

A Dark and Constant Rage: 25 Years of Right-Wing Terrorism in the United States

Read ADL's comprehensive report, [A Dark and Constant Rage: 25 Years of Right-Wing Terrorism in the United States](#) (PDF).

In March 2017, a white supremacist from Maryland, James Harris Jackson, traveled to New York City with the alleged intention of launching a series of violent attacks on black men to discourage white women from having relationships with black men. After several days, Jackson chose his first victim, a 66-year old black homeless man, Timothy Caughman. Jackson later allegedly admitted that he had stabbed Caughman with a small sword he had brought with him, describing the murder as a “practice run.”

However, after the killing, Jackson’s angry energy dissipated and he turned himself over to the authorities. A week later, New York prosecutors announced that they were charging him with second-degree murder as a hate crime and also with a state charge of terrorism.

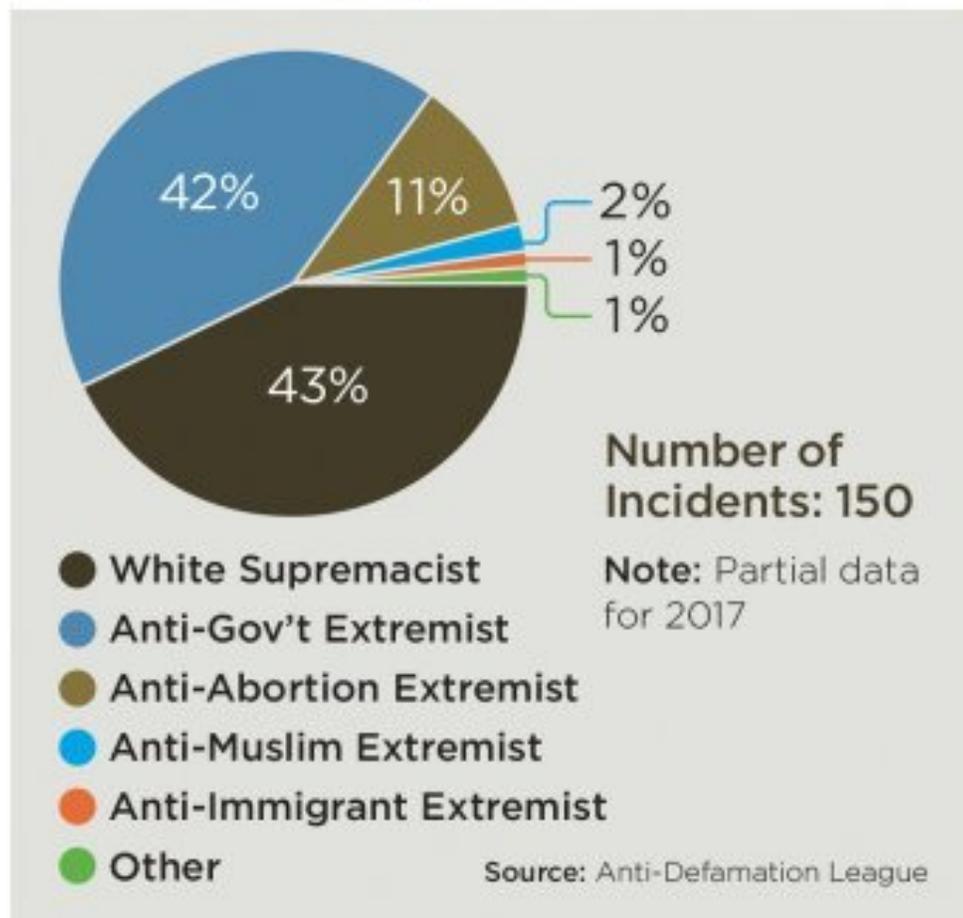
Jackson’s aborted killing spree was a shocking example of right-wing terror in the United States but it was unfortunately far from an isolated example.

For over a century and a half, since “burning Kansas” of the 1850s and the Ku Klux Klan of the 1860s, right-wing terrorism has been an unwelcome feature of the American landscape. Yet today, many people are barely aware that it exists and most people don’t recognize its frequency or scope.

Far more attention in recent years has been given to the threat of homegrown radical Islamic terror—a danger that has generated such horrific acts as the

Right-wing Terror Incidents in the United States

1993–2017 | by Movement



Orlando and San Bernardino shooting sprees. Yet the very real specter of radical Islamic terror in the United States has existed alongside an equally serious threat of terror from right-wing extremist groups and individuals.

Both movements have generated shooting sprees, bombings, and a wide variety of plots and conspiracies. Both pose threats so significant that to ignore either would be to invite tragedy.

