing

extremists” and “left-wing extremists” do not correspond to political parties in the United States, such as Republicans or Democrats. Opinion polls in the United States show that most Republicans and Democrats loathe terrorism.<sup>3</sup>

Instead, right-wing terrorism commonly refers to the use or threat of violence by sub-national or non-state entities whose goals may include racial, ethnic, or religious supremacy; opposition to government authority; and the end of practices like abortion.<sup>4</sup> As Bruce Hoffman writes, right-wing terrorists generally criticize the democratic state for “its liberal social welfare policies and tolerance of diverse opinion—alongside its permitting of dark-skinned immigrants in the national labor force and of Jews and other minorities in positions of power or influence.”<sup>5</sup> Left-wing terrorism, on the other hand, refers to the use or threat of violence by sub-national or non-state entities that oppose capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism; focus on environmental or animal rights issues; espouse pro-communist or pro-socialist beliefs; or support a decentralized sociopolitical system like anarchism.<sup>6</sup>

The rest of this brief is divided into four sections. The first examines the growth of right-wing terrorism in the United

States. The second examines its evolving nature in the United States, including the use of the internet and social media. The third assesses the challenge of far-right extremism in Europe. The fourth discusses policy implications.

## THE RISE IN FAR-RIGHT EXTREMISM

Terrorist attacks by right-wing extremists in the United States have increased. Between 2007 and 2011, the number of such attacks was five or less per year. They then rose to 14 in 2012; continued at a similar level between 2012 and 2016, with a mean of 11 attacks and a median of 13 attacks; and then jumped to 31 in 2017.<sup>7</sup> FBI arrests of right-wing extremists also increased in 2018.<sup>8</sup>

As Figure 1 highlights, most of the far-right attacks involved firearms or incendiary devices (the latter which included setting fire to targets like mosques). These types of weapons are simple to acquire, easy to use, and require little preparation—especially for lone actors. The perpetrators attacked religious figures and institutions, primarily Muslim or Jewish targets (31 percent); private citizens and property (29 percent); and U.S. or foreign government targets in the United States, such as the Forsyth County Courthouse in Georgia or the Mexican consulate in Austin, Texas (14 percent).<sup>9</sup>

The perpetrators of these attacks were mostly white supremacists and “sovereign citizens.” The latter category includes a loose mixture of individuals and groups that use violence, or the threat of violence, to protest government functions such as taxation. The perpetrators mostly have been lone actors and small networks of white supremacists and sovereign citizens, rather than groups.

Most of these attacks either didn’t kill anyone or led to a small number of deaths. In September 2017, for example, Kenneth James Gleason, a white supremacist, was charged with shooting and killing Donald Smart, an African-American, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. A few attacks were more lethal. In June 2015, Dylann Roof opened fire with a Glock .45 caliber pistol on parishioners at Emanuel Africa Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, killing nine people. His motivations were racist, and he expressed his extremist beliefs on such websites as [lastrhodesian.com](http://lastrhodesian.com).<sup>11</sup>

Two decades earlier, Timothy McVeigh orchestrated the deadliest right-wing attack in recent U.S. history, killing 168 people and injuring more than 680 in Oklahoma City. Michael Fortier, a close friend of McVeigh’s, remarked that “we both believed that the United Nations was actively trying to form a one-world government, disarm the American public, take away our weapons.”<sup>12</sup> As Figure 2 highlights, between 2007 and 2017 attacks occurred in virtually every state in the United States, from California to Texas, Florida, Virginia, and New York.

The perpetrators of the October 2018 attacks were motivated by racist and anti-Semitic views. Cesar Sayoc allegedly mailed 13 packages containing improvised explosive devices (consisting of a PVC pipe, small clock, battery, wiring, and explosive material) to prominent Democrats.<sup>13</sup> “He was very angry and angry at the world,” one of his former bosses remarked, “at blacks, Jews, gays. He always talked about ‘if I had complete autonomy none of these gays or these blacks would survive.’”<sup>14</sup> Robert Bowers, who killed 11 people at the Tree of Life Jewish

