

The Dangers of Overreacting to Far-Right Extremism

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Establishment Views on Countering Far-Right Extremism

On his first day in office, President Biden initiated an unprecedented review of U.S. government efforts to counter domestic terrorism. This review resulted in the first-ever national strategy to combat domestic terrorism. The National Security Council [document](#), entitled the National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism, is careful to note that “domestic terrorism can take many forms, inspired by a wide range of violent ideologies.” It emphasizes that “the definition of domestic terrorism in our law makes no distinction based on political views—left, right, or center—and neither should we.” The document thus pledges “to confront domestic terrorism regardless of the particular ideology that motivates individuals to violence.” Despite these assurances, President Biden and [other](#) Democratic leaders [repeatedly finger right-wing extremism](#) as the foremost threat to the United States—specifically, former President Donald Trump, his supporters, and the Make America Great Again (MAGA) agenda.

Even before the January 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol, leading opinion-makers across academe, media, and government agencies began calling for severe crackdowns against right-wing extremism akin to the post-9/11 response. The Stanford political science professor Michael McFaul [recommended](#) for America to “start a war on terrorism at home” against the far-right. *The Atlantic* staff writer and *Washington Post* columnist Anne Applebaum [agreed](#) that the U.S. government should employ a “similar response” to “domestic white supremacist terrorism” as “foreign jihadi terrorism.” *The Daily Beast* [echoed](#), “Now, before it grows any stronger, should be the time to move against it with the same kind of concerted international focus of attention and resources that were trained on Osama bin Laden. Now is the time for a global war on white nationalist terrorism.” Secretary of Transportation and veteran Pete Buttigieg also told audiences that he “learned a lot [in Afghanistan] that sadly will be [applicable](#) here at home, too.”

Former [CIA](#) and [FBI](#) practitioners have prescribed how the post-9/11 global war on terrorism can be applied to fighting right-wing extremists at home, from tracing their networks “just like we did against other terrorist groups” after 9/11 to changing our laws for us to “fight domestic terror groups...the way we treat foreign ones.” Six former senior directors for counterterrorism at the White House's National Security Council released a [joint statement](#) calling on the government to go after the Timothy McVeighs as ferociously as the Osama bin Ladens.

The January 6th attack on the Capitol intensified animus against far-right extremists. Some Trump critics claimed the attack on the Capitol was even [worse](#) than 9/11. Elizabeth Neumann, a leading Trump critic from the Department of Homeland Security, has [said](#) that “We have to go after [the far-right]...with the same intensity that we did with Al Qaeda.” And we must treat Trump like Osama bin Laden for inciting the violence, as he was the “spokesperson that rallied the troops.” Gen. Stanley McChrystal [claimed](#) that right-wing extremists are following “the evolution of al-Qaida in Iraq,” which led to ISIS. Alex Stamos of the Stanford Internet Observatory has [recommended](#) that we treat white nationalists at home like ISIS by monitoring and restricting their social media.

Notably, this animus is sometime directed against not only violent offenders, but the Republican party. President Biden has [walked back](#) some of his rhetoric to reassure Americans that he does not view the entire GOP as an enemy. But as an MSNBC host recently [acknowledged](#), “We don’t separate right wing extremists from the Republican Party any more.” Reflecting a common view among elite American opinion-makers, Charles M. Blow of the *New York Times* likewise [says](#) that the entire Republican party is guilty of “fascist” thought for inadequately opposing Trump. Clearly, the establishment view in U.S. politics is to escalate countermeasures against right-wing “extremism,” broadly defined.

My Views on Countering Far-Right Extremism

But those views on countering the far-right are ill-advised, even counterproductive for six reasons.

First, a hallmark of authoritarian regimes is their declared policy of countering “extremists” as opposed to “terrorists.” These two terms are frequently used interchangeably, but carry very different meanings with critically important implications. Terrorists, by definition, are guilty of an extremism of means—not ends. Terrorists engage in radical tactics (against civilians) whereas an “extremist” may be guilty only of harboring unwelcome or aberrant political preferences from the vantage of the establishment. As White House Press Secretary Karine [Jean-Pierre](#) has noted, “When you are not with what majority of Americans are, then you know, that is extreme. That is an extreme way of thinking.” Governments that identify extremists rather than terrorists as the enemy risk becoming the thought police and criminalizing nonviolent dissent.

Second, such overreactions are not only un-Constitutional and prone to abuse, but actually increase the number of terrorists. A large body of political science research suggests that government overreaction strengthens terrorists relative to the government. The overreaction [convinces](#) those on the sidelines that the government is as radical as the terrorists allege, growing their supporters and ultimately membership rosters. And the harming of innocents can [convince](#) them that the government will target them regardless of whether they commit terrorism, strengthening the strategic logic of engaging in this violent behavior. For these and other reasons, [my research](#) demonstrates that authoritarian regimes make inferior counterterrorists. Unsurprisingly, most terrorists operate in the most [illiberal countries](#), where governments fail to distinguish between terrorists and dissidents.

Third, terrorists thrive on grievances. And the far right in particular has historically been fueled by perceived injustices. Most notoriously, Timothy McVeigh reportedly attacked the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City to [avenge](#) government abuses at Ruby Ridge and Waco.

Fourth, terrorists often want to provoke government overreaction. As David Rapoport [remarked](#) decades ago, terrorists have historically used the “politics of atrocity” to “produce counter-atrocities rebounding to the advantage of the original assailant.” For example, Russian anarchists and the Algerian National Liberation Front tried to elicit heavy-handed countermeasures in order to erode the target government’s popular support and attract more terrorists. The main constraint of terrorists is their structural weakness compared to the government. Terrorist leaders may not have a sophisticated understanding of the causal logic, but often realize that eliciting an overreaction can help them out organizationally at the expense of the government.

Fifth, my research indicates that whereas government excesses help terrorists, terrorist excesses help the government. Although a large theoretical literature in political science purports to show the strategic utility of terrorism, empirical work demonstrates that the non-state attacks on civilians tend to backfire by [strengthening](#) the [resolve](#) of the target country, [lowering](#) the [odds](#) of government concessions, [eroding](#) popular support, and [expediting](#) organizational demise. A common narrative after the Capitol attack was that it would spur recruitment for the far-right. *The New York Times*, for example, ran a piece [entitled](#) "Capitol Attack Could Fuel Extremist Recruitment for Years, Experts Warn." And yet far-right violence has [historically](#) eroded support for far-right movements, whereas government abuses have increased it. Terrorism is self-regulating behavior with inherent limits that can reduce the need for a kinetic counterterrorism response. The biggest counterterrorism successes—from the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria to the Egyptian al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya to the Islamic State—have been due to the excesses of the terrorists themselves.

Sixth, the War on Terrorism demonstrates how major counterterrorism investments can yield disappointing returns and even exacerbate conflicts. The post-9/11 treatment is hardly worth emulating. Other scholars have [documented](#) the tremendous human, material, and normative costs. The war on terror has [cost](#) \$6.4 trillion and 801,000 lives according to one estimate, [created](#) a massively expanded security state, and helped Al Qaeda to grow in Iraq, Libya, and Syria by generating the sorts of power vacuums [ideal](#) for terrorists to thrive. Currently, Afghanistan is on the brink of mass starvation, the Taliban has returned to power, women are again imprisoned under Sharia law, and Iraq is on the verge of another civil war. In Somalia, the Sahel, Mozambique and other areas of Africa, jihadis are actually on the [rise](#).

In sum, political science research indicates that governments pay a heavy price when their declared policy is to counter extremists rather than terrorists. In fact, government overreaction is sought by terrorists and helps them, especially on the far-right. The biggest counterterrorism successes are seldom due to government expenditure and sacrifice, but from the terrorism itself, which is self-regulating owing to its unpopularity. These observations in the counterterrorism literature are not new. But contrary to the establishment narrative since the January 6th attack, they point to government restraint as the optimal approach for reducing domestic terrorism, safeguarding law-abiding Americans, and preserving liberal values along with the proper role of government. The counterterrorism research landscape thus suggests an important corrective to the establishment narrative.