



**From Reconstruction to the Day of the Rope:
The Evolution and Persistence of Assassination
as a Tool of White Supremacist Terror**

Joseph Stabile • November 2022

Program on Extremism

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About the Program on Extremism

The Program on Extremism at The George Washington University provides analysis on issues related to violent and nonviolent extremism. The Program spearheads innovative and thoughtful academic inquiry, producing empirical work that strengthens extremism research as a distinct field of study. The Program aims to develop pragmatic policy solutions that resonate with policymakers, civic leaders, and the general public. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security or The George Washington University.

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Introduction

“What can you and I do to a state legislator besides kill them?”¹ Two days prior to the January 6th Capitol Siege, white supremacist commentator Nick Fuentes launched a livestream to ask this question, condemning lawmakers and the democratic process itself. In the same breath with which he began to walk back this incendiary rhetoric, Fuentes again inquired, “what else can you do, right? Nothing.”² In the lead-up to the Siege, content posted on TheDonald.win likewise glorified political violence, including a post from January 5th that justified the lynching of elected officials.³ Less than twenty-four hours later, a crowd of thousands chanted “Hang Mike Pence” and spoke about executing the then-Vice President for his failure to challenge the results of the 2020 presidential election.⁴ Law enforcement officials later recovered a pair of pipe bombs, one outside the Democratic National Committee building and the other in an alley behind the Capitol Hill Club and the Republican National Committee building. To date, the unidentified suspect of this plot remains at large.⁵

On that day, a mix of anti-government militia extremists, conspiracy theorists, white supremacist extremists (WSEs), and partisan demonstrators primarily sought to prevent the Congressional certification of election results as they stormed the Capitol building. The calls for violence, however, suggest an additional motivation among some rioters. Some of those involved, writes sociologist Kathleen Blee, seemed “intent on assassinating politicians they saw as enemies.”⁶ Even after authorities finally wrested control of the building from the mob, the threat of political violence continued,

¹ Hannah Gais, “Meet the White Nationalist Organizer Who Spewed Hate Against Lawmakers,” Southern Poverty Law Center, January 19, 2021, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2021/01/19/meet-white-nationalist-organizer-who-spewed-hate-against-lawmakers>.

² Hannah Gais, “Meet the White Nationalist Organizer Who Spewed Hate Against Lawmakers.”

³ Craig Timber, “Gallows or guillotines? The chilling debate on TheDonald.win before the Capitol siege.” Washington Post, April 15, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/04/15/thedonald-capitol-attack-advance-democracy/>.

⁴ “Threats, Call for Violence Targeting Elected Officials,” Anti-Defamation League, January 29, 2021, <https://www.adl.org/blog/threats-calls-for-violence-targeting-elected-officials>.

⁵ Sebastian Murdock, “6 Months After Deadly Capitol Riot, Pipe Bomb Suspect Still Eludes Authorities,” Huffington Post, July 3, 2021, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/capitol-riot-pipe-bomb-suspect-at-large_n_60e09791e4b094dd268c029b.

⁶ Kathleen Blee, “The U.S. Capitol storming was a victorious display of white supremacy. What should we be watching in the near future?” Center for Research on Extremism, January 16, 2021, <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/news-and-events/right-now/2020/us-capitol-white-supremacism.html>.

with rhetoric aimed at Democrats and Republicans alike.⁷ On Telegram, for example, users levied “threats of public hanging” and other violent imagery towards Republican officials who did not vote to dismiss impeachment proceedings against former President Trump.⁸

This environment—in which the threat of political assassination looms large, and extremists target the heart of America’s democratic process—may feel like an aberration, or an unprecedented moment in U.S. history. Reality, however, lies far from this perception. For generations, violent white supremacists have targeted political leaders and prominent activists in an attempt to subvert multiracial democracy.

Studying the long arc of assassination sheds light on the factors that have sustained the use of this tactic over the course of generational shifts, ideological developments, and organizational evolutions within the WSE movement. This paper argues that existing scholarly criteria for sustained terrorist campaigns—particularly, the importance of a belief in the efficacy of violence, the resonance of a violent movement’s belief with a wider audience, and the influence of ideological leadership—help to explain the persistent use of assassination as a tactic of white supremacist terrorism.⁹ Over time, the increasing salience of one factor may help mitigate another’s decline and contribute to the tactic’s continued use in an evolving environment.

As the United States experiences a period of heightened animosity toward elected officials and other political leaders, the history of WSE assassination—and the context in which these attacks have occurred—suggests a stark outlook for the future landscape of violent extremism.¹⁰ Though today’s

⁷ “Threats, Call for Violence Targeting Elected Officials,” Anti-Defamation League, January 29, 2021, <https://www.adl.org/blog/threats-calls-for-violence-targeting-elected-officials>.

⁸ “Threats, Call for Violence Targeting Elected Officials,” Anti-Defamation League, January 29, 2021, <https://www.adl.org/blog/threats-calls-for-violence-targeting-elected-officials>.

⁹ See: Richard English, *Terrorism: How to Respond* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 98. Though English discusses a number of factors in the context of 21st century international terrorism, his criteria for the sustainment of terrorist campaign provide a helpful framework from which to study different violent extremist threats.

¹⁰ See, for example: Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware, “The Accelerating Threat of the Political Assassination,” *War on the Rocks*, August 24, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/08/the-accelerating-threat-of-the-political-assassination/>; Ben Makuch, “The Far-Right Is Doxxing Judges and Calling for Their Assassinations,” *Vice News*, May 12, 2022, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/m7vzmp/telegram-far-right-doxxing-judges-calling-for-assassinations>; Linda So and Jason Szep, “U.S. election workers get little help from law enforcement as terror threats mount,” *Reuters*, September 8, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-election-threats-law-enforcement>.

WSE movement may not match the strength of its predecessors, the confluence of a rhetorical environment that glorifies political violence and a growing consensus that violence will deliver preferred political outcomes suggest the threat of assassination will remain an ongoing concern. This threat is only one piece of a broader campaign to undermine democracy and intimidate public leaders, but to understand the threat of political violence in the United States today, it is crucial to understand its complete historical context.¹¹ As an increasingly diverse contingent of extremists prompts security officials to issue threat advisories related to the 2022 midterm elections, this paper seeks to provide one component of that foundation.¹²

¹¹ Brian Hughes and Cynthia Miller-Idriss, "Uniting for Total Collapse: The January 6 Boost to Accelerationism," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 14, No. 4, (April/May 2021), <https://ctc.usma.edu/uniting-for-total-collapse-the-january-6-boost-to-accelerationism/>; Meryl Kornfield and Mariana Alfaro, "1 in 3 Americans say violence against government can be justified, citing fears of political schism, pandemic," *Washington Post*, January 1, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/01/01/1-3-americans-say-violence-against-government-can-be-justified-citing-fears-political-schism-pandemic/>; Linda So and Jason Szep, "U.S. election workers get little help from law enforcement as terror threats mount," *Reuters*, September 8, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-election-threats-law-enforcement>.

¹² "Summary of Terrorism Threat to the U.S. Homeland," Department of Homeland Security, June 7, 2022, <https://www.dhs.gov/ntas/advisory/national-terrorism-advisory-system-bulletin-june-7-2022>; Cynthia Miller-Idriss and Brian Hughes, "Blurry Ideologies and Strange Coalitions: The Evolving Landscape of Domestic Extremism," *Lawfare*, December 19, 2021, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/blurry-ideologies-and-strange-coalitions-evolving-landscape-domestic-extremism>.

Scope and Road Map

In the following sections, this paper traces the arc of WSE political assassination in the U.S., beginning with the first campaign of modern American terror in the late nineteenth century and following the movement into the 2020s. And while the scope of this paper focuses primarily on one particular tactic of the WSE movement, it also examines the context in which WSEs come to employ it.

When discussing the WSE movement across generations, this paper refers to a broad range of non-state actors who use violence or the threat thereof to advance an agenda perceived to benefit a socially constructed in-group of whiteness. At various points in U.S. history, this movement has included pro-state vigilantes such as the Klansmen that reinforced Jim Crow policies; revolutionary white power activists who united neo-Nazis, neo-Confederates, and Christian Identity extremists;¹³ and accelerationists seeking the violent overthrow of the existing U.S. political and social order to usher in a white ethnostate (whether implicitly or explicitly identifying as such).¹⁴

WSE actors over the course of generations share notable similarities in target selection, though this paper will also explore how changes to the operating environment over the course of generations have influenced the application of assassination. From the post-Civil War era through today, WSE assassins have targeted both out-group figures—racial and religious minorities—and members of the in-group of whiteness they perceive to be “race traitors.” This paper addresses the emergence of this phenomenon in the Reconstruction era and later explores the key role it plays in the most important propaganda texts of the following century.