To illustrate the threat of right-wing terrorism in the United States, the Anti-Defamation League's Center on Extremism has compiled a list of 150 right-wing

terrorist acts, attempted acts, plots and conspiracies from the past 25 years (1993-2017). These include terrorist incidents from a wide variety of white supremacists, from neo-Nazis to Klansmen to racist skinheads, as well as incidents connected to anti-government extremists such as militia groups, sovereign citizens and tax protesters. The list also includes incidents of anti-abortion terror as well as from other, smaller right-wing extremist movements.

ADL's Center on Extremism defines *terrorism* as a pre-planned act or attempted act of significant violence by one or more non-state actors in order to further an ideological, social or religious cause, or to harm perceived opponents of such causes. Significant violent acts can include bombings or use of other weapons of mass destruction, assassinations and targeted killings, shooting sprees, arsons and firebombings, kidnappings and hostage situations and, in some cases, armed robberies. *Domestic terrorism* consists of acts or attempted acts of terrorism in which the perpetrators are citizens or permanent residents of the country in which the act takes place.

The right-wing terrorist incidents in ADL's list include those that best fit the above criteria. They are drawn from the much larger pool of violent and criminal acts that American right-wing extremists engage in every year, from hate crimes to deadly encounters with law enforcement. Right-wing extremists annually murder a number of Americans, but only some of those murders occur in connection with terrorist acts. There are, after all, hundreds of thousands of adherents of right-wing extremist movements in the United States and all such movements have some degree of association with criminal activity. No one should think, therefore, that the incidents listed here represent the breadth of right-wing violence in the U.S. But, as acts of terrorism, they do show right-wing movements at their most vicious and ambitious.

The Perpetrators

The people who committed or attempted the terrorist acts listed here came from a variety of right-wing extremist movements. In a few cases, extremists connected

to terror incidents here even adhered to more than one right-wing extremist movement; in such cases, the seemingly dominant ideology was selected for statistical purposes. Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh, for example, was primarily an anti-government extremist but also had white supremacist leanings. Richard Poplawski, who gunned down three police officers in Pittsburgh, was a white supremacist who also had leanings towards the anti-government movement.

Most right-wing extremists in the United States fall into one of two broad umbrella movements or spheres: white supremacists and anti-government extremists. An overwhelming majority of the terror incidents listed here (85%) were committed by adherents of one of these two spheres. Moreover, the number of acts attributed to each sphere is almost identical: 64 terror incidents are related to white supremacists, while 63 are related to anti-government extremists. Many people, when picturing right-wing terrorism, tend to think of white supremacists, but anti-government extremists such as militia groups and sovereign citizens pose just as much of a threat.

White supremacists involved in right-wing terror incidents include adherents of every major segment of the white supremacist movement, including neo-Nazis, racist skinheads, “traditional” white supremacists (such as Ku Klux Klan groups), white supremacist prison gangs, the religious sect Christian Identity, and the Alt Right. Leaving aside dual-movement extremists such as Timothy McVeigh, the worst white supremacist terrorist was Dylann Roof, a “traditional” white supremacist who embarked upon a deadly shooting spree at the Emanuel AME church in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015, killing nine.

The anti-government extremists, who are often collectively termed the “Patriot” movement, consist primarily of adherents of the tax protest movement, the sovereign citizen movement, and the militia movement (with the latter including Oath Keepers and Three Percenters). Though the “Patriot” movement goes back to the mid-1960s, it was in the mid-1990s that it really came into its own in terms of

becoming a major domestic terrorist threat, one that equaled the threat posed by white supremacists. Oklahoma City bombers Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols were dedicated adherents of the “Patriot” movement and their 1995 attack on the Murrah Federal Building gave notice that anti-government extremists now posed a major threat.

It is common for the media and others to assume that anti-government extremists are also mostly white supremacists, but this is not the case. Though there is some overlap between the two spheres, the main anti-government extremist movements direct their anger at the government and there have always been people of color in these movements.

Indeed, the sovereign citizen movement in particular has unfortunately seen particularly strong growth within the African-American community in recent years. Two of the sovereign-citizen related incidents on this list, the LaPlace, Louisiana, shootings in 2012 and the Columbus, Ohio, bomb-making attempt in 2016, involved African-Americans. Two incidents not included on this list involved extremists who were primarily black nationalists but who had secondary sovereign citizen affiliations: the 2014 plot by two men to blow up the Gateway Arch and kill law enforcement officials in St. Louis, Missouri, and the 2016 deadly ambush killings of three police officers in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

The militia movement has spent much of its history trying to distance itself from accusations of racism or white supremacy but in recent years much of the movement has willingly embraced a particular type of bigotry: anti-Muslim hatred. This Islamophobia has taken numerous forms, from armed protests in front of mosques to a major terrorist plot in October 2016 in Garden City, Kansas, where three militia members were arrested in connection with an alleged plot to blow up an apartment complex that primarily housed Muslim Somali-American residents. The militia movement could produce more such terror attempts aimