

IDENTIFYING AND EXPLOITING THE WEAKNESSES OF THE WHITE SUPREMACIST MOVEMENT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

White supremacists have been a leading source of terrorist violence in the United States in the last decade, responsible for 40 plots or attacks from 2011 to 2020. We argue that the threat is dangerous but also that the white supremacist movement as a whole has many weaknesses, some of which can be exploited. In contrast to jihadist groups like al-Qaida at its peak, American white supremacists lack a haven from which to operate; their international ties are also weaker than those of jihadist organizations. The white supremacist movement is also highly divided, and members disagree as to who their primary enemies are and how they should attack them. In addition, they enjoy little public support, and their violence usually backfires, making the movement less popular.

Overall, the movement's capabilities are low, unable to match its grandiose ambitions. These weaknesses hinder recruitment and operations, make movement members vulnerable to prosecution and disruption, and otherwise limit their strength. Many of these weaknesses stem from existing counterterrorism and civil society pressure; continued and at times increased efforts by government, technology companies, and civil society officials is vital. Political leaders of both parties must also consistently condemn white supremacy, ensuring that the movement remains marginalized.

INTRODUCTION

The white supremacist movement has eclipsed jihadism as a top counterterrorism concern in the United States in recent years. Attacks like the mass shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh in October 2018 and the mass shooting at a Walmart in El Paso in August 2019 demonstrated the danger that violent white supremacists pose, even as the threat to the U.S. homeland from the Islamic State (IS) and like-minded groups declined. Overseas, white supremacists are responsible for killings in Germany, New Zealand, and other countries, showing that the danger today is global.

In fall 2020, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), in a leaked draft threat assessment, warned, “we assess that white supremacist extremists — who increasingly are networking with likeminded persons abroad — will pose the most persistent and lethal threat.”¹ The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has similarly elevated “racially motivated violent extremism” — an FBI category of extremism that mostly includes white supremacists — to the same national threat level as groups like IS.² Prominent terrorism scholars like Bruce Hoffman³ and Seth Jones⁴ also share this concern, and the two of us have regularly written on this danger.⁵

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This concern about white supremacists is overdue, as is the need to address it, but the threat requires a sober response that neither minimizes nor exaggerates its nature and extent. Although the white supremacist movement is capable of extreme violence, the movement also possesses many weaknesses, ranging from its lack of a sanctuary to its limited public support. These weaknesses hinder recruitment and operations, make it vulnerable to prosecution and disruption, and otherwise limit its strength. With additional effort and resources, the U.S. and partner governments can exploit these weaknesses further, diminishing the danger.

This essay has three parts. It first briefly explains the danger of white supremacist violence and why experts and ordinary people are rightly concerned about its spread. The second section, constituting the bulk of this essay, lays out the many weaknesses of the white supremacist movement as a whole. In the final section, we discuss how governments can exploit these weaknesses and better combat the movement.

THE DANGER OF VIOLENT WHITE SUPREMACISM

White supremacists in eras past, particularly those in the South, focused their anxiety and anger on what they perceived of as threats to their longstanding white hegemony. Issues such as school desegregation in the 1950s prompted responses ranging from rearguard legal actions to violence against civil rights workers and local Black leaders. During the civil rights revolution, however, white supremacists lost their de jure hegemony and faced real threats to their de facto hegemony.

In the decades that followed, white supremacist ideology in the United States shifted to reflect this fact. As white supremacists lost power and support, increasingly they came to see white dominance as lost and the white race as existentially threatened. They claimed that a rising tide of non-whites — controlled and orchestrated by Jews — was working to engineer the extinction of the white race. The government, once seen as an ally that bolstered segregation and other forms of white dominance, now became an enemy that spied on, arrested, and prosecuted white supremacists. By the 2010s, most hardcore white supremacists thought of themselves as fighting to prevent what some termed “white genocide.”⁶

This “cornered rat” version of white supremacist ideology has helped propel many to violence ranging from lesser hate crimes to acts of terrorism and murder. According to terrorism tracking data from the Anti-Defamation League (ADL)’s H.E.A.T. Map, right-wing extremists (of all types) in the United States engaged in 98 terrorist incidents from 2011 through December 2020.⁷ Of those, white supremacists alone were responsible for 40 terrorist plots or attacks.⁸

White supremacists have been responsible for a large proportion of extremist murders in the United States. According to ADL’s report “Murder and Extremism in the United States in 2020,” white supremacists were responsible for 53% of the 17 domestic extremist-related murders in the United States in 2020.⁹ In 2019, they were responsible for 81% of 42 such killings that year.¹⁰ Over the previous 10 years, white supremacists committed 77% of all right-wing extremist-related murders and 58% of the 430 total extremist-related murders (including left-wing and domestic Islamist-related killings). There is no denying that white supremacists pose a very real threat of violence.

