



Program on Extremism

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

# SURVEYING THE LANDSCAPE OF THE AMERICAN FAR RIGHT

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AUGUST 2019

## About the Program on Extremism

The Program on Extremism at George Washington University provides analysis on issues related to violent and non-violent 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.

### About the Author

Dr. Mark Pitcavage is a historian with 25 years' expertise on domestic terrorism and right-wing extremism in the United States, having authored many articles, reports and studies on related subjects; trained over 17,000 government officials and law enforcement officers; and served

as an expert witness in a number of trials. Since 2000, Dr. Pitcavage has worked for the Anti-Defamation League, one of the nation's oldest civil rights organizations, where he currently serves as a Senior Research Fellow in ADL's Center on Extremism. In the past, Dr. Pitcavage has also been Director of the Center on Extremism. Prior to joining ADL, Dr. Pitcavage was Research Director for the Justice Department's State and Local Anti-Terrorism Training Program. Dr. Pitcavage received his MA and Ph.D. from The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, where he still lives and works.

*The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Program on Extremism or the George Washington University.*

## Introduction

What is the extreme right in the United States? To many, terms such as “extreme right” and “far right” are simply synonymous with white supremacy. References by the media, political leaders and pundits may reinforce such views, painting a simplistic picture. The reality is the United States is a large, complicated country with ideological fringes equally complex. The American far right is not a monolith but a convoluted landscape encompassing an array of movements and causes. White supremacy is an important feature of that landscape, but hardly the only one. Indeed, when one examines right-wing terrorism in the United States, white supremacist attacks and plots make up only a plurality (43%) of such incidents.<sup>i</sup>

## The American Far Right Takes Shape

The further back in American history one travels, the harder it is to maintain a sense of political “left” and “right” that is consistent with modern party affiliations or other delineations. Nevertheless, one can identify two ideological strains—white supremacy and nativism—that solidified in the early- to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, becoming staples of the far right to the present day. By the late 1800s, two more strains joined them: 1) extreme hostility to socialism and communism (what one might call political sinistrophobia) and 2) ideological anti-Semitism. These four belief systems dominated the far right for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with white supremacy and anti-communist extremism constituting its most important pillars, nativist anger emerging cyclically, and anti-Semitism intertwined with all three.<sup>ii</sup>

The end of the Cold War allowed the major expansion of a hitherto less significant segment of the far right: anti-government extremism. The extremists of the “Patriot” movement replaced conspiracy theories about communist infiltration with more nebulous conspiracies in which the federal government itself was the enemy. From the mid-1990s, white supremacy and anti-government extremism would be the two most important segments of the American far right, each encompassing multiple movements of their own.

The far right also contains several single-issue movements—movements centered around one narrow cause. Some of these, like anti-abortion extremism, have been a consistent source of right-wing violence.<sup>iii</sup>

## **White Supremacy**

Racism in the United States existed long before the country itself did, but racist ideas and stereotypes did not cohere into a full-fledged ideology until the 1830s, when pro-slavery advocates under attack from abolitionists built an ideological defense of slavery based on racism. “Prior to the 1830s,” George Fredrickson wrote in his classic *The Black Image in the White Mind*, “black subordination was the practice of white Americans, and the inferiority of the Negro was undoubtedly a common assumption, but...it took the assault of the abolitionists to...force the practitioners of racial oppression to develop a theory that accorded with their behavior.”<sup>iv</sup>

### ***Traditional White Supremacy***

After the Civil War and the end of slavery, conservative white Southerners updated their pro-slavery arguments to reflect their desire to resist perceived threats to white hegemony, such as Reconstruction state governments and the African-American community itself. The evolution of the Ku Klux Klan into a violent movement conducting a sustained terrorist campaign was the ultimate expression of such goals.<sup>v</sup>

This form of white supremacy, originating in (or descended from) opposition to African-American equality, can be called traditional white supremacy. It has been an enduring feature of the far right landscape. The Second Ku Klux Klan of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was more nativist than traditional white supremacist, except in the South, but Civil Rights-era Klan groups returned to form. Today, traditional white supremacists are still primarily represented by Ku Klux Klan groups, though these have been in decline, as well as other groups such as the Council of Conservative Citizens and the neo-Confederate League of the South.<sup>vi</sup>