Figure 1: Weapon and Target Type for Right-Wing Attacks, 2007-2017<sup>10</sup>

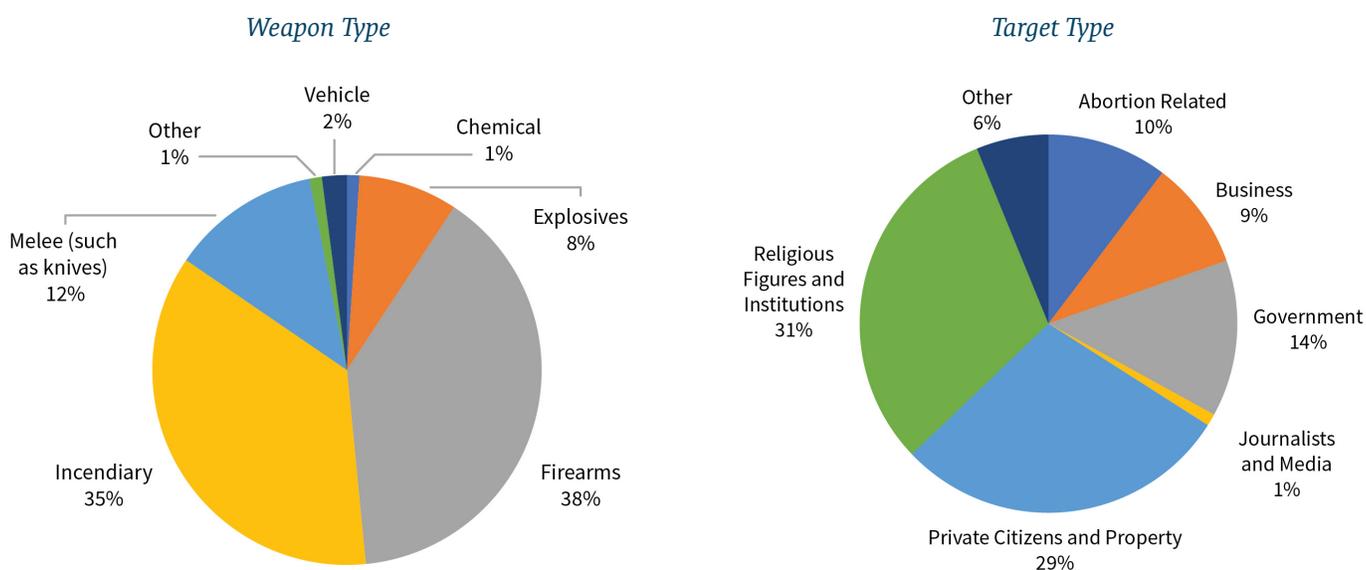


Figure 2: Right-Wing Terrorist Attacks in the United States, 2007–2017<sup>54</sup>



Synagogue in Pittsburgh, also was motivated by extreme right-wing views.<sup>15</sup> He espoused anti-immigrant and anti-Jewish views on Gab, a social media network that has been embraced by white nationalists. Just before the shooting, Bowers posted a comment on his Gab account referencing the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS): “HIAS likes to bring invaders in that kill our people. I can’t sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics. I’m going in.”<sup>16</sup>

Many of these right-wing extremists are trying to be less visible and less conspicuous. The goal is to avoid the classic skinhead appearance of shaved heads, steel-toe combat boots, and other apparel that might be obvious to law enforcement.<sup>17</sup> Islamic extremists have developed similar tactics, trimming their beards and wearing Western-style clothes to avoid detection from law enforcement and intelligence agencies as they plot terrorist attacks.<sup>18</sup> White supremacist Ben Daley instructed his supporters to wear clothing like polo-style shirts and khakis, as well as to get clean-cut military haircuts.

As Daley wrote in one private Facebook message intercepted by the FBI, “If you are still in LA area it’ll probably be me meeting up with you. We go for the implicit look so you’ll have to change your [style] up a bit when your with us.”

His associate responded, “Yea that’s fine [I] can grow my hair out if need be, drop the boots and braces look etc.”

Daley replied using a symbol for “okay” and then remarked, “Trust I did it for a long time too but ultimately the 80s in that style of nationalism proved to be ineffective ... [I] think its time to reimagine the nationalist look and playbook, we have become predictable that needs to change.”<sup>19</sup>

In another Facebook post, Daley noted, “I would be mindful of saying anything that could be misconstrued as a call to violence. I know people who literally have feds show up at there door over posts. [J]ust food for thought. Trust I’m not speaking in terms of morality rather practicality.”<sup>20</sup>

## FACTORS DRIVING FAR-RIGHT EXTREMISM

Why is there a rise in far-right attacks? Several factors may have contributed to this growth.