During its four years in office, the Trump administration increased public fears of white supremacist violence because of its perceived toleration, and at times even encouragement, of

white supremacy. President Donald Trump's rhetoric matched some white supremacist talking points, playing down police violence against Black people,¹¹ calling Mexican immigrants "rapists," declaring COVID-19 to be a "Chinese virus," and telling Black and other minority members of Congress to "go back" to their home countries, among many other remarks.¹² When violence occurred, as it did during a 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia organized by white supremacists, Trump opined that their ranks included "very fine people."¹³

Regardless of whether President Trump truly supported white supremacists or was simply trolling his critics, the perception that Trump is a racist is quite strong, with a 2020 poll finding that half of Americans saw him as one.¹⁴ Senior DHS officials in the Trump administration modified intelligence reports to play down the white supremacist threat.¹⁵ These perceptions and actions have created anxiety among many that Trump gave white supremacists greater freedom to act, in contrast to his predecessors of both parties who shunned them politically and sought to clamp down on any violence.

THE WEAKNESSES OF THE WHITE SUPREMACIST MOVEMENT

Despite the many legitimate concerns over white supremacy, it is important to remember that the white supremacist movement itself suffers from numerous problems that diminish its appeal and weaken its capacity to use violence. Counterterrorism officials can exploit many of these weaknesses through intelligent and aggressive policies.

Lack of public support

Public support for white supremacy is still low, and support for violence is lower still. In the 1960s, the American Nazi Party foundered because it was never able to attract significant members to its ranks, and membership in Ku Klux Klan groups, which surged as a reaction to the civil rights

movement, has been declining for decades. Violent groups and individuals active in the 1980s and 1990s like The Order and Timothy McVeigh hoped their attacks would spark a massive sympathetic response, but this never happened. In contrast to Europe — where, thanks in part to parliamentary systems with proportional representation, parties with extreme views like Golden Dawn in Greece and the Alternative for Germany have at times had a significant presence in national parliaments after running on openly anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant platforms — no white supremacist group active in the United States today has a significant political presence at a national or even state level.

Racism, anti-Semitism, anti-immigrant sentiment, and other white supremacist beliefs remain strong, though thankfully they are less mainstream than they were decades ago. The Anti-Defamation League reports, "a relatively low share of Americans harbors significant anti-Semitic attitudes."¹⁶ The ADL report indicates that views of Jews are roughly comparable to that of other religions, though views of Muslims are "far colder." Although racism remains manifest in numerous ways ranging from policing to medical care to job discrimination, the long-term picture is more positive, with views of intermarriage, Black political leadership, and similar issues improving¹⁷ and white recognition of racism and police mistreatment of African-Americans growing.¹⁸

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tremendous pressure on many white supremacists to closet themselves — and presumably also makes at least some less willing to act out violently.

White supremacist *violence* has less support still and, in fact, tends to backfire. Although white supremacists may seek to use violence to “wake up” white Americans to the dangers of non-whites and Jews, such a clarion call usually fails. Often white supremacists can’t even convince large segments of their own movement of the desirability of violence. The case of white supremacist Dylann Roof is instructive. After Roof committed his shooting spree at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston in 2015, some white supremacists praised him, but others frowned upon the attack,¹⁹ largely because they thought it made the victims seem sympathetic and would be used by the authorities to crack down on themselves and the movement as a whole. Roof’s own writings, moreover, suggest that his attack was perhaps more intended to inspire other white supremacists than to change hearts and minds. In the document he posted online shortly before the attack, he suggested that other white supremacists were doing nothing but talking, but he was going to “take it to the real world.” In writings taken from his cell after his arrest, Roof claimed that “I did what I thought would make the biggest wave. And now the fate of our race sits in the hands of my brothers who continue to live freely.”²⁰