Along with these continuities, assassination plots by WSEs have varied slightly based on what Yannick Veilleux-Lepage describes as “changes in propositional knowledge”—fluctuations in social and political contexts, as well as changes in the nature of the relationship between WSEs and their perceived

¹³ Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018), 6.

¹⁴ Brian Hughes and Cynthia Miller-Idriss, “Uniting for Total Collapse.”; Matthew Kriner, “An Introduction to Militant Accelerationism,” Accelerationism Research Consortium, May 9, 2022, <https://www.accelresearch.org/shortanalysis/an-introduction-to-militant-accelerationism>.

adversaries.¹⁵ As the WSE movement grew increasingly distant from the mainstream of the United States in the mid-twentieth century, key propagandists have reinforced the centrality of assassination as a tool of white supremacist terror, helping to sustain a belief in the efficacy of violence even as broader sympathy for white supremacist terrorism has declined in the United States. As a result of this rhetorical leadership, the tactic of assassination has endured in the *modus operandi* of a highly decentralized network. As such, it will likely remain, even if relatively infrequently, a tactic of choice.

Finally, Veilleux-Lepage posits that changes in technological contexts can prompt tactical innovation.¹⁶ The concluding sections of this paper, therefore, explore WSE assassination plots in the twenty-first century, which include the nascent use of “swatting”—attempts to carry out targeted attacks by proxy actors. In doing so, this paper draws from this work and other scholarship to conclude with an assessment of the threat environment to come.

¹⁵ Yannick Veilleux-Lepage, *How Terror Evolves: The Emergence and Spread of Terrorist Techniques* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 49.

¹⁶ Yannick Veilleux-Lepage, *How Terror Evolves*, 13.

Why Study Assassination?

Before exploring the historical trajectory and present manifestation of assassination as a tool of WSEs, it is worth defining the term, unpacking the tactic itself, and assessing why it matters within the overall movement. To start, this paper applies Arie Perliger's definition from the 2015 study, *The Rationale of Political Assassinations*: "an action that directly or indirectly leads to the death of an intentionally targeted individual who is active in the political sphere, in order to promote or prevent specific policies, values, practices or norms pertaining to the collective."¹⁷ This paper therefore examines the targeted killing of elected officials, activists, and others whose political engagement triggered a perceived threat among WSEs. This approach likewise aligns with Bruce Hoffman's distinction of an assassin who is "pursuing purely egocentric goals" or "material satiation"¹⁸ from the terrorist assassin, who is "ineluctably political in aims and motives."¹⁹

Having now defined this term, one may question why WSE assassinations matter relative to more frequently employed tactics. It is worth noting that assassinations have comprised a slim proportion of white supremacist terrorist plots in recent years—attacks against civilians, especially religious institutions, are far more common.^{20,21} According to Bennett Clifford's tally of racially- or ethnically-motivated violent extremist attack plots in the United States between 2014 and 2019, targeting of

¹⁷ Arie Perliger, "The Rationale of Political Assassinations," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, February 2015, 21, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/CTC_The-Rationale-Of-Political-Assassinations-February20151.pdf.

¹⁸ Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006), 39.

¹⁹ Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 39-40.

²⁰ Bennett Clifford, "Racially/Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremist (RMVE) Attack Planning and United States Federal Response, 2014-2019," Program on Extremism at The George Washington University, May 2021, 14, <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/RMVE%20Attack%20Planning%20and%20United%20States%20Federal%20Response.pdf>.

²¹ Ravndal et al. similarly find that attacks against state institutions (including political leaders) make up a small percentage of "right-wing terrorism and violence," but the authors do note that this type of targeting increased between 2016 and 2020. See: Jacob Aasland Ravndal, Madeleine Thorstensen, Anders Ravik Jupskås and Graham Macklin, "RTV Trend Report 2021: Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence in Western Europe, 1990 – 2020," C-REX Research Report, 2021, <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/groups/rtv-dataset/trend-report-2021.pdf>.

religious institutions outpaced plots against prominent members of media and Congress by a ratio of twenty to one.²²

Why, then, study an outlier among the broader set of WSE plots and attacks? Assassinations matter because these types of attacks can serve as disproportionately influential acts of terror. When conducted successfully, assassinations deliver an impact that extends far beyond the immediate casualty count. Though results may vary across regime types, assassinations “shock societal and political institutions...leaving citizens to question the future of their state institutions,” writes Laura Bell.²³ By undermining faith in the political system, these events provide openings for violent actors to sow distrust and further destabilize governing institutions.²⁴ As such, assassinations serve as a particularly suitable tool for the accelerationist camp of today’s WSE movement—those who believe that “the overthrow of the existing political and social order is the essential first step of any future agenda seeking to reshape the country.”²⁵ Unsurprisingly, given this context, plots for targeted assassinations may coincide with plans for other terrorist violence.²⁶ This tactic therefore demands attention from scholars and practitioners because of its ability to generate an outsized impact, even if the raw totals pale in comparison to other terrorist methods.

Beyond this inordinate societal impact, assassination may also lead to an accelerated cycle of political violence, particularly given the iterative nature of white supremacist terrorism. In his study on the rationale of political assassinations, Perliger finds a “strong contingency effect of assassinations” in which “would-be assassins try to imitate past successes.”²⁷ More broadly, WSEs tend to mimic their

²² Bennett Clifford, “Racially/Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremist (RMVE) Attack Planning and United States Federal Response, 2014-2019,” 19.

²³ Laura Bell, “Terrorist Targeting and Political Assassination,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* Vol., 40 No. 2 (July 2016), 158.

²⁴ Laura Bell, “Terrorist Targeting and Political Assassination,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* Vol. 40, No. 2 (July 2016), 158.

²⁵ Brian Hughes and Cynthia Miller-Idriss, “Uniting for Total Collapse.”

²⁶ See, for example: the case of Conor Climo, who allegedly sought to target both Anti-Defamation League staff members and the LGBTQ community, as well plots from Atomwaffen and The Base, which are described later in this paper and by H.E. Upchurch in “The Iron March Forum and the Evolution of the ‘Skull Mask’ Neo-Fascist Network,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 14, No. 10, (December 2021), <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-iron-march-forum-and-the-evolution-of-the-skull-mask-neo-fascist-network/>.

²⁷ Arie Perliger, “The Rationale of Political Assassinations,” 53-54.

predecessors and replicate their attacks.²⁸ Graham Macklin has thus characterized the movement's violence as self-referential in nature, building on the 2019 finding that "at least one-third of extreme-right terrorists since 2011 had been inspired by similar perpetrators, revered them, or studied their tactics and modus operandi."²⁹ So while these attacks may remain a relatively rare phenomenon in the broader extremist ecosystem, assassinations entail far more than a discrete act of violence.

²⁸ Blyth Crawford and Florence Keen, "The Hanau Terrorist Attack: How Race Hate and Conspiracy Theories Are Fueling Global Far-Right Violence," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 13 No. 3 (March 2020), <https://ctc.usma.edu/hanau-terrorist-attack-race-hate-conspiracy-theories-fueling-global-far-right-violence/>; Isaac Stanley-Becker and Drew Harwell, "Buffalo suspect allegedly inspired by racist theory fueling global carnage," *Washington Post*, May 15, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/05/15/buffalo-shooter-great-replacement-extremism/>.

²⁹ Graham Macklin, "The Christchurch Attacks: Livestream Terror in the Viral Video Age," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 12, No. 6, (July 2019), <https://ctc.usma.edu/christchurch-attacks-livestream-terror-viral-video-age/>.

Origins of White Supremacist Assassinations

Understanding the damaging societal impact of assassinations and their implication for future violence, we must examine the advent of modern white supremacist terror—the Reconstruction and Redemption eras. While the most infamous assassination of the nineteenth century took place with the murder of Abraham Lincoln, the period that followed unleashed a wave of violence that included a torrent of attacks against elected officials and other leaders.

Within five years of the Civil War's end, members of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), the Knights of the White Camelia (KWC), and the White Brotherhood began to carry out political violence across the Southern states.³⁰ Relatively little evidence has survived regarding these shadowy groups' internal decision-making processes and operating procedures, but available information points clearly to the conclusion that assassination served as a key tactic of terror. Writing specifically about the KWC, W.E.B. DuBois noted that this group's objectives "were especially aimed at excluding Negroes from voting by terrorism and killing the leaders [of Reconstruction]." ³¹ According to the testimony of one member of the KWC, the organization even developed norms surrounding the practice of assassination. After identifying a target, members held a formal vote on the decision to carry out the assassination, and separate chapters often coordinated with one another for plots that crossed KWC jurisdictions.³² The KWC's assassination advanced a sinister, yet simple, logic: "Every man who has a white heart is a walking arsenal...And it is the determination of whites to remain united until the last Radical [Republican] and the last n—er are out of office."³³

³⁰ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*, Updated Edition. (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 342 and 425.