### ***Nazism and Neo-Nazism***

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, new forms of white supremacy joined the traditional white

supremacists. Some originated abroad, like Nazism, which rose within the German-American community in the 1930s. German-oriented Nazism fell casualty to World War II but was replaced after the war by neo-Nazi groups. The first prominent neo-Nazi organization was George Lincoln Rockwell's American Nazi Party, formed in 1959. After Rockwell's 1967 assassination, various followers started groups of their own that dominated the neo-Nazi scene for decades. More recently, new neo-Nazi groups such as Atomwaffen Division and the National Socialist Legion have accompanied the rise of the alt right.<sup>vii</sup>

### ***Religious White Supremacy***

White supremacist religious sects slowly emerged in the United States in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century in the form of Christian Identity and white supremacist Norse paganism. While white supremacists have used various religious claims and interpretations to defend their racist views, these new sects featured white supremacy as the cornerstone of their beliefs. Christian Identity—whose adherents claim white people are God's chosen people, while non-whites and Jews have subhuman or even Satanic origins—evolved slowly from British-Israelism but was spreading steadily among white supremacists by the 1960s. It reached a peak influence in the 1980s/1990s, but the deaths in the 2000s of many of its pioneers have caused a recent decline.<sup>viii</sup>

Modern Norse paganism, a revival of ancient Norse traditions, emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, with some adherents promoting a specifically white supremacist version of the religion, often called Odinism or Wotanism. White supremacist Norse pagans contrast their version of Norse paganism with “pacifistic” and “Jewish” Christianity, claiming Odinism is a warrior religion for people of European descent.<sup>ix</sup>

Subscribers of both faiths, in addition to forming their own groups, can also be found in other segments of the white supremacist movement.

### ***Racist Skinheads***

Skinheads emerged as a subculture in Great Britain by the late 1960s, with distinctive dress, rituals, and music. The original skinhead subculture was not connected to white supremacy but in the 1970s a white supremacist variant emerged, making its way to the

United States by the 1980s and attracting young, newly-radicalized recruits who formed skinhead gangs or joined other white supremacist groups. Racist skinhead activity and violence was strong in the United States from the 1990s through the mid-2000s, but now the subculture is aging, while the rise of the alt right appears to be drawing away potential recruits, throwing its long-term future into some doubt.<sup>x</sup>

### ***White Supremacist Prison Gangs***

White supremacist prison gangs can be traced to the Aryan Brotherhood in the 1960s but became widespread in the 1980s as state prison systems ended racial segregation. With limited connections to other white supremacists, such gangs generally practiced a crude, homegrown version of white supremacy. By the 2000s, white supremacist prison gangs had become increasingly active on the streets and had absorbed more orthodox white supremacist ideology. However, these gangs operate as organized crime and heavily prioritize traditional criminal goals over ideological ones. They have fewer connections to other segments of the white supremacist movement than those segments have with each other.<sup>xi</sup>

### ***The Alt Right (and Alt Lite)***

The most recent addition to the white supremacist sphere is the rise of the alt right in the 2010s, bringing the largest number of young recruits to the movement since the emergence of racist skinheads. Alt right adherents draw ideological beliefs from white supremacist orthodoxy as well as paleoconservatism and identitarianism (the latter imported from Europe), but are also shaped by a distinctive online subculture that evolved on websites such as 4chan, 8chan and Reddit. The alt right is also noteworthy for its misogyny. The 2016 presidential election energized the alt right; by the end of 2016, alt right adherents were forming real world organizations and engaging in activities ranging from propaganda distribution to acts of violence.<sup>xii</sup>

Another movement, the so-called *alt lite*, has recently surfaced as an offshoot of the alt right, which in its early years included adherents who were nationalist, anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, anti-left, anti-LGBTQ, and/or misogynistic, but not necessarily explicitly white supremacist. Due to the negative attention the alt right attracted during the 2016 election, many such adherents abandoned the alt right, calling themselves “civic

nationalists” rather than “white nationalists.” White supremacists derisively referred to them as “alt lite.” The alt lite constitutes an emerging movement separate from white supremacy; alt lite groups sometimes even have small numbers of non-white or LGBTQ members. It is too soon to tell if the alt lite will survive in the long-term as a distinctive movement.<sup>xiii</sup>

## **Anti-Government Extremists**

Anti-government extremists—often known collectively as the “Patriot” movement—became increasingly important in the far right after the end of the Cold War, when their conspiracy theories proved a popular substitute for anti-communist conspiracy theories. Through the 1980s, many leading movement figures were also white supremacists—typically Christian Identity adherents—but this proportion dropped significantly over time as the movement grew; by the 1990s, one could even find people of color in the movement’s different segments. Today, white supremacists make up only a relatively small proportion of the ranks of the “Patriot” movement and its constituent segments.