First, right-wing extremists are increasingly using the internet and social media to issue propaganda statements, coordinate training (including combat training), organize travel to attend protests and other events, raise funds, recruit members, and communicate with others. The internet and social media provide an unparalleled opportunity to reach a broader audience, which is why Islamic extremists have done the same. As one Islamic

State defector noted, “The media people are more important than the soldiers...Their monthly income is higher. They have better cars. They have the power to encourage those inside to fight and the power to bring more recruits to the Islamic State.”<sup>21</sup> In addition to the Islamic State, other Salafi-jihadist organizations like al-Qaeda have used social media to recruit, radicalize, raise funds, intimidate, and communicate with members and the public.

Right-wing networks have used Twitter (with hashtags like #nationalist and #ultraright in Twitter posts), posted videos on YouTube, established Facebook pages, created Instagram accounts, and communicated on social media sites like Gab and through Voice over Internet Protocol applications like Discord. Some have even sprayed graffiti on neighborhood walls to advertise their white supremacist ideology. In addition, websites like the *Daily Stormer* remain influential among many neo-Nazi and white supremacy activists.<sup>22</sup> Social media sites have been littered with phrases like the Fourteen Words (also referred to as the 14 or 14/88) coined by white supremacist David Lane, a founding member of the group the Order. The Fourteen Words includes variations like: “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.”<sup>23</sup>

Second, right-wing extremists are increasingly traveling overseas to meet and exchange views with likeminded individuals.<sup>24</sup> In the spring of 2018, for example, several members of the Rise Above Movement (or RAM)—Robert Rundo, Ben Daley, and Michael Miselis—traveled to Germany, Ukraine, and Italy to celebrate Adolf Hitler’s birthday and to meet with members of European white supremacist groups. RAM is a white supremacist group headquartered in southern California. Its members posted photographs on their Instagram accounts of their Europe trip with the RAM logo and words like “RAPEFUGEES ARE NOT WELCOME HERE” and “REVOLT AGAINST MODERN ... ACTIVISM-ATHLETICS-VIRTUE ... RIGHT SIDE.”<sup>25</sup> In Ukraine, RAM members met with groups like the Azov Battalion, a paramilitary unit of the Ukrainian National Guard, which the FBI says is associated with neo-Nazi ideology. The Azov Battalion also is believed to be training and radicalizing white supremacist organizations based in the United States.<sup>26</sup> These foreign connections provide U.S.-based groups with an opportunity to improve their tactics, develop better counter-intelligence techniques, harden their extremist views, and broaden their global networks.

Third, right-wing extremism has been energized over the past decade by several issues. Some were infuriated by the election of an African-American, Barack Obama, as

president. As one U.S. Department of Homeland Security assessment concluded shortly after the election, “Rightwing extremists have capitalized on the election of the first African American president, and are focusing their efforts to recruit new members, mobilize existing supporters, and broaden their scope and appeal through propaganda, but they have not yet turned to attack planning.”<sup>27</sup> Others have been incensed about a perceived rising tide of immigration to the United States from countries like Mexico and Syria.