In the years since the Charleston attack, accelerationist white supremacists²¹ — racists who want to hasten the collapse of society in order to build a new white supremacist society from its ashes — have elevated Roof to a sort of sainthood and urged others to emulate him. They have done the same with other white supremacist killers, most notably Brenton Tarrant, whose deadly attacks on mosques in New Zealand in 2019 have indeed inspired imitators, including in the United States, where white supremacist shooters in Texas and California targeted Hispanics and Jews much as Tarrant targeted Muslims.²² White supremacist violence can, indeed, inspire more

white supremacist violence, but it doesn’t seem to change public opinion, which in all of these cases was repelled and angered by the blood spilled by white supremacist killers. Meanwhile, the attention garnered by accelerationist white supremacist groups such as Atomwaffen and The Base have simply led to a major law enforcement crackdown on them.²³

No sanctuaries for white supremacist violence

Terrorist groups and movements tend to prosper in lawless or semi-lawless areas where governments are nonexistent or too weak to take down such groups.²⁴ In recent years, we have seen such groups thrive in places like Syria, Somalia, and Afghanistan. Absent government toleration or incapacity, terrorist groups will typically be dismantled sooner or later by governments and law enforcement.

Some terrorist groups have found safe havens in sympathetic foreign countries; the Red Army Faction, a West German terrorist group, benefited considerably from assistance from communist East Germany. Al-Qaida was able to base itself first in Sudan, then in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Other terrorist groups have been able to shelter themselves within a racial, ethnic, or religious community within a country, moving among them — to paraphrase Chinese communist leader Mao Zedong — as a fish swims within the sea. One can think perhaps of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Northern Ireland or ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna) in the Basque region of Spain.

White supremacists in the United States, however, do not enjoy the equivalent of an ethnic homeland or part of the country where they are particularly strong. In the Jim Crow-era South, the sympathies of local authorities often firmly rested with white supremacists willing to use violence to oppose the cause of civil rights activists, making prosecutions difficult or impossible. This sympathy has been gone for decades. Today, the Deep South is no longer a major center of white supremacist violence. In fact, white supremacist violence tends to be found in

states roughly in proportion to population.²⁵ This can be read as bad news — “they’re everywhere” — but it also means there are few areas of particular strength and influence; white supremacists today are spread thinly across a large country. They have little ability to hinder law enforcement’s ability to receive tips and develop informants, or to investigate and prosecute them. Charges are regularly brought forward, witnesses are typically willing to testify, and juries are generally willing to convict. In a few places, local law enforcement may be sympathetic to or tolerant of white extremists,²⁶ and it is vital to ensure that such officers are detected and fired.

For nearly a half-century, some white supremacist groups and “thinkers” ranging from Richard Butler to Harold Covington have promoted the idea of white supremacists moving to the Pacific Northwest — already a very white part of the country — in order to create a breakaway white supremacist republic. Such efforts have never had any success, even at a local political level. In some remote parts of some states, white supremacists have at times enjoyed a degree of autonomy, but this has been a function of isolation rather than demographic clout.

Resources don’t match desires

For decades, terrorist threats have often been measured or discussed in terms of *intent* and *capability*.²⁷ Intent represents the level of desire of a particular group or movement to engage in violent acts such as terrorism, while capability represents the degree to which a group or movement possesses the skills and resources (including financial, weapons, training, mobility, etc.) to actually do so. A terrorist group with high intent and high capability, such as al-Qaida in the years before September 11, 2001, represents a particular threat, because it not only possesses a strong inclination to do harm, it also has the means with which to launch a sophisticated attack.

American white supremacists — like most American extremists of whatever stripe — are best categorized as high intent, low capability. White supremacist groups tend to be small, poorly-organized, and

broke.²⁸ Moreover, as noted above, because white supremacists have no sanctuaries to shelter them from law enforcement, white supremacist organizations that form for the purpose of committing terrorist acts, or which develop such a purpose, are typically quickly dismantled. Unlike Americans linked to IS or al-Qaida during these groups’ heydays, white supremacists cannot draw on groups that have a strong presence overseas.

As a result, most white supremacist terrorist incidents in the U.S. are not committed by organized groups acting as groups but rather by lone actors or small, informal cells — something that further limits their capabilities. Such “leaderless”²⁹ actors are a difficult challenge for law enforcement and intelligence. However, the individuals themselves are often poorly trained and unable to conduct sophisticated attacks.