### *The Tax Protest Movement*

The “Patriot” movement’s oldest component is the tax protest movement, which emerged in the 1960s after decades of failed attempts to repeal the 16<sup>th</sup> Amendment. Tax protesters use pseudo-legal arguments to claim Americans have no obligation to pay income taxes, but a conspiracy has covered up this fact. Tax protesters frequently engage in tax evasion and tax fraud but occasionally resort to acts of violence, including terrorism.<sup>xiv</sup>

### *The Sovereign Citizen Movement*

Sovereign citizens believe a conspiracy long ago infiltrated the United States government, replacing it with an illegitimate counterfeit. Sovereigns believe they can ignore most regulations or laws and that the government and courts have no jurisdiction over them. The movement emerged in primitive form in the 1970s but experienced several major surges—in the early-to-mid 1980s, in the mid-1990s, and from 2008-2015—that increased its size and added to its arsenal of pseudo-legal theories. Common sovereign citizen tactics include “paper terrorism” harassment measures, scams and frauds, and both spontaneous and planned acts of violence.<sup>xv</sup>

Ironically for a movement with many white supremacist pioneers, since the mid-1990s, the sovereign citizen movement has grown to include tens of thousands of African-Americans and other people of color. The movement has also expanded abroad to most English-speaking countries.

### *The Militia Movement*

The youngest segment of the “Patriot” sphere, militia groups emerged in the 1990s as a paramilitary movement whose adherents claim the federal government is collaborating with a shadowy “New World Order” to strip Americans of their freedoms. The movement declined in the early 2000s but surged again during the Obama administration. Many people join the militia movement as so-called “Three Percenters,” people who compare themselves to Revolutionary War patriots opposing British rule. Since the election of Donald Trump—whom the movement strongly supported—adherents have focused their anger less on the federal government and more against Muslims, immigrants, and antifa.<sup>xvi</sup>

## **Far Right Single-Issue Movements**

The far right also contains smaller movements focused around narrow issues. Sometimes these movements constitute the extreme wings of more mainstream causes; in such cases, what differentiates them from their less-radical counterparts is not so much their beliefs themselves as the more extreme lengths to which they are willing to go to further them.

### *Anti-Abortion Extremists*

The anti-abortion movement is a mostly mainstream movement that arose after the legalization of abortion in 1973. The movement’s extreme wing perceives the abortion issue as such a crisis that even violent action to stop abortion is justified, including bombings/arsons of clinics or assassinating clinic physicians or employees. Despite the relatively small number of anti-abortion extremists, anti-abortion violence has been a consistent factor in right-wing domestic terrorism.<sup>xvii</sup>

### *Anti-Public Lands Extremists*



In the 1970s, a conservative movement—referred to variously over the years as the “Sagebrush Rebellion,” the “county rule” movement and the “Wise Use” movement—emerged in western states opposing federal stewardship, and even ownership, of public lands. Though the anti-public lands movement is mostly mainstream, it contains an extremist fringe that has occasionally engaged in violence. The armed takeover of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in January 2016 was committed by an alliance of anti-public lands extremists and “Patriot” movement adherents.<sup>xviii</sup>

### *Anti-Immigration Extremists*

Since the 1980s, an anti-immigrant movement pioneered in large part by John Tanton has evolved to exploit and amplify anti-immigrant sentiments in the United States. The movement’s extreme wing includes adherents motivated by racism (Tanton, who died in 2019, himself had past ties to white supremacists), as well as those who engage in border vigilante activities.<sup>xix</sup>

### *Anti-Muslim Extremists*

The past twenty years have seen a significant rise of Islamophobia in the United States, which has solidified into a single-issue movement that demonizes Islam and Muslims, with numerous ideologues spreading anti-Muslim conspiracy theories and propaganda. The movement also includes people willing to put ideas into violent action through arson and other attacks on mosques.<sup>xx</sup>