³¹ W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America*. (New York: Atheneum, 1970), 681.

³² Edward Ball, *Life of a Klansman: A Family History in White Supremacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), 263-264.

³³ Edward Ball, *Life of a Klansman: A Family History in White Supremacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), 263-264. ; Daniel Byman, "White Supremacy, Terrorism, and the Failure of Reconstruction in the United States," *International Security*, Vol. 45, No. 1, (Summer 2021), 77-82.

Part of a more expansive effort to restore white supremacy,³⁴ these attacks aimed to “thwart and destroy [B]lack and Republican party political activity.”³⁵ Though the precise scale of this campaign of assassinations remains untallied, the historical record suggests a pattern of attacks incomprehensible by today’s standards.³⁶ As leaders sought to rebuild the U.S. political system in the wake of Civil War, historian Eric Foner recounts, “at least one tenth of the [B]lack members of the 1867-68 constitutional conventions became victims of violence during Reconstruction, including seven actually murdered.”³⁷ These assassinations continued as Reconstruction-era governments began to take shape, and the violence permeated all levels of society. Local political leaders could not escape these attacks, as the case of Jack Dupree reflects. In 1871, the “well-respected Black president of a local political club in Monroe County, Mississippi” was taken from his home and brutally lynched by a mob of sixty Klansmen.³⁸ Clergymen, too, faced the Klan’s violence during an era in which Black churches “shouldered a lot of the burden for educating and organizing freedpeople.”³⁹ The same year that Mississippi Klansmen killed Jack Dupree, their South Carolinian counterparts in terror assassinated Lewis Thompson, a Methodist minister who defied demands to abandon his vocation.⁴⁰

At a time when Black Americans’ assertion of economic autonomy prompted violent backlash, entrepreneurship and high-publicity commercial activity reasonably qualified as political acts. The targeted killing of prominent Black business owners—such as was seen in the triple lynching of Thomas Moss and his employees Will Stewart and Calvin McDowell—therefore finds a place within the broader campaign of assassinations and violence in the postwar nineteenth century.⁴¹ Writing about this

³⁴ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution*, 425.

³⁵ David Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of American Freedom*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018) 522.

³⁶ Equal Justice Initiative, *Reconstruction in America: Racial Violence After the Civil War 1865-1876*, (Montgomery: 2020), 59, <https://eji.org/report/reconstruction-in-america/the-danger-of-freedom/#political-violence>.

³⁷ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution*, 426.

³⁸ Equal Justice Initiative, *Reconstruction in America: Racial Violence After the Civil War 1865-1876*, (Montgomery: 2020), 59, <https://eji.org/report/reconstruction-in-america/the-danger-of-freedom/#political-violence>.

³⁹ Kidada Williams, “Centuries of Violence,” *Slate*, June 19, 2015, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2015/06/charleston-church-shooting-for-black-americans-dylann-storms-attack-is-just-the-latest-example-of-two-centuries-of-white-supremacist-violence.html>.

⁴⁰ Kidada Williams, “Centuries of Violence.”; Paul Harvey, *Christianity and Race in the American South: A History*, Chicago History of American Religion (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 110.

⁴¹ See: Amanda K. Frisken, “A Song Without Words’: Anti-Lynching Imagery in the African American Press, 1889 – 1898,” *The Journal of African American History*, Vol. 97, No. 3, (Summer 2012), 246. ; “Three Black Grocers Lynched in Memphis, Tennessee,” Equal Justice Initiative: A History of Racial Injustice, <https://calendar.eji.org/racial-injustice/mar/9>.

particular attack on the operators of the People's Grocery venture, the pioneering anti-lynching activist Ida Wells-Barnett reflected on the political and psychological consequences of this targeted violence, describing it as an attempt "to get rid of N—es who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized."⁴²

In addition to targeting Black community and political leaders, WSEs took aim at those white officials who aimed to advance the cause of equality through the support of Reconstruction policies. Indeed, a new vocabulary emerged to condemn this class of so-called *scalawags*, those supposedly "traitorous white Southerners" who worked alongside federal troops and "plundered the defeated South," in the eyes of Confederates.⁴³ Here, one can begin to discern a pattern that would replicate over the course of generations in which WSEs direct violence towards fellow whites when these individuals are perceived as collaborating with a corrupt system to supposedly betray their own race.⁴⁴ In 1868, for example, a suspected Klansman murdered Rep. James Hinds, the first sitting member of the U.S. Congress to be assassinated.⁴⁵ Hinds, a convert to the Republican cause and outspoken advocate for Black suffrage, was murdered while campaigning for Ulysses S. Grant. His death came in the context of considerable violence against elected officials in Hinds's home state of Arkansas, with one contemporary report noting that the "Rebel murderers have now a regular arrangement in every county to put out of the way leading Republicans."⁴⁶

This sort of violence occurred throughout the region as the Klan and other militant white supremacists carried out attacks against perceived race traitors across the South. Two years after Hinds's

⁴² Wells qtd. in Tommy J. Curry, "The Fortune of Wells: Ida B. Wells-Barnett's Use of T. Thomas Fortune's Philosophy of Social Agitation as a Prolegomenon to Militant Civil Rights Activism," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy*, Vol. 48, No. 4, (Fall 2012), 466.

⁴³ Eric Foner, "*Black Reconstruction: An Introduction*," *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 112, No. 3, (Summer 2013), 409.

⁴⁴ For more on the modern manifestation of this phenomenon, see: J.M. Berger, "A Paler Shade of White: Identity & In-group Critique in James Mason's *Siege*," *Resolve Network*, April 2021, https://www.resolve.net/system/files/2021-04/RSVE_REMVE_Berger_April%202021_1.pdf.

⁴⁵ William B. Darrow, "The Killing of Congressman James Hinds," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 74, No. 1, (Spring 2015). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24477498?read-now=1&refreqid=excelsior%3Aff3f9ee2826609a5a59e976b06c13839&seq=1>. ; "Sitting Arkansas U.S. Congressman James Hinds is murdered on the road in Monroe County, Arkansas," *House Divided: The Civil War Research Engine at Dickinson College*, <http://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/46941>.

⁴⁶ William B. Darrow, "The Killing of Congressman James Hinds," 37.

assassination, a North Carolina state senator was murdered because of his long-held opposition to the Confederate cause.⁴⁷ Klansmen likewise killed three white Georgia legislators who opposed the so-called Invisible Empire's white supremacist aims.⁴⁸ A string of assassinations in South Carolina claimed the lives of at least one Black legislator and two white legislators prior to the 1868 elections, leading even the local Democratic Party leadership to condemn the violence.⁴⁹

As the modern racial terror movement emerged in the late nineteenth century, the scope of acceptable targets became clear. Beyond the primary subject of this violence—the Black community—Klan terror also enveloped white officials assisting in the project of Reconstruction. These attacks served the movement's counterrevolutionary aims and helped reshape the trajectory of post-war politics away from progress towards racial equality. As successive iterations of the Klan re-emerged in the following century, extremists employed similar attacks in pursuit of a white supremacist agenda. Indeed, Daniel Byman argues that Reconstruction-era achievements provided WSEs “a repertoire of violence to draw on in subsequent years when their superior social position faced new threats.”⁵⁰ Tim Wilson likewise contends that the violence of this era—which heavily targeted Black leaders and their allies—offered “an enduring template for the future.”⁵¹

These attacks did not occur in a vacuum and ultimately complemented the broader project to halt Reconstruction and reverse its progress. In chronicling the 1898 coup that overthrew the multiracial government of Wilmington, North Carolina, David Zucchino argues that terrorists and non-violent political actors worked in tandem to advance the cause of white supremacy. The failure to hold perpetrators of violence accountable fed this cycle and inspired like-minded actors across the country.⁵²

⁴⁷ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*, 427.

⁴⁸ Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction* (Harper Collins: New York, 2015), 11, https://www.nypl.org/sites/default/files/foner_-_preface_chapter_9.pdf.

⁴⁹ Patrick Young, “Wade Hampton & South Carolina Democrats Call for a Halt to Assassinations Nov. 1868,” *The Reconstruction Era*, October 15, 2019, <https://thereconstructionera.com/wade-hampton-south-carolina-democrats-call-for-a-halt-to-assassinations-nov-1868/>

⁵⁰ Daniel Byman, “White Supremacy, Terrorism, and the Failure of Reconstruction in the United States,” *International Security*, 101.