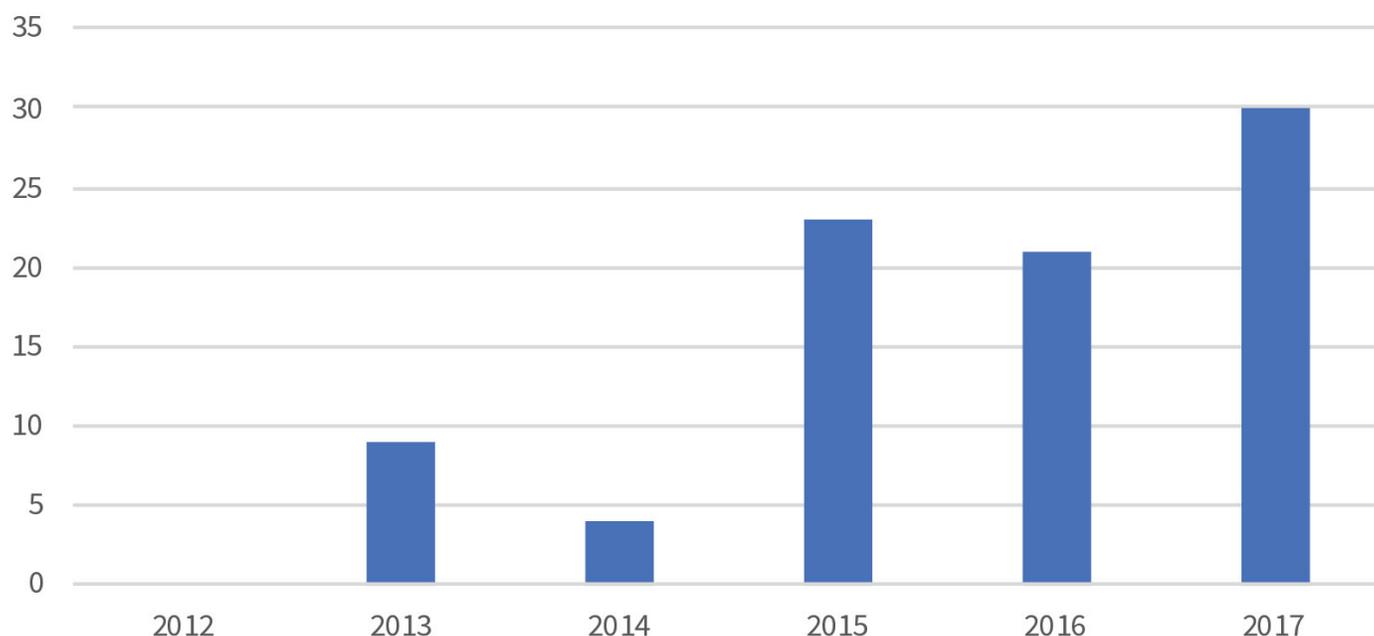
Still others have been inspired by President Donald Trump, as noted in Department of Justice criminal complaints and indictments. On March 25, 2017, RAM members attended a “Make America Great Again” rally in Huntington Beach, California and fought protesters. They carried signs like “DEFEND AMERICA” and “Da Goyim Know” (a phrase used by some white supremacists to refer to a supposed Jewish conspiracy to control world affairs).<sup>28</sup> After the rally, the *Daily Stormer* published an article titled “Trumpenkriegers Physically Remove Antifa Homos in Huntington Beach.”<sup>29</sup> The word “antifa” refers to a mix of left-wing and anti-fascist militant networks.

As an FBI special agent explained in a criminal complaint, “based on my training and experience, I know that ‘Trumpenkriegers’ is intended to mean ‘Fighters for Trump.’”<sup>30</sup> In addition, Cesar Sayoc, who allegedly sent pipe bombs to critics of President Trump, covered the windows of his white van with images supportive of the president and critical of organizations like CNN.<sup>31</sup> While the election of President Trump has energized some right-wing extremists, Trump’s election does not fully explain this trend. The first notable increase in right-wing terrorist attacks over the past decade occurred in 2012—from one attack in 2011 to 14 in 2012—four years before President Trump was elected.

## FAR-RIGHT EXTREMISM IN EUROPE

Like the United States, Europe faces a growing threat from extreme right-wing groups. As Figure 3 highlights, extreme right-wing attacks have significantly increased—from 0 in 2012 to 9 in 2013; 21 in 2016; and 30 in 2017.<sup>32</sup> European Union Security Commissioner Sir Julian King has expressed serious concern about the “growing menace” of right-wing extremism: “I’d just like to pause for one moment on this. I’m not aware of a single EU member state that is not affected in some way by right-wing violent extremism.”<sup>33</sup> In 2011, 77 died in a series of attacks by a lone right-wing extremist in Oslo and the island of Utøya. Violent groups include the Identitäre Bewegung Deutschland (IBD, Identitarian Movement Germany) and supporters of the Reich Citizen ideology in Germany; the Generace Identity