### *Incels*

Incels are a recent addition to the far right landscape. “Incel,” short for “involuntary celibate,” refers to men who, unable to form meaningful relationships with women, channel their anger into hatred and extreme misogyny. Though the community includes people of color, it also harbors a vein of racism, especially directed at women in sexual relationships with non-whites. The incel community is mostly online, but since 2014 several people with incel associations have committed violent acts, including shooting sprees.<sup>xxi</sup>

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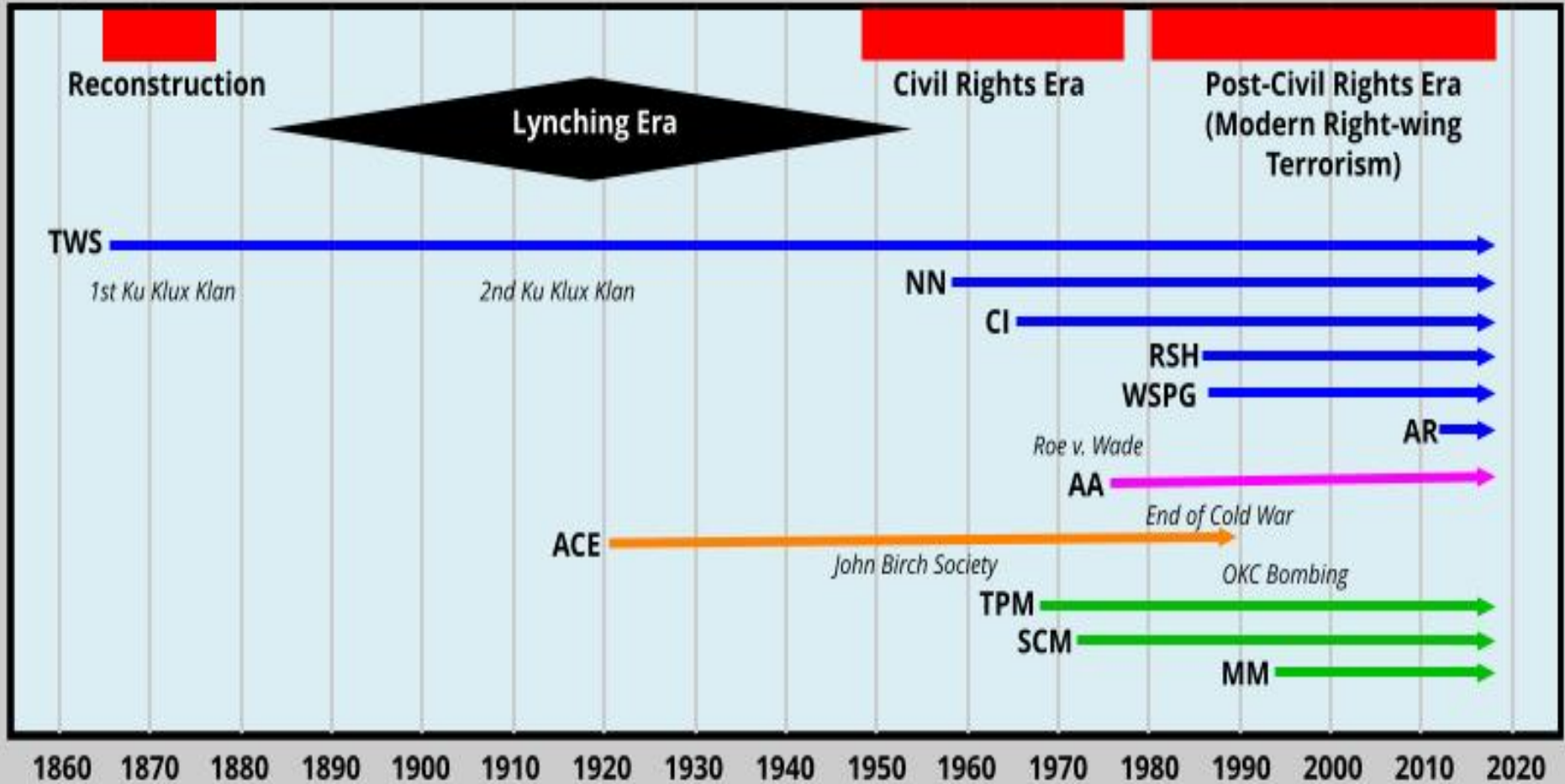
## **Conclusion: Unum de multis**

For most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, what can be termed “right-wing extremism” consisted of traditional white supremacy accompanied by cycles of intense nativism. But as American society grew more complex in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, its far right landscape became correspondingly complex as well. The American far right steadily accreted new movements and subcultures, especially in the second half of the century, while losing only the anti-Communist extremists of the Cold War. Both influences from abroad, like Nazism and the skinhead subculture, as well as homegrown forms of extremism, like the anti-government zealots of the “Patriot” movement, contributed to this landscape. So too did the rise of single-issue movements.