⁵¹ Tim Wilson, “Rightist Violence: An Historical Perspective,” 6.

⁵² David Zucchino, *Wilmington's Lie: The Murderous Coup of 1898 and the Rise of White Supremacy* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2020), Epilogue.

In the late nineteenth century, judicial and legislative decisions ultimately fulfilled the mission of the first Klan by restoring the subjugation of Black Americans. The 1876 Supreme Court decision *United States v. Cruikshank*, for example, “imposed strict limitations on the enforcement of civil and political rights,” which “unleashed a coordinated campaign of paramilitary terrorism that ousted numerous county-level Republican officials.”⁵³ The withdrawal of federal troops from the South in the following year led to new voting restrictions in every Confederate state in the coming decades.⁵⁴ As segregation reshaped the political landscape in the United States, WSEs adapted to their operating environment and embraced vigilante-style terrorism to preserve the new status quo. Motivated by a continued commitment to white supremacy, validated in their belief of the efficacy of violence, and ideologically supported by the prevailing U.S. political institutions, the WSE campaign carried onwards into the twentieth century.

⁵³ James Gray Pope, “Snubbed Landmark,” 389.

⁵⁴ Ruth Colker, “The White Supremacist Constitution,” Ohio State Legal Studies Research Paper, No. 612, (April 2021), 26, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3836733.

Assassination in Jim Crow America⁵⁵

Helping to destroy the project of Reconstruction and curb Black access to the ballot, the success of nineteenth-century terrorism generated an evolution in targeting stemming from a sharp decline in the election of Black Americans to elected office. The implementation of poll taxes, literacy tests, and other segregationist measures effectively disenfranchised the Black population and reversed the trend of a rapid increase in Black office-holding, especially within Southern state legislatures.⁵⁶ With white Democrats advancing one-party rule throughout the South, not a single Black American was elected to U.S. Congress between 1901 and 1929,⁵⁷ and it would take until 1967 for Black representation in Congress to reach Reconstruction-era levels.⁵⁸ Whereas the Reconstruction era witnessed the fruits of Black male enfranchisement, the subsequent period of resurgent white supremacy ushered in the ascendance of Klansmen and their sympathizers to nearly every level of elected office and public authority.⁵⁹ Adapting to the relative absence of Black office-holders, WSEs set their sights on Black community leaders, activists, and their allies as part of a campaign of vigilante violence to discourage voter enfranchisement and civil rights activism.

With a broad base of support and emboldened by the success of terrorist violence in the post-Civil War period, assassinations and other forms of racial violence continued in the Jim Crow era to purge political

⁵⁵ Scope note: When studying vigilante terrorism, the line between state and non-state violence often blurs, as multiple forms of violence serve to uphold a given status quo. This challenge is particularly true in the context of Jim Crow America, when the racism that animated terrorist violence was explicitly reflected in state institutions and legal regimes, and the rosters of the Klan intersected with that of the municipal offices. This paper, however, which focuses on the violence of non-state actors, does not delve into the phenomenon of violent attacks against activists by agents of the state. This aspect of the era's history undoubtedly merits recognition, but because the paper focuses on the vigilantes themselves—and not the state that they sought to reinforce—it does not include discussion the murders of activists such as Jimmie Lee Jackson.

⁵⁶ Richard M. Valelly, *The Two Reconstructions: The Struggle for Black Enfranchisement* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2009), 3.

⁵⁷ "The Negroes' Temporary Farewell: Jim Crow and the Exclusion of African Americans from Congress, 1887–1929," Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives, 2008, <https://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/BAIC/Historical-Essays/Temporary-Farewell/Introduction/>.

⁵⁸ Ida Brudnick and Jennifer Manning, "African American Members of the U.S. Congress: 1870-2020," Congressional Research Service, December 15, 2020, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RL30378.pdf>, 6-8.

⁵⁹ See: David Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan*, 3rd ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 202-215.; David Chalmers, "The Ku Klux Klan In Politics In The 1920's," *Mississippi Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 4 (Fall 1965) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26473702>, 235.; Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017), 184.

actors from the fight for equality and dissuade others from taking up the cause. Among the more than 3,000 lynchings between 1890 and 1930,⁶⁰ many attacks targeted prominent Black Americans resisting mistreatment, including ministers and community leaders who sought to organize Black laborers.⁶¹ All too often, the lynch mob specifically targeted those who spearheaded the fight for economic and civil rights—acts that would constitute assassination based on the definition applied in this paper.

In addition to spontaneously organized lynch mobs, the second generation of the Ku Klux Klan added to the sum of assassinations in this period of attacks that complemented other intimidation efforts and economic coercion. In Kansas, Klansmen abducted a mayor opposed to the organization and publicly whipped him.⁶² While this beating was non-lethal, the violence nonetheless mirrors other attacks on public-facing leaders and serves the same political and psychological purpose. Beyond elected officials, the Klan, too, targeted Black activists and community leaders. Perhaps most infamously, the Omaha Klan's threats forced the family of Reverend Earl Little, an organizer for the Universal Negro Improvement Association and father to the activist later known as Malcolm X, to flee their home for the North, where the violent intimidation did not cease.⁶³ In her study of the second Klan in Georgia, historian Nancy MacLean observes a similar pattern of attacks on community leaders and those who the Klan perceived posed a threat to white economic hegemony. NAACP leaders faced threats, a Methodist minister who sought to educate his community endured a flogging, and a Black local political leader named S.S. Mincey was kidnapped and beaten to death by masked men in 1930.⁶⁴

Towards the middle of the century, as political violence surged in reaction to a growing mid-century struggle for civil rights,⁶⁵ assassination continued to play a role in the campaign of white supremacist terrorism in the United States. The violence continued under a familiar set of circumstances: attackers

⁶⁰ Tim Wilson, "Rightist Violence: An Historical Perspective," 7.

⁶¹ *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, Equal Justice Initiative, 2017, 39, <https://eji.org/wp-content/uploads/2005/11/lynching-in-america-3d-ed-052421.pdf>.

⁶² Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK*, 101.

⁶³ Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK*, 94.

⁶⁴ Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 154-165. Arthur Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1933), Chapter X.

⁶⁵ Arie Perliger has documented a significant rise in violence after both the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. See: Arie Perliger, *American Zealots: Inside Right-Wing Domestic Terrorism*, Columbia Studies in Terrorism and Irregular Warfare (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 101.

acted with impunity while a broader audience—to include state institutions—abetted this terror and WSE movement leaders helped to coordinate such attacks.

As was the case in the post-Civil War era, racist attacks went habitually unpunished, leaving many apparent assassinations without legal resolution. For example, the killers of Harry T. Moore—the first NAACP official assassinated during the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights Movement—evaded prosecution, and only in 2006 did a report from the Florida Attorney General’s Office implicate four Klansmen in the 1951 plot.⁶⁶ Moore, who investigated lynchings and fought for voting rights in a Klan hotbed, died alongside his wife, Harriette, when a bomb planted inside his house detonated on Christmas day.⁶⁷ Just five years later, assailants gunned down another local NAACP leader, Rev. George Lee, who had faced regular threats for his attempts to register Black voters. At the time, some law enforcement authorities refused to investigate the attack and a local prosecutor declined to bring charges in the case.⁶⁸ Forty-five years later, the FBI released documents detailing “a significant amount of evidence linking” two members of the white supremacist Citizens Council to the murder, while also noting they could not be prosecuted because they were deceased, and the statute of limitations had expired.⁶⁹

Other cases, such as that of Mississippi NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers, would take multiple trials to bring the perpetrator to justice. Evers, who himself investigated the murder of Rev. Lee, had garnered notoriety for his work as a civil rights organizer. In short time, he received threats from the Citizens Council, and by 1963, rhetoric evolved into violent action when an unknown assailant launched a

⁶⁶ Charlie Crist, “The Christmas 1951 Murders of Harry T. and Harriette V. Moore: Results of the Attorney General’s Investigation,” Florida Attorney General’s Office, 2006
<https://www.nbbd.com/godo/moore/investigation/0608MooreExecSum.pdf>.

⁶⁷ Francine Uenuma, “The Unsolved Murder of Civil Rights Activist Harry Moore,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 26, 2020, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/unsolved-murder-civil-rights-activist-harry-moore-180974285/>; “The Legacy of Harry T. Moore,” PBS, accessed May 24, 2021, <http://www.pbs.org/harrymoore/harry/mbio.html>.

⁶⁸ David T. Beito and Linda Royster Beito, “The Grim and Overlooked Anniversary of the Murder of the Rev. George W. Lee, Civil Rights Activist,” *George Washington University History News Network*, <http://hnn.us/articles/11744.html>; “Rev. George Lee,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, accessed October 5, 2022, <https://www.splcenter.org/rev-george-lee>.