Like all Americans, white supremacists have easy access to non-automatic firearms, but they cannot easily obtain more sophisticated, especially military-style forms of weaponry. Nor are skills like bomb-making common within the white supremacist movement, a fact demonstrated by the occasional explosive mishap.³⁰ White supremacists have come up with many grandiose terrorist plots over the years that they had little ability to realize.

It is true that some low-capability white supremacist terrorists abandon overambitious plans in favor of something simpler but just as deadly, like engaging in a shooting spree. The most lethal attacks, such as the aforementioned shootings in Charleston, Pittsburgh, and El Paso, all involved individuals who used readily available guns. This stands in contrast to more lethal, and more sophisticated, operations like the 9/11 attacks or less-complex but still comparatively difficult bombings like the 1995 Oklahoma City attack led by anti-government extremist Timothy McVeigh. Some white supremacist attacks are simply targets of opportunity and involved little or no planning: a person of color or other minority background may be assaulted or killed simply because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Such operations are horrible and, as recent shooters have demonstrated, can be quite lethal. Nevertheless, they are a step down from bombings of transportation targets, as al-Qaida did in Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005, killing 191 and 52 innocent people respectively, or coordinated shooting and suicide bombing attacks, as IS did in Paris in 2015 and Brussels in 2016, killing 130 and 32 innocent people respectively. White supremacists in the United States have so far not demonstrated an ability to launch complex, multifaceted, or simultaneous attacks.

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Moreover, the lack of skills and resources among other white supremacists have rendered them particularly vulnerable to sting operations, perhaps law enforcement's most potent tool in fighting domestic terrorism. In a typical sting operation, an informant or undercover officer purports to offer the subject some means, such as explosives or weapons, that they seek in order to carry out their plans. A subject who goes through with such a deal can be arrested. The case of Benjamin McDowell is a useful example from among many white supremacists whose plans for violence were thwarted through sting operations.³¹ In 2017, McDowell, inspired by Dylann Roof's shooting spree, sought to attack Jews or Muslims in South Carolina. However, as a convicted felon, he couldn't legally own a gun. A federal agent offered to sell McDowell a gun for his attack — but when McDowell handed the money over, he was arrested.

Civil society inhibits effectiveness

The odious ideology of white supremacy combined with the movement's violent history has put a rather broad target on the back of the movement, and not only from the point of view of the government and law enforcement. In fact, a number of different

types of institutions and many areas of society are willing to work, and often willing to work together, to combat white supremacy.

One can start with anti-extremism organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League (for which one of the authors of this piece works) and the Southern Poverty Law Center, as well as numerous similar but smaller or more regional organizations such as the Montana Human Rights Network, which dedicate much of their time to tracking and exposing extremists such as white supremacists, educating the general public about them, and helping law enforcement or others combat the problems they cause. Occasionally, their information can even help initiate terrorism investigations.³²

Such civil society groups can also, with their many allies in the civil rights community, put pressure on businesses ranging from credit card companies to social media platforms to refuse to allow white supremacists and other extremists to exploit their services and platforms. "Deplatforming" white supremacists — i.e., denying them free and easy use of social media and other platforms for recruiting, networking, organizing and plotting — is a difficult task but one that nevertheless inhibits all of their activities, including white supremacist violence.

Weak international ties

White supremacist networks today often have global connections.³³ The mosque shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand, for example, inspired American attacks like the Walmart shooting in El Paso, and there is a back and forth of white supremacist ideas around the world, enabled by social media.³⁴

Any level of international connections is bad. However, compared with some other types of extremism, these connections are, for now, at least, relatively weak. In contrast to the foreign fighter flow to Iraq and Syria when IS was at its peak, where tens of thousands of volunteers swelled the group's ranks, the white supremacist connections are more limited and uncoordinated, though travel of white

supremacists to eastern Ukraine to participate in the activities of militias on both sides of the conflict there remains a concern.³⁵ Global connections put new ideas and tactics into the worldwide white supremacist ecosystem, but though an Anders Behring Breivik or Brenton Tarrant may inspire some lone wolves to random and uncoordinated violence, it is at the expense of increased law enforcement attention to the rest of the movement. In addition, international white supremacist ties so far have not led to significant flows of money or other resources.

Divided over priorities and targeting

Terrorists have the greatest impact when they have the power to modulate their use of violence. This entails focusing on key enemies and targets while managing the public backlash against their bloodshed and trying to force the government into an overreaction. Groups ranging from the IRA to al-Qaida have sought strategically to control the violence done in their group's name, often issuing detailed targeting guidelines,³⁶ and establishing procedures to distinguish between attacks done by the group and those done by sympathizers that the group itself might reject.