Figure 3: Extreme Right-Wing Attacks in Europe, 2012–2017<sup>55</sup>



(Generation of Identity) movement and the Pro-Vlast movement in the Czech Republic; Soldiers of Odin in Belgium; and the Blood & Honour organization in Portugal.<sup>34</sup>

In the UK, extreme right-wing groups have not presented a significant terrorism threat until recently, partly in response to rising domestic concerns about refugees and asylum-seekers from countries like Syria and Afghanistan. In 2016 and 2017, the UK banned the far-right groups National Action, Scottish Dawn, and National Socialist Anti-Capitalist Action under the Terrorism Act 2000.<sup>35</sup> There also have been several right-wing attacks in the UK. Examples include the June 2017 killing of one individual by Darren Osborne at the Finsbury Park Mosque, and the June 2016 assassination of UK Labour Member of Parliament Jo Cox by Thomas Mair. Some extreme right-wing individuals and groups pose a particular threat because they have stockpiled firearms and developed the capability to build improvised explosive devices.<sup>36</sup> As the UK government concluded in 2018, “We assess the threat from extreme right-wing terrorism is *growing*.”<sup>37</sup>

The threat from extreme right-wing groups and individuals is likely more acute in the UK than anywhere else in Europe. As the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation concluded, “Five foiled, failed or completed terrorist attacks attributed to rightwing extremists (RWE) were reported for 2017: all of them by the UK.”<sup>38</sup> In 2017 and early 2018, the UK arrested 27 individuals on suspicion of being a member of National Action, 15 of whom were charged with terrorism

offenses. In addition, the British domestic intelligence agency, MI5, and the police disrupted nearly a half-dozen right-wing terrorist plots in the UK in the first half of 2018.<sup>39</sup>

France also has experienced isolated acts of far-right extremism. In June 2018, for example, French authorities arrested 10 suspected far-right extremists—including a retired police officer and a retired soldier—from the group Action des Forces Opérationnelles who allegedly were plotting to attack Muslims. They had stockpiled rifles, handguns, homemade grenades, and ammunition around Paris, the Mediterranean island of Corsica, and the western Charentes-Maritimes region.<sup>40</sup> Unlike the Finsbury Park attack in the UK, the Action des Forces Opérationnelles plotters claimed they were “only” planning to attack jihadists, radical preachers, and “radicalized individuals”—yet their definition of “radicalized” individuals included women wearing veils.

Much like in the United States, right-wing networks and individuals have broadened their contacts in other countries, especially in Europe and North America. In addition, right-wing extremists also have increasingly leveraged the internet and social media. As the German Ministry of Interior concluded:

The Internet has become the most important propaganda tool in the right-wing extremist scene. As soon as right-wing extremist organisations begin planning large-scale public actions or launch campaigns, they almost without exception use the

Internet to spread the news. Designated websites, social media profiles, online flyers, and images, texts and video clips posted on the Internet are key elements of their online campaigns. Since the right-wing extremist scene began using the Internet, its basic methodology has been to openly show its presence and disseminate on the one hand and to shift its communications and criminal behaviour to protected, non-public areas of the Internet on the other.<sup>41</sup>

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Right-wing extremism is nothing new in the United States. After the Civil War, President Ulysses S. Grant conducted an aggressive—and ultimately successful—campaign against the Ku Klux Klan and its offshoots (such as the Knights of the White Camellia) from the 1860s to the 1870s. Grant deployed federal soldiers to arrest Klan members, enlisted U.S. attorneys to try their cases, supported Congressional legislation like the Ku Klux Klan Act, and organized federal judges to oversee Klan trials.<sup>42</sup> For much of the twentieth century, the FBI and local law enforcement agencies effectively penetrated and dismantled dozens of right-wing terrorist groups, such as the Order and the Covenant, Sword, and Arm of the Lord.<sup>43</sup> In the 1990s, right-wing groups were energized around issues like gun control, free trade agreements, perceived government infringement on civil liberties, and social issues such as abortion, immigration, and same-sex marriage.<sup>44</sup> Following the April 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, the FBI and local law enforcement agencies again successfully infiltrated far-right networks and arrested their leadership.