⁶⁹ “George Lee – Notice to Close File” Department of Justice Civil Rights Division - FILE NO. 144-40-2154, July 12, 2011, <https://www.justice.gov/crt/case-document/george-lee>.

Molotov cocktail onto his property.⁷⁰ Less than one month later, an avowed white supremacist named Byron de la Beckwith shot Evers in the back, killing the burgeoning civil rights leader.⁷¹

Despite uncertainty surrounding many cases, available evidence offers a clear picture that organized extremist groups—from the leadership to foot soldiers—continued to adopt assassination as a tactic of terror. Though perhaps less commonly understood as such, the 1964 murders of civil rights workers Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney—the former two northern-born Jewish Americans and the latter a Black native Mississippian—fit squarely within Perliger’s definition of assassination. A well-established activist in Mississippi with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Schwerner, in particular, caught the attention of the Klan. Sam Bowers, Imperial Wizard of the White Knights of the KKK, personally ordered Schwerner’s killing.⁷²

One month after Bowers called for Schwerner’s assassination, Klansman Edgar Ray Killen—in collaboration with local law enforcement officials—allegedly led his men on the mission that led to the death of the three civil rights workers.⁷³ Like Evers and others, white supremacists targeted these three activists specifically because of their work to dismantle the Jim Crow system. The murders detailed in this paper highlight only a fraction of this era’s terrorist assassinations: one count suggests “white supremacists murdered 41 people linked to the civil rights struggle” between 1954 and 1968.⁷⁴ And as was the case in the post-Civil War era, a lack of accountability for these attacks only begot more

⁷⁰ Erin Blakemore, “How the assassination of Medgar Evers galvanized the civil rights movement,” National Geographic, June 12, 2020, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/medgar-evers-assassination-galvanized-civil-rights-movement>; “Medgar Evers,” National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/civil-rights-leaders/medgar-evers>.

⁷¹ Two prosecution attempts in the following year failed when all-white juries delivered hung verdicts, but Beckwith was convicted and sentenced to life in prison thirty years later upon retrial. See: Margaret M. Russell, “Cleansing Moments and Retrospective Justice,” Michigan Law Review, Vol. 101. No. (2003), 1238-1239, <https://repository.law.umich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1785&context=mlr>.

⁷² Douglas Linder, “The Mississippi Burning Trial,” UMKC School of Law, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/price&bowers/Account.html>; Carolyn Boyes-Watson and Susan T. Krumholz, *Crime and Justice: Learning through Cases, third ed., Learning through Cases* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 267.

⁷³ Douglas Linder, “The Mississippi Burning Trial.”

⁷⁴ Daniel Byman, *Spreading Hate: The Global Rise of White Supremacist Terrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 21.

violence. Sam Bowers, for example, was later convicted for his role in the murder of another NAACP leader named Vernon Dahmer.⁷⁵

These more methodically planned assassinations might also be considered along a spectrum with what could be characterized as a more sporadic form of violence against civil rights workers, including beatings that were so prevalent that activists were taught specific techniques to reduce the impacts of the blows. At times, these attacks resulted in death, such as in the case of Reverend James Reeb, who traveled to Selma, Alabama in 1965. Reeb and two fellow ministers were ambushed en route to Brown Chapel AME Church after passing by a Klan-friendly restaurant—targeted as white, out-of-state supporters of the movement for voting rights.⁷⁶

In the face of this campaign of assassinations—along with beatings, a surge in bombings,⁷⁷ and violence at the hands of the state—organizers and activists ultimately helped secure a historic suite of civil rights legislation. Indeed, President Lyndon Johnson cited the murders of Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman as evidence of the importance of passing new civil rights legislation.⁷⁸ Extremism, however, did not abate as new policies helped to loosen the grip of institutional white supremacy. To the contrary, the WSE movement reacted to this step towards equality by embracing revolution.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ “Vernon Dahmer,” Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://www.splcenter.org/vernon-dahmer>.

⁷⁶ See: Duncan Howlett, *No Greater Love: The James Reeb Story*, (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1993). ; Andrew Beck Grace and Chip Brantley, *White Lies*, National Public Radio, <https://apps.npr.org/white-lies/#evidence>.

⁷⁷ David Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan*, 3rd ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 356. ; Tim Wilson, “Rightist Violence: An American Perspective,” 15.

⁷⁸ Alan Duke, “Johnson tapes offer glimpse into Civil Rights history,” CNN, February 14, 1997, <http://edition.cnn.com/US/9702/14/lbj.audio/>.

⁷⁹ Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 5.

The Role of Assassination Post-Civil Rights Movement

In the decades after the Civil Rights Movement, the WSE movement had transformed, but the historical legacy of assassination had not fallen from the movement's collective consciousness. The dedication section of Louis Beam's *Essays of a Klansman*, for example, includes a tribute to both Sam Bowers and Byron de la Beckwith.⁸⁰ Years later, at a planning meeting for an organization that brought together "hate groups as disparate as the neo-Nazi National Alliance and the more mainstream, neo-Confederate League of the South," attendees honored Evers's assassin as they commenced with a moment of silence for de la Beckwith.⁸¹

By this point at the turn of the century, the movement in the United States had exchanged its Jim Crow-era vigilantism for a decidedly anti-statist orientation, viewing violence as a tool to collapse the state and establish a new white-dominated society. As Kathleen Belew documents, the movement declared war on the state in 1983 and embraced cell-style terrorism in response to increased federal counterterrorism pressure.⁸² From this point on, assassination in the U.S. context took on a role more akin to what Wilson terms a "strategy of tension"—one that aims to sow chaos and "provoke a general crisis, even a civil war."⁸³ What conditions, then, sustained the popularity of the tactic of assassination within a changing movement? To unpack this question, this paper examines the late twentieth-century ideologues and attackers who helped keep assassination—a tool that serves the goal of anti-democratic destabilization—at the center of an evolving WSE movement.

As the movement grew increasingly revolutionary in the context of historic mid-century civil rights legislation, key propagandists promoted assassination as a means to incite race war. Two especially relevant ideologues—William Luther Pierce and James Mason—emerged from this period and helped shape the movement in the decades to come.

⁸⁰ Louis Beam, *Essays of a Klansman: Being a Compendium of Ku Klux Klan Ideology, Organizational Methods, History, Tactics, and Opinions, with Interpolations by the Author*, (Hayden Lake, ID: A.K.I.A. Publications, 1983).

⁸¹ "American White Supremacist Groups Have History of International Conflict," SPLC Intelligence Report, August 29, 2001. Available at: <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2001/american-white-supremacist-groups-have-history-international-conflict>.

⁸² Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 104.

⁸³ Tim Wilson, "Rightist Violence: An Historical Perspective," 8.

Pierce and the *Diaries*

The proud great-great grandson of an Attorney General of the Confederate States of America,⁸⁴ William Luther Pierce set out to reshape white supremacist organizing by rejecting electoral politics and embracing revolution. After years of intermittent contact with George Lincoln Rockwell, founder of the American Nazi Party, Pierce was hired to edit the *National Socialist World* in 1967 and would shortly thereafter join the National Socialist White People's Party.⁸⁵ With Rockwell's death came infighting typical of the WSE movement and, after a series of squabbles, Pierce assumed control of National Youth Alliance (which would drop the "Youth" from its title in 1974).⁸⁶ By 1975, his pseudonymously-written seminal text began to take shape.

The Turner Diaries, described by extremism expert J.M. Berger as the bible of the white nationalist movement, presents itself as a "found document" that details a small insurgency's efforts to foment a race war, assume control of the U.S. government, and exterminate non-whites across the world.⁸⁷ Among other criminal activity and violence, assassination figures into the operational repertoire of a fictitious terrorist cabal that begins its campaign by "assassinating law enforcement officials and politicians."⁸⁸ Per the *Diaries'* narrative, these attacks initially target non-white leaders but the cabal quickly turns its sight on so-called "race traitors."⁸⁹ This violence climaxes with what Pierce called "The Day of the Rope"—a mass execution of politicians, journalists, and others deemed to have betrayed the white race.⁹⁰ Less than a decade after publication, the *Diaries* inspired the 1983 formation of The

⁸⁴ Note: Pierce's fondness for his Confederate heritage appears openly in numerous favorably written biographic accounts. See: Kevin Alfred Strom, "William Pierce: Preparing the Way, part 1," *National Vanguard*, September 11, 2015. ; Robert S. Griffin, *The Fame of a Dead Man's Deeds: An Up-Close Portrait of White Nationalist William Pierce*, (Self-published: 2001), 29.

⁸⁵ Leonard Zeskind, *Blood and Politics: The History of the White Nationalist Movement from the Margins to the Mainstream* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2009), 58.