White supremacists hate Blacks, Jews, Muslims, Latinos, Asian-Americans, immigrants in general, the LGBTQ community, and the left as a whole, as well as many governmental and nongovernmental institutions. This enemies' list gives white supremacists a vast reservoir of grievances from which to tap, and makes for a target-rich environment, but it also makes it hard for them to prioritize and focus their limited resources to achieve specific goals. White supremacists attack all these targets, but they find it hard to modulate their violence due to the decentralization of the movement and the fact that so much of its violence comes from lone actors and informal cells rather than organized groups. If individual activists, on their own, decide which target to attack, they will do so based on personal preferences and local convenience. As a result, it is harder for them to instill fear into one particular community or to

overstretch the system, which some of their thinkers believe would bring about its collapse. They also unite a range of communities that would otherwise not necessarily see one another as natural allies against themselves. Finally, such attacks may prompt a government crackdown when members of the movement as a whole are not prepared for it.

COUNTERTERRORISM POTENTIAL

This discussion of the weaknesses of the white supremacist movement is not intended to downplay or dismiss the dangers that the movement poses. The many deaths it has caused speak for themselves. But it is important to realize that many of these weaknesses stem in whole or in part from effective counterterrorism and counterextremism efforts, and additional pressure and resources can further exacerbate and exploit them.

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White supremacist recruiting can often be vulnerable to tracking. Recruiting, at least in its initial stages, is usually done openly, often via social media. This allows intelligence and police officials as well as concerned civil society members to identify entities engaging in recruiting and in some cases to follow recruitment itself (though in the case of government officials, probable cause is necessary for an initial investigation). Some networks can be identified even in their earliest stages, if there are enough interested eyes and ears.

The criminal backgrounds of many group members increase this problem for the movement. Many show up on the radar screens of law enforcement for reasons ranging from spousal abuse to drug dealing, and the government enjoys considerable leverage to flip them to become informants. From there a trail leads to other violent white supremacists. More broadly, because they do

not enjoy a haven, white supremacists have few places to hide once the government is trying to monitor them. All this, of course, requires that the government actually be looking. Since the end of the civil rights era, U.S. pressure on and resources directed at white supremacists have ebbed and flowed, at times creating breathing space for violent individuals and groups.

Constant pressure on groups and the movement matters, especially to ensure that technology and financial companies are deplatforming them. These companies often have ambiguous terms-of-service policies, enabling them to avoid action if they so choose but also to act broadly and decisively if necessary. Public embarrassment is often more effective than law enforcement pressure in getting companies to deplatform white supremacists.

The international ties of the movement, though weak compared with some Islamist extremist movements, are also a vulnerability, albeit a limited one.³⁷ In April 2020, the United States for the first time designated a white supremacist organization, the Russian Imperial Movement, as a foreign terrorist organization.³⁸ Such designation makes any material support — a broad term — illegal and also brings in a host of intelligence actors like the National Security Agency and the Central Intelligence Agency, which focus abroad. As with IS or al-Qaida, individuals who provide even a small amount of money to a designated foreign group or individual can be prosecuted on terrorism charges. The second order effects are often more important.

Social media and financial companies will shun anyone who has potential ties with such a group or person, denying them resources. This is both a potential source for prosecuting white supremacists and a way to ensure that further international ties are limited. However, white supremacists in the United States are less connected to overseas groups than are jihadists. Moreover, many of the most dangerous white supremacists in recent years are not affiliated with any organized group.

One of the most important changes is one of the easiest — ending the sense that white supremacy is tolerated from on high. Though the FBI has been aggressive in recent years in investigating white supremacist violence, the Trump administration sent ambiguous signals toward the broader movement, at times seemingly reluctantly condemning it but also defending causes it champions, like the preservation of Confederate statues and military bases named after Confederate generals, and promoting conspiracy theories related to immigrants. It has also rhetorically labeled enemies of the movement, such as Black Lives Matter and Antifa, as terrorist organizations, creating confusion and false equivalence. High-level support for cracking down on white supremacist violence will ensure that resources are in place to fight white supremacists, that agencies know their roles, and that more mainstream groups that are critical of immigration or otherwise share some concerns of white supremacists know they must reject the violent haters in their ranks.

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