Yet far-right extremism persists. *The Turner Diaries*, a 1978 novel written by William Pierce under the pseudonym Andrew Macdonald, has been influential in far-right circles. It describes a series of events that begins with a white supremacist military revolution and culminates in a race war, world-wide nuclear war, and extermination of Jews, gays, and non-whites.<sup>45</sup> Anti-government activist and white supremacist Louis Beam advocated an organizational structure that he termed “leaderless resistance” to target the U.S. government. As Beam noted, “Utilizing the Leaderless Resistance concept, all individuals and groups operate independently of each other, and never report to a central headquarters or single leader for direction or instruction, as would those who belong to a typical pyramid organization.”<sup>46</sup> Beam’s leaderless resistance concept remains inspiring to some right-wing extremists and partially explains why much

of the far-right threat comes from lone actors and small networks—rather than large groups.

Today, some in the Department of Justice, Department of Homeland Security, FBI, and state and local law enforcement agencies have expressed alarm at far-right extremism. The Trump Administration’s counterterrorism strategy, released in October 2018, warned that the United States faces a threat from individuals motivated by types of violent extremism other than radical Islam, “such as racially motivated extremism, animal rights extremism, environmental extremism, sovereign citizen extremism, and militia extremism.”<sup>47</sup> In April 2018, federal authorities charged 57 members of white supremacist organizations with drug trafficking and kidnapping.<sup>48</sup> As U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions remarked following the arrest, “Not only do white supremacist gangs subscribe to a repugnant, hateful ideology, they also engage in significant, organized and violent criminal activity.” He continued that “the Department of Justice has targeted every violent criminal gang member in the United States. The quantities of drugs, guns, and money seized in this case are staggering.”<sup>49</sup>

The challenge now is to devote sufficient attention and resources to stop the *further rise* of right-wing extremism.<sup>50</sup> The goal should be to bring far-right activity to a manageable level and to prevent attacks. Several steps are important.

First, federal, state, and local agencies need to focus on the rise of right-wing extremism. As noted earlier, the number of right-wing terrorist attacks is now greater than the number of Islamic extremist attacks. Europe’s evolving terrorism threat has led to a reapportionment of counterterrorism resources. In the UK, the government gave the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre, the domestic spy agency MI5, and the police more resources to collect intelligence on—and arrest—right-wing terrorists. The FBI and Joint Terrorism Task Forces, which lead terrorism investigations across the United States, have been focused on the threat from Sunni jihadists and Shia groups like Hezbollah. The results of the November 2018 mid-term elections are unlikely to significantly impact the threat from right-wing extremists, though partisanship and even hate speech from all sides could increase.

Penetrating far-right networks, identifying extremists on social media forums, and arresting terrorists before they attack won’t be easy. Most right-wing extremists are lone actors. Even the alt-right, or alternative right, is a loosely connected network of white supremacists, white nationalists, anti-Semites, neo-Nazis, and other fringe hate groups. Lone actors and small networks don’t often talk about their

plots by phone or e-mail, both of which can be intercepted by law enforcement agencies.<sup>51</sup> However, they may be active on social media forums, which can be monitored. In addition, there is no federal statute in U.S. code for domestic terrorism.<sup>52</sup> There is also no domestic terrorist organization designation like there is for international terrorists (such as the U.S. State Department's Foreign Terrorist Organization designations) to focus attention on threats from right-wing or left-wing extremists.<sup>53</sup>

Second, the U.S. government needs to work closely with the private sector—including social media companies—and European partners to combat right-wing extremism, as it has in combatting Islamic extremism. Some European states, including France and the UK, have put significant pressure on social media companies to remove content that advocates or otherwise supports terrorism, including if it violates company terms of service. Restricting extremist access to social media requires companies to devote staff time and engineering resources to detecting such content and closing it down. The United States should set out clear requirements and consider what additional levels of regulation and assertions of liability might be applied to secure maximum compliance—especially in cases where individuals and networks support violence.

The United States has made significant progress since 9/11 in countering the threat from Islamic extremists. It now needs to do the same with right-wing and other terrorists. To succeed, Americans will need a sober assessment of the threat and thoughtful solutions, not political posturing.

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## ENDNOTES

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- 17 See, for example, Casey Sanchez, *NYT Fashion Pub: Skinhead Style is Back* (Montgomery, AL: Southern Poverty Law Center, September 21, 2007), <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2007/09/21/nyt-fashion-pub-skin-head-style-back>.
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