⁸⁶ Leonard Zeskind, *Blood and Politics*, 60-68.

⁸⁷ J.M. Berger, "The Turner Legacy: The Storied Origins and Enduring Impact of White Nationalism's Deadly Bible," ICCT – The Hague, September 2016, <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2016/09/ICCT-Berger-The-Turner-Legacy-September2016-2.pdf>.

⁸⁸ J.M. Berger, "The Turner Legacy," 10.

⁸⁹ J.M. Berger, "The Turner Legacy," 10.

⁹⁰ "Day of the Rope," Anti-Defamation League, <https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/day-of-the-rope>.

Order, which would carry out the assassination of Alan Berg, a Jewish radio host who frequently used his platform to denounce the white power movement. As Byman writes, The Order also bombed the house of a Catholic priest in Idaho who was a “vocal opponent” of the group, and group leader Robert Mathews “especially wanted to kill Morris Dees, the head of the [Southern Poverty Law Center].”⁹¹

By the end of the 1980s, Pierce published a follow-on text entitled *Hunter*, a novel that “progresses from murdering mixed-race couples to a more ambitious assassination campaign.”⁹² Pierce dedicated this sequel novel to Joseph Paul Franklin, a one-time Klansman and serial killer who admitted to the attempted assassinations of civil rights leader Vernon Jordan and magazine publisher Larry Flynt.⁹³ In a telling example of the interrelated and intergenerational nature of white supremacist terror, one of the “loudest and most vocal advocates” for Franklin was Frazier Glenn Miller, who once encouraged the murder of Dees (and other public officials) and would go on to kill three in a 2014 shooting at the Overland Park Jewish Community Center in Kansas.⁹⁴

Resonant as it was, William Pierce did not confine his glorification of assassination solely to the realm of fiction. In the real world, he matched the tone of his marquee text. Even prior to the *Diaries*’ publication, Pierce called for President Richard Nixon to be “dragged out of his office and shot,”⁹⁵ and suggested “the government in Washington is filled with traitors who need to be hanged.”⁹⁶ The National Alliance leader persistently pushed this rhetoric up through the year of his death, writing in 2002 that President George W. Bush and his cabinet members Donald Rumsfeld and John Ashcroft “should be

⁹¹ Daniel Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 48.

⁹² J.M. Berger, “The Turner Legacy,” 37.

⁹³ John Douglas and Mark Olshaker, “The Election May Never Be Over for White Supremacists Who Thrive on Resentment,” *Time*, November 25, 2020, <https://time.com/5912631/election-white-supremacists/>; “I Shot Vernon Jordan, Franklin Says,” Associated Press, April 8, 1996; David Mills, “Don’t Think Twice, it’s All White,” *Washington Post*, May 16, 1993, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1993/05/16/dont-think-twice-its-all-white/da028467-ba72-448b-9af1-4d6c8a30d511/>.

⁹⁴ Abby Ohlheiser, “Kansas City Shooter Was Well-Known to Hate Group Watchers,” *The Atlantic*, April 24, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/04/kansas-city-shooter-was-well-known-to-hate-group-watchers/360602/>; Daniel Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 140.

⁹⁵ Vegas Tenold, *Everything You Love Will Burn: Inside the Rebirth of White Nationalism in America* (New York, NY: Nation Books, 2018), 117.

⁹⁶ William Pierce, “Winning,” *National Vanguard*, November 1975.

hanged for letting American interests go to hell while they scramble to serve the Jews at America's expense."⁹⁷

Along with Pierce, other leading white supremacist extremists of the late twentieth century helped to inculcate assassination into the movement's violent discourse—chief among them Louis Beam. In communicating his strategy of leaderless resistance at the 1983 Aryan Nations World Congress, Beam encouraged the “targeting of federal officials,” among other state institutions, and at the following year's convening he laid out a plan to assassinate federal judges.⁹⁸ The movement's propaganda machine followed suit. On Liberty Net, a password-protected online message board launched in 1984, the site's so-called “computer index on traitors” occasionally “corresponded to an assassination point system Beam had purportedly outlined” at the World Congress.⁹⁹ And in addition to Beam's links to The Order (whose members were responsible for the assassination of Berg),¹⁰⁰ his audience at the 1983 Congress included two members of the survivalist Christian Identity organization known as the Covenant, the Sword, and the Arm of the Lord which attempted to assassinate an FBI agent later that year.¹⁰¹ Even beyond this immediate impact, the influence of Pierce and Beam extends to the modern day.

In the coming decades, the Anti-Defamation League notes, the language of assassination penetrated the transnational WSE vernacular. The Day of the Rope, specifically, “had become a concept well-known across the white supremacist movement,” and was featured in the white power music scene from the United States to Eastern Europe.¹⁰² In the pantheon of Pierce's ideological successors, however, one text stands out with a dark legacy of its own.

⁹⁷ William Pierce, “A Third World War?” *Free Speech* magazine, June 2002.

⁹⁸ Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 219 and 124.

⁹⁹ Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 121.

¹⁰⁰ JM Berger, “The Strategy of Violent White Supremacy Is Evolving,” *The Atlantic*, August 7, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/08/the-new-strategy-of-violent-white-supremacy/595648/>.

¹⁰¹ Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 219.

¹⁰² “Day of the Rope,” Anti-Defamation League.

Mason and the Influence of *Siege*

As Pierce and his *Diaries* dominated the late twentieth century extremist discourse in the United States and beyond, another emerging ideologue began to produce a series of newsletters that earned little acclaim at the time but has now emerged as “required reading” for a new generation of extremists.¹⁰³ Writing throughout the 1980s, James Mason urged white supremacists to take up cell-style terrorism with the goal of accelerating societal collapse.¹⁰⁴ Eventually compiled into a single volume entitled *Siege*, Mason’s writing serves as both “a philosophical totem” and “a template for action.”¹⁰⁵

Though the *Diaries* and *Siege* do not entirely overlap, journalist Robert Evans argues that “*Siege* might best be understood as a more academic accompanying text to the *Diaries*. What the *Diaries* proposes in fiction, *Siege* outlines in depth.”¹⁰⁶ Moreover, the ideological similarities and shared target priorities reflect the two authors’ personal relationship. Two decades Mason’s senior, Pierce played a role in welcoming the then-teenager into the WSE movement.¹⁰⁷ At fourteen, Mason first joined the American Nazi Party before following Pierce into the succeeding National Socialist White People’s Party from 1967 until the mid-1970s. By 1980, Mason began the project of *Siege* in earnest, incorporating the influence of Rockwell, revolutionary neo-Nazi Joseph Tommasi, Pierce, and cult leader Charles Manson.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ Jacob Ware, “Siege: The Atomwaffen Division and Rising Far-Right Terrorism in the United States,” ICCT – The Hague, July 2019, 6; “Deadly inspirations – What their chosen reading says about America’s far-right,” *The Economist*, February 20th, 2021. <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2021/02/20/what-their-chosen-reading-says-about-americas-far-right>.

¹⁰⁴ Hatewatch Staff, “Atomwaffen and the SIEGE parallax: how one neo-Nazi’s life’s work is fueling a younger generation,” Southern Poverty Law Center, February 22, 2018, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/02/22/atomwaffen-and-siege-parallax-how-one-neo-nazi%E2%80%99s-life%E2%80%99s-work-fueling-younger-generation>.

¹⁰⁵ Hatewatch Staff, “Atomwaffen and the SIEGE parallax: how one neo-Nazi’s life’s work is fueling a younger generation.”

¹⁰⁶ Robert Evans, *The War on Everyone*, Chapter 7, 24:30, <http://www.thewaroneveryone.com/>.

¹⁰⁷ Hatewatch Staff, “Atomwaffen and the SIEGE parallax: how one neo-Nazi’s life’s work is fueling a younger generation.”

¹⁰⁸ Hatewatch Staff, “Atomwaffen and the SIEGE parallax: how one neo-Nazi’s life’s work is fueling a younger generation.”

Assassination takes on a significant role in *Siege*—perhaps unsurprisingly given Pierce’s influence on Mason, as well as Mason’s derision for white “collaborators” within a purportedly Jewish-controlled “System.”¹⁰⁹ The author disparages politicians and government officials throughout the text, often describing them as a key obstacle to the goal of white supremacy. When discussing the initiation of “full, revolutionary conflagration in the United States,” Mason specifically cites “consecutive assassinations” as an important indicator of societal collapse.¹¹⁰ When this “System” begins to break down, Mason predicts, “the sold-out politicians and pigs become fair game for a population bent on bloodglut.”¹¹¹ More specifically, the author showered praise on Dan White, the man who assassinated San Francisco Mayor George Moscone and San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk in 1978.¹¹² Likewise, in a section on the Internal Revenue Service—the “bloodsucking” symbol of an illegitimate state, in Mason’s view—he laments the fact that likeminded revolutionaries have not assassinated more IRS officials.¹¹³ Whether an elected lawmaker or low-level official, Republican or Democrat, *Siege* holds equal contempt for all representatives of the state. “In the end,” Mason writes, “we have to simply kill them, as expeditiously and unceremoniously as possible.”¹¹⁴

Though Mason began writing *Siege* decades ago, Bethan Johnson and Matthew Feldman argue that the text exists as somewhat of a living document, with new printings occurring in 2003, 2017, and 2018.¹¹⁵ In the period surrounding the most recent re-prints, Mason also published dozens of pieces of commentary that only doubled down on his advocacy for violence—including targeting political figures. In their assessment of this content, Johnson and Feldman write that “authorities are viewed as traitors worthy of death, with depictions of enemies shot, hanged, or crushed not uncommon in [Mason’s twenty-first century] ‘Siege Culture’ propaganda.”¹¹⁶

¹⁰⁹ J.M. Berger, “A Paler Shade of White: Identity & In-group Critique in James Mason’s *Siege*,” 21.

¹¹⁰ James Mason, *SIEGE*.

¹¹¹ James Mason, *SIEGE*.

¹¹² James Mason, *SIEGE*.

¹¹³ James Mason, *SIEGE*.

¹¹⁴ James Mason, *SIEGE*.

¹¹⁵ Bethan Johnson and Matthew Feldman, “Siege Culture After Siege: Anatomy of a Neo-Nazi Terrorist Doctrine,” ICCT – The Hague, (July 2021) <https://icct.nl/publication/siege-culture-anatomy-of-a-neo-nazi-terrorist-doctrine/>.

¹¹⁶ Bethan Johnson and Matthew Feldman, “Siege Culture After Siege,” 12.

Given that *Siege* languished in relative obscurity at the time of its original publication, only for Mason to become a mentor and inspiration to many of today's violent extremists,¹¹⁷ the text serves as a fitting conduit for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Along with the persistently influential *Diaries*, *Siege* became an important text on the fascist web forum known as Iron March, which came to be “the incubator and eventually the primary organizational platform for a transnational neo-fascist accelerationist terrorist network” in the 2010s.¹¹⁸ A generation after Beam and his compatriots declared war on the state, Mason's enduring influence helped to sustain the tactic of assassination for a new generation of domestic terrorists.

¹¹⁷ Alex Newhouse, “The Threat Is the Network: The Multi-Node Structure of Neo-Fascist Accelerationism,” CTC Sentinel, Vol. 14, No. 5 (June 2021), <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/the-threat-is-the-network-the-multi-node-structure-of-neo-fascist-accelerationism/>.

¹¹⁸ H.E. Upchurch, “The Iron March Forum and the Evolution of the ‘Skull Mask’ Neo-Fascist Network,” CTC Sentinel, Vol. 14, No. 10, (December 2021), <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-iron-march-forum-and-the-evolution-of-the-skull-mask-neo-fascist-network/>.

Florence Keen, “From Iron March to Fascist Forge,” GNET, December 21, 2019, <https://gnet-research.org/2019/12/31/from-iron-march-to-fascist-forge-how-the-global-far-right-makes-use-of-social-networking/>; Michael Edison Hayden, “Visions of Chaos: Weighing the Violent Legacy of Iron March,” Southern Poverty Law Center, January 15, 2019, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2019/02/15/visions-chaos-weighing-violent-legacy-iron-march>.

Mason's Twenty-First Century Disciples

When Rinaldo Nazzaro, founder of the neo-Nazi terror network The Base, began to vet potential recruits, he often asked his interviewees if they had read *Siege*.¹¹⁹ As investigative journalist Jason Wilson writes, The Base “was dedicated to promoting the work and ideas” of Mason.¹²⁰ Harold Covington—whose 2007 dystopian fiction *The Brigade* framed assassination as a tactic of white supremacist insurgency and was dedicated to an accomplice in Alan Berg’s murder—likewise stood out as another key source of inspiration for the group.^{121, 122} As The Base began to take shape after its 2018 founding, its members operationalized the blueprint outlined by Mason and his fellow extremist ideologues.

Alongside a thwarted plot to allegedly incite mass violence at a gun rights rally in Virginia,¹²³ one of The Base’s most notorious conspiracies included a plan to assassinate two activists as part of their broader efforts to accelerate the downfall of the United States and establish a white ethno-state.¹²⁴ Hewing to the vision of James Mason and following in the footsteps of their twentieth-century predecessors, the three Base operatives targeted activists in order to send a broader message that opposition to white supremacist terrorism would not go unpunished.¹²⁵ In the words of one operative: “Any engagement in

¹¹⁹ Jason Wilson, “The Base: Exporting Accelerationist Terror,” Southern Poverty Law Center, August 12, 2020, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2020/08/12/base-exporting-accelerationist-terror>.

¹²⁰ Jason Wilson, “The Base: Exporting Accelerationist Terror.”

¹²¹ Jason Wilson, “The Base: Exporting Accelerationist Terror.”; “David Lane,” Southern Poverty Law Center, Accessed January 9, 2022, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/david-lane>.; H.A. Covington, *The Brigade* (Longview, WA: Northwest Publishing Agency, 2007).

¹²² It is worth noting that Covington also appears to have inspired two thwarted would-be lone assassins: Coast Guard Lieutenant Christopher Hasson, who’d developed a target list of journalists and politicians, and Wayde Lynn Kurt, who allegedly plotted to kill President Barack Obama in 2010. See: Bill Morlin, “FBI: Washington White Supremacist Plotted to Kill Obama in 2010,” Southern Poverty Law Center, May 10, 2021.; Brett Barrouquere, “Coast Guard Lt. Christopher Hasson Wrote to Notorious Neo-Nazi Harold Covington,” Southern Poverty Law Center, February 21, 2019.

¹²³ “United States Of America V. Brian Mark Lemley, Jr., Patrik Jordan Mathews, And William Garfield Bilbrough IV, Motion for Detention Pending Trial,” United States District Court for the District of Maryland, filed January 21, 2020, <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Maryland%20Cell%20Motion%20for%20Detention%20Pending%20Trial.pdf>.

¹²⁴ “The Base Georgia Affidavit: Exhibit 1,” <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/The%20Base%20Georgia%20Affidavit.pdf>. Accessed via: Emma Broches and Julia Solomon-Strauss, “White Supremacist Prosecutions Roundup,” Lawfare, July 13, 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/white-supremacist-prosecutions-roundup>.

¹²⁵ “The Base Georgia Affidavit: Exhibit 1,” 9.

anti-fascist activity will carry the death penalty.”¹²⁶ In discussing the plot, the targets were described as “race traitors,” mirroring Mason’s ideology and reflecting the long history of WSE operations against those perceived as collaborators with a corrupt system.

While a federal investigation disrupted this plot, the rhetoric surrounding the plan reflects a clear alignment with Mason’s vision for WSE insurgency. The conspirators undoubtedly understood the operation as an assassination, with one member specifying that the cell would need to acquire the right kind of equipment for “sneaking in and assassination type things.”¹²⁷ Positioning this tactic as a key approach in the broader accelerationist playbook, one plotter wrote, “If one were to want change[,] I’d think mass casualty events...political hits against those who attack you in any way (rhymes with Fifa,) and assassinations of jews [sic].”¹²⁸ And while these plots are concerning in its own right, Base members were not the only disciples of Mason to adopt the *Siege* blueprint, translating its ideas into violent action.

¹²⁶ “The Base Georgia Affidavit: Exhibit 1,” 7.

¹²⁷ “The Base Georgia Affidavit: Exhibit 1,” 8.

¹²⁸ Mack Lamoureux, Ben Makuch, and Zachary Kamel, “How One Man Built a Neo-Nazi Insurgency in Trump’s America,” *Vice News*, October 7, 2020, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/v7g9kb/how-one-man-built-a-neo-nazi-insurgency-in-trumps-america>.

