Contending With Domestic Terrorism: Causes and Constraints
Current Issues Club Topic for November 20, 2020

Definition - "Domestic terrorism: Violent, criminal acts committed by individuals and/or groups to further ideological goals stemming from domestic influences, such as those of a political, religious, social, racial, or environmental nature". Source- FBI website

Current Threat- "The FBI is committed to remaining agile in its approach to the terrorism threat, which has continued to evolve since the September 11, 2001 terror attacks. Years after these attacks, the threat landscape has expanded considerably, and international terrorism remains a serious threat. The threat of domestic terrorism also remains persistent overall, with actors crossing the line from exercising First Amendment-protected rights to committing crimes in furtherance of violent agendas". Source- FBI website

In 2001 Congress passed Section 802 of the **USA PATRIOT Act** (Pub. L. No. 107-52) that expanded the definition of terrorism to cover ""domestic,"" as opposed to international, terrorism. A person engages in domestic terrorism if they do an act "dangerous to human life" that is a violation of the criminal laws of a state or the United States, if the act appears to be intended to: (i) intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination or kidnapping. Additionally, the acts have to occur primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States and if they do not, may be regarded as international terrorism. Source- https://www.congress.gov/107/plaws/publ56/PLAW-107publ56.pdf

Like foreign terrorists, domestic terrorists generally attempt to spread fear, anxiety and terror among their victims and/or to express hatred, rage, or resentments towards certain individuals or groups of people who are seen as a threat to them or to their way of life. While most of the domestic terrorists acts from the 1960s to the 1980s were committed by left-wing radical groups for revolutionary reasons, domestic terrorists since then have most often been right-wing extremists motivated by anti-government sentiments, beliefs about white supremacy, or some perceived threat to individual freedoms or rights. Domestic terrorism became a serious concern in the U.S. long before the September 11, 2001 attacks. The bombing of the A.P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City by Timothy McVeigh in 1995 killed 168 innocent people, including 19 children, as his act of revenge against the government attack on the Branch Davidians in Waco. In 1996, Eric Rudolf was convicted of killing 2 people in his bombing of the Summer Olympics in Atlanta, Georgia, because he felt the Olympics were promoting "global socialism". In the first decade of the 21st century there was a rise in organized militia style domestic extremist groups over gun control issues, government restrictions of individual freedoms, the desire to defend racial or religious identities, and citizens responsibilities to assist police in maintaining law and order. Source- *Domestic Terrorism* by Jack Levin

In their 2007 book *Hunting the American Terrorist former* FBI Deputy Assistant Director Terry Turchie and former FBI special agent Kathleen Puckett described six criteria to define a "lone wolf" domestic terrorist:
1. The act of terrorism was organized by few or only one person that was not operating with an organized group
2. The individual is willing to use lethal violence to achieve their goal
3. Their primary goal is ideological, political, or religious in scope
4. The individual is willing to accept full-scale collateral damage

5.The individual is not intending to commit suicide, unless the situation calls for it
6.The individual is intending to commit homicide to get their message public, or to use such acts as the message

No one commonality appears in the profiles of domestic terrorists-   The only constant appears to be "a newfound hatred for their native or adopted country, a degree of dangerous malleability, and a religious fervor justifying or legitimizing violence that impels these very impressionable and perhaps easily influenced individuals toward potentially lethal acts of violence," according to Peter Bergen and Bruce Hoffman's September 2010 paper for the Bipartisan Policy Center. The Southern Poverty Law Center also keeps track of white supremacy groups and points to the threat of violent racists like Dylan Roof who murdered African American church members in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015 in hope of starting a race riot in America. In 2020, the annual assessment conducted by the Department of Homeland Security warned that violent white supremacy was the "most persistent and lethal threat in the homeland" and that white supremacists were the most deadly among domestic terrorists in recent years.   Source- https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/24/us/domestic-terrorist-groups.html

In one week in August of 2019, three American cities experienced mass shootings, with gunmen killing at least 32 people. Patrick Crusius, 21, walked into a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, a border town with an 80 percent Hispanic population, opened fire with an assault weapon, and killed 20 people. Several hours later, police say that Connor Betts, 24, shot and killed at least nine people in a busy downtown district of Dayton, Ohio. At the beloved annual Gilroy Garlic Festival, 19-year-old Santino William Legan allegedly opened fire on the crowd and killed three people.