A close examination of the far right’s varied movements reveals many overlaps, especially between the different types of white supremacists, as well as between the different anti-government extremists. Many in the far right also share at least some perceived enemies; thus, militia groups and white supremacists have both engaged in violence against abortion clinics, just as anti-abortion extremists have.

But the American far right also contains so much variety that some of its movements are even, to varying degrees, alien to each other. Racist skinheads, for example, are not very likely to encounter the pseudo-legal arguments of the sovereign citizen movement, much less be persuaded by them. Attempts to paint the far right with a broad brush—particularly to assume that its entire landscape rests upon a foundation of white supremacy—are bound to result in a failure to understand its different movements and greater difficulty in dealing with the crime and violence that emanates from them.

# Right-wing Terrorism in the United States



TWS = Traditional White Supremacists  
 NN = Neo-Nazis  
 CI = Christian Identity  
 RSH = Racist Skinheads  
 WSPG = White Supremacist Prison Gangs  
 AR = Alt Right

AA = Anti-Abortion Extremists  
 ACE = Anti-Communist Extremists  
 TPM = Tax Protest Movement  
 SCM = Sovereign Citizen Movement  
 MM = Militia Movement

**Red Bars Indicate  
 Periods of Significant  
 Right-wing Terrorism**

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<sup>ii</sup> The most recent history of the far right in the United States was published 25 years ago: David H. Bennett, *Party of Fear: The American Far Right from Nativism to the Militia Movement* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition), (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

<sup>iii</sup> William E. Dyson, *Terrorism: An Investigator’s Handbook*, (Dayton, Ohio: Anderson Publishing, 2001), 28.

<sup>iv</sup> George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 43. Leonard Zeskind details the history of some, though not all, segments of the white supremacist movement in Leonard Zeskind, *Blood and Politics: The History of the White Nationalist Movement from the Margins to the Mainstream*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009). On the current state of the white supremacist movement, see Mark Pitcavage, “New Hate and Old: The Changing Face of American White Supremacy,” (New York: Anti-Defamation League, 2018), accessed at <https://www.adl.org/media/11894/download>.

<sup>v</sup> On the first Ku Klux Klan, see Allen W. Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995 [orig. pub.1971]), and Elaine Frantz Parsons, *Ku-Klux: The Birth of the Klan during Reconstruction*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

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<sup>x</sup> Mark Hamm, *American Skinheads: The Criminology and Control of Hate Crime*, (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1993). On the state of the racist skinhead subculture during their last surge of activity in the mid-2000s, see Anti-Defamation League, “Army of Hate: The Resurgence of Racist Skinheads in America,” (New York: Anti-Defamation League, 2006).

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<sup>xiii</sup> Anti-Defamation League, “From Alt Right to Alt Lite: Naming the Hate,” (New York: Anti-Defamation League, 2017), accessed at <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/from-alt-right-to-alt-lite-naming-the-hate>.

<sup>xiv</sup> On the origins of the tax protest movement, see Mark Pitcavage, “Tax Protest Movement,” (New York: Anti-Defamation League, 2001), accessed at <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/tax-protest-movement>.

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<sup>xvii</sup> The origins of anti-abortion extremism are traced in James Risen and Judy Thomas, *Wrath of Angels: The American Abortion War*, (New York: Basic Books, 1999), and Eleanor J. Bader and Patricia Baird-Windle, *Targets of Hatred: Anti-Abortion Terrorism*, (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

<sup>xviii</sup> On the origins of the Sagebrush Rebellion, see R. Mcgreggor Cawley, *Federal Land, Western Anger: The Sagebrush Rebellion and Environmental Politics*, (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1993). On the participants in the Malheur standoff, see Mark Pitcavage, “Anatomy of a Standoff: The Occupiers of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge Headquarters,” (New York: Anti-Defamation League, 2016), accessed at <https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/assets/pdf/combating-hate/Anatomy-of-a-Standoff-MalheurOccupiers.pdf>.

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