John Cameron Denton and Atomwaffen Division

The final case examined in this paper—that of former Atomwaffen Division leader John Cameron Denton and his extremist associates—exhibits both an ideological continuity and a tactical evolution manifested within in a series of failed assassination plots. Denton, who helped shape Atomwaffen’s ideology and design its propaganda,¹²⁹ undoubtedly possesses an intimate familiarity with the writing of James Mason.¹³⁰ After helping to articulate the group’s mission online for a number of years,¹³¹ Denton translated rhetoric into action through his participation in a “swatting” conspiracy between October 2018 and February 2019. Among the targets of these attempts were journalists and a Trump administration cabinet official—perceived members of a system that must be met with revolutionary violence. In May 2021, a federal court sentenced Denton to 41 months in prison for his role in the criminal activities.¹³²

A method that emerged from the toxic underworld of gaming culture, swatting involves “calling the police and falsely describing an imminent threat at a specific location, causing the authorities to respond in force.”¹³³ During one incident of the Atomwaffen swatting conspiracy, for example, the caller “stated he had an AR-15, had shot and killed his girlfriend, had her two children tied up in the laundry room and he would kill them if he did not speak to the hostage negotiator, and that he had a pipe bomb that he would detonate.”¹³⁴

¹²⁹ A.C. Thompson and Jake Hanrahan, “Inside Atomwaffen As It Celebrates a Member for Allegedly Killing a Gay Jewish College Student,” ProPublica, February 23, 2018, <https://www.propublica.org/article/atomwaffen-division-inside-white-hate-group>.

¹³⁰ Alexander Epp and Roman Höfner, “The Hate Network: Atomwaffen Division,” Spiegel International, September 7, 2018, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/the-hate-network-an-inside-look-at-a-global-extremist-group-a-1226861.html>.

¹³¹ “Atomwaffen Division (AWD)/ National Socialist Order (NSO),” Anti-Defamation League, <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/atomwaffen-division-awd-national-socialist-order-nso>.

¹³² Allyson Waller, “Former Neo-Nazi Leader Sentenced to 3 Years in ‘Swatting’ Scheme,” New York Times, May 4, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/04/us/john-cameron-denton-atomwaffen-division.html>.

¹³³ Mike Baker, Adam Goldman, and Neil MacFarquhar, “White Supremacists Targeted Journalists and a Trump Official, F.B.I. Says,” New York Times, February 26, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/26/us/atomwaffen-division-arrests.html>.

¹³⁴ United States of America vs. John Cameron Denton, “Affidavit in Support of a Criminal Complaint and Arrest Warrant,” February 25, 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edva/press-release/file/1252081/download>, 26.

Though tactically distinct from traditional assassination attempts that involve direct confrontation with a target, the incidents aimed at former Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen and employees of the investigative journalism outlet ProPublica almost certainly intended to cause the death of specifically-targeted political figures.¹³⁵ Accordingly, multiple extremism experts have characterized Denton and Atomwaffen's actions as attempted assassinations,¹³⁶ as the swatting was clearly intended to elicit a lethal police response.

Though in its relative infancy as a tactical innovation (and despite the failure to result in physical harm to intended targets), this case warrants inclusion to demonstrate how extremists can apply the ideology of their like-minded predecessors to experimental approaches to targeted violence. That said, however, one should not necessarily assume widespread adoption of this technique will permeate the broader movement. As Macklin and Bjørgo write, the circulation of violent tactics within a radical milieu "do not automatically translate into action simply by virtue of their existence."¹³⁷ Operationally speaking, swatting involves a lower immediate risk to the perpetrator, in exchange for a far higher degree of unpredictability of outcome. And despite the relative safety of picking up a phone as opposed to a gun, the successful prosecution of Denton and his co-conspirators does demonstrate the ability of law enforcement officials to impose costs on these perpetrators.¹³⁸ For this reason, in particular, the tactic seems unlikely to replace more traditional forms of extremist violence.

Thus while "swatting"-as-terrorism may hold only a marginal place in the longer arc of WSE assassination, the innovation offers worthwhile insight into the application of a long-held tactic in a new context. Directly inspired by the doctrine of *Siege*, Denton and his co-conspirators attempted to eliminate a senior government official and journalists, while simultaneously targeting minority

¹³⁵ Prior to the attacks, ProPublica had published a series of investigative reports into Atomwaffen.

¹³⁶ Alexander Reid Ross, Emmi Bevenssee, and ZC, "Transnational White Terror: Exposing Atomwaffen And The Iron March Networks," Bellingcat, December 19, 2019, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2019/12/19/transnational-white-terror-exposing-atomwaffen-and-the-iron-march-networks/>; Amanda E. Rogers, "Dismantling White Supremacist Infiltration of the Military and Law Enforcement," The Century Foundation, January 25, 2021, <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/dismantling-white-supremacist-infiltration-of-the-military-and-law-enforcement/?session=1&agreed=1>.

¹³⁷ Graham Macklin and Tore Bjørgo, 15.

¹³⁸ Allyson Waller, "Former Neo-Nazi Leader Sentenced to 3 Years in 'Swatting' Scheme."

communities. Though unsuccessful, the adoption of this approach reflects the tendency of violent actors to adapt in the face of increased counterterrorism pressure.

Conclusion

If one examines the language of WSEs in the years leading up to the January 6th Siege, some calls for violence may seem curiously prescient. Leaked audio recordings from the “vetting room” of The Base, for example, reveal one individual calling on thousands to “march up into f---ing, into the Capitol building and just kill everybody f---ing in it.”¹³⁹ Rather than suggest a long-held conspiracy related to the 2021 Siege, however, this rant merely demonstrates the degree to which political violence figures as a key feature of the WSE movement. It should come as no surprise that a movement fundamentally hostile to democracy will seek to attack its central institutions, elected officials, and political leaders.¹⁴⁰

Rather than subside in wake of the Siege, the threat of assassination has only grown. The Department of Homeland Security warns that the United States “remains in a heightened threat environment,” with government personnel and perceived ideological opponents listed as potential targets.¹⁴¹ And while today’s threats may not appear obviously connected to those of generations’ past, the deep foundation of political violence in this country has helped to sustain these risks. Not every extremist who calls for the assassination of race traitors will have read *The Turner Diaries*, *Siege*, or other propaganda texts from cover to cover—or perhaps even at all. They may not understand the Klan’s reign of terror on politicians and activists alike in generations past. But expertise in the syllabus of WSE assassination is not a necessary precondition for violence because this rhetoric now finds itself within the movement’s vernacular.¹⁴² With the tactic migrating from one extremist to the next, an exhaustive history of WSE may not be clear to the perpetrator of each attack, but successive plotters help to sustain this practice. In an era of instructional violent extremist manifestos, this lineage includes those attackers who do not

¹³⁹ Geraldine Moriba and Jamila Paksima, *Sounds Like Hate, Part 3*, Southern Poverty Law Center <https://soundlikehate.org/images/assets/sounds-like-hate-baseless-part-3-transcript.pdf>.

¹⁴⁰ For the relationship between right-wing extremism and democracy, see: Anders Ravik Jupskås and Iris Beau Segers, “What is right-wing extremism,” C-REX - Center for Research on Extremism, <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/groups/compendium/what-is-right-wing-extremism.html#end1>.

¹⁴¹ “Summary of Terrorism Threat to the U.S. Homeland,” Department of Homeland Security, June 7, 2022, <https://www.dhs.gov/ntas/advisory/national-terrorism-advisory-system-bulletin-june-7-2022>.

¹⁴² Seyward Darby, “The Far Right Told Us What It Had Planned. We Didn’t Listen.” *New York Times*, January 7, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/07/opinion/white-supremacists-capitol-riot.html>. ; Robert Evans, *The War on Everyone*.

perpetrate assassinations themselves but direct readers to “[k]ill high profile enemies” and “traitorous politicians.”¹⁴³

If the history of WSEs’ use of assassination prompts cause for concern, the broader picture only appears grimmer. The spread and normalization of violent rhetoric against elected officials and other public leaders spells trouble for American democracy, exacerbating the decade-long trend of democratic backsliding in the U.S.¹⁴⁴ At the same time, tactical convergences occurring within a blurry extremist landscape create new challenges for policymakers and officials.¹⁴⁵ Understanding how impunity has historically emboldened WSEs in the Redemption and Jim Crow eras, the U.S. must pursue accountability for those who illegally threaten our democratic institutions if it wishes to disrupt an intergenerational cycle of political violence.

¹⁴³ Quotes are respectively drawn from the alleged manifestos of the attackers of a Buffalo, New York grocery store and Poway, California synagogue. For more on the role of manifestos, see: J.M. Berger, “The Dangerous Spread of Extremist Manifestos,” *The Atlantic*, February 26, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/02/christopher-hasson-was-inspired-breivik-manifesto/583567/>.

¹⁴⁴ “From Crisis to Reform,” Freedom House, March 2021, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/US_Democracy_Report_FINAL_03222021.pdf.

¹⁴⁵ Cynthia Miller-Idriss and Brian Hughes, “Blurry Ideologies and Strange Coalitions: The Evolving Landscape of Domestic Extremism,” *Lawfare*, December 19, 2021, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/blurry-ideologies-and-strange-coalitions-evolving-landscape-domestic-extremism>.

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