By October of 2019, the F.B.I. had made 90 arrests in domestic terrorism cases that year. These cases included planned or committed acts of violence by Americans who belong to anti-government militias, white supremacist groups or individuals who ascribe to similar ideologies not connected to Islamic extremism. The F.B.I. reported that it had 850 pending domestic terror investigations, about 40 percent involve racially motivated extremism. In 2017 and 2018, the F.B.I. made more arrests connected to domestic terror than to international terrorism, which includes groups like Al Qaeda and the Islamic State and their lone-wolf recruits in the U.S.   https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2019/08/06/race-based-terrorism-in-wake-of-the-weekend-mass-shootings

Elizabeth Neumann, Assistant Secretary for Counterterrorism at the Department of Homeland Security, stated in the summer of 2020 that President Trump used the term "domestic extremism" in reference to the violence and looting that occurred during the protests across the country against police brutality targeting Black Americans, which the president attributed to "antifa." She said, however, that the numbers don't bear out the idea that left-wing violence is as much of a problem as right-wing violence, and arrests during the summer's protests demonstrate that. "If you look at the people that have been arrested for that, by and large, I mean, it's the boogaloo movement or it's an association with QAnon. It's the right side of the ideological spectrum." Neumann noted that "The threat of domestic terrorism is not from antifa. It is from these right-wing movements."

Some U.S. government agencies have outlined the threat from domestic extremists, though most have not provided recent data about terrorist incidents. In its Homeland Threat Assessment released in October 2020, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security concluded that "racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists—specifically white supremacist extremists (WSEs)—will remain the most persistent and lethal threat in the Homeland." The report also assessed that anarchists and other individuals inspired by anti-government and anti-authority ideologies posed a threat. But it did not provide 2020 data. The Federal Bureau of Investigation similarly argued that the "top threat we face

from domestic violent extremists" is from racially- and ethnically motivated violent extremists, including white supremacists. Nevertheless, FBI officials have not publicly released their data, making it difficult for U.S. civilians to judge the degree and type of threat.

On October 22, 2020, the Center for Strategic and International Studies issued an analysis of government agency reports on domestic terrorism that included three findings: First, white supremacists and other like-minded extremists conducted 67 percent of terrorist plots and attacks in the United States in 2020. They used vehicles, explosives, and firearms as their predominant weapons and targeted demonstrators and other individuals because of their racial, ethnic, religious, or political makeup—such as African Americans, immigrants, Muslims, and Jews. Second, there was a rise in the number of anarchist, anti-fascist, and other like-minded attacks and plots in 2020 compared to previous years, which comprised 20 percent of terrorist incidents (an increase from 8 percent in 2019). These types of extremists used explosives and incendiaries in the majority of attacks, followed by firearms. They also targeted police, military, and government personnel and facilities. Third, far-left and far-right violence was deeply intertwined—creating a classic "security dilemma."

This analysis made a distinction between domestic terrorism and hate crimes noting that there is some overlap between terrorism and hate crimes, since some hate crimes include the use or threat of violence. But hate crimes can also include non-violent incidents, such as graffiti and verbal abuse. Hate crimes and hate speech are obviously concerning and a threat to society, but this analysis concentrates only on terrorism and the use—or threat—of violence to achieve political objectives. In addition, this analysis does not focus on protests, looting, and broader civil disturbances. While these incidents are important to analyze—particularly in light of the events in 2020 following the death of George Floyd—most are not terrorism. Some are not violent, while others lack a political motivation. For instance, some of the looting following the death of George Floyd was perpetrated by apolitical criminals.

Some of the rise in domestic terrorism has been attributed to organized militia style anti-government groups (Boogaloo, The Base, Proud Boys, Wolverine Warriors, etc.) Far-right terrorism now includes the use or threat of violence by subnational or non-state entities whose goals may include racial or ethnic supremacy; opposition to government authority; anger at women, including from the involuntary celibate (or "incel") movement; belief in certain conspiracy theories, such as QAnon; and outrage against certain policies, such as abortion. Far-left terrorism involves the use or threat of violence by subnational or non-state entities that oppose capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism; advocate black nationalism; pursue environmental or animal rights issues; espouse pro-communist or pro-socialist beliefs; or support a decentralized social and political system such as anarchism. Other terrorist groups involve the use or threat of violence by subnational or non-state entities that do not neatly fit into any of the above categories, such as the anti-government Boogaloo movement, whose adherents aim to start a civil war (or "boogaloo") in the United States. https://www.csis.org/analysis/war-comes-home-evolution-domestic-terrorism-united-states
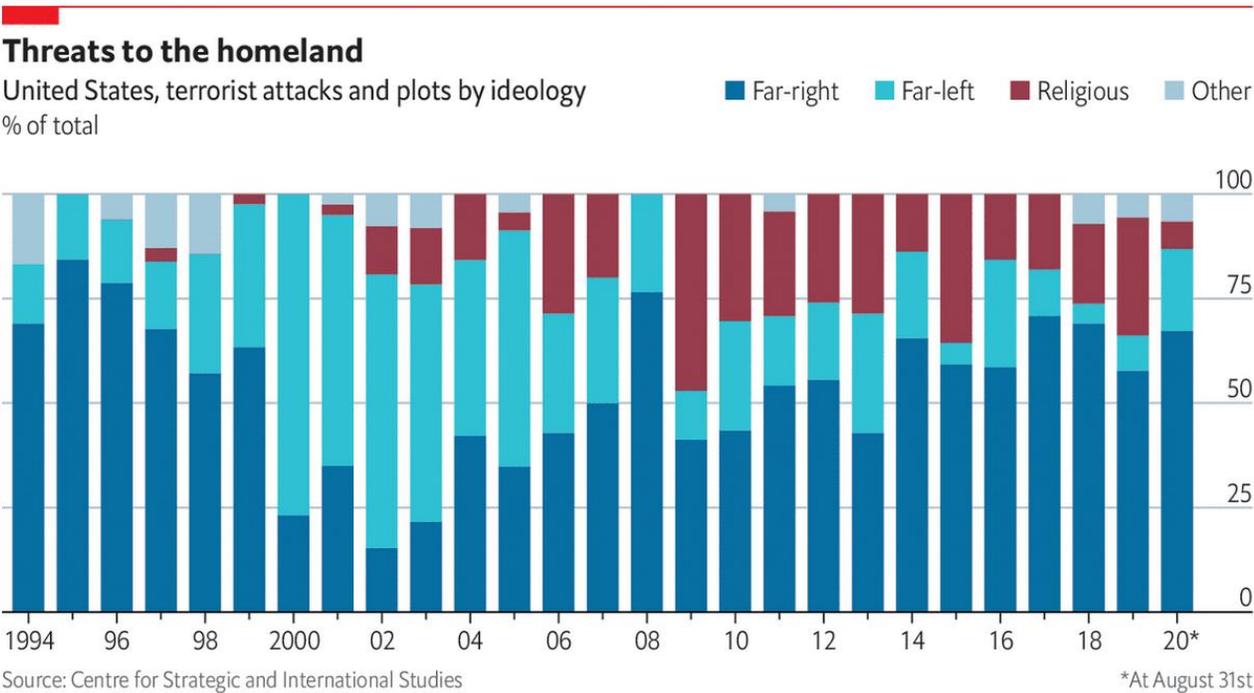
To counter domestic terrorism the Department of Homeland Security has developed a *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence* that emphasizes "locally-based solutions that identify signs of risk before acts of terrorism or targeted violence can be carried out. Not only must we develop frameworks for prevention, but we must also enhance infrastructure protections and community preparedness to better protect against, respond to, and recover from attacks when they do occur". Source - https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/19_0920_plcy_strategic-framework-countering-terrorism-targeted-violence.pdf

Others argue that better Federal policies are needed to combat the threats from domestic terrorists. Congress should consider whether the federal government has properly prioritized and resourced efforts to counter the domestic terrorist threat, provide adequate tools for the FBI and law enforcement agencies to identify and prevent potential acts of domestic terrorism, and provide more public reporting of domestic terrorist activities. Source- https://www.lawfareblog.com/road-map-congress-address-domestic-terrorism

Addressing the root causes that give rise to acts of domestic terrorism is more difficult. Those who have studied the patterns and motivations that are often behind acts of domestic terrorism point to a variety of factors that conspire to create extremist reactions: the erosion of trust in our national institutions, the declining credibility of civic leadership, the eclipse of a sense of community in favor of individual rights, the marginalization of people without social or political standing or power, the ability of social media to unite hostilities towards others, the rise in misinformation and suspected "fake news", and the loss of respect and intolerance of differing ideological perspectives in today's highly polarized political environment. "Bringing all Americans, especially those who feel marginalized, back into the mainstream of social, economic, and civic engagement may be our most effective long-term strategy for preventing future acts of domestic terrorism". Source- *Domestic Terrorism* by Jack Levin

In America, far-right terrorist plots have outnumbered far-left ones in 2020

This has been so in most years for the past quarter-century

Threats to the homeland

United States, terrorist attacks and plots by ideology
% of total

Legend: Far-right, Far-left, Religious, Other

Source: Centre for Strategic and International Studies   *At August 31st

The Economist

The Economist is not a left-leaning publication by any means. What is missing is the total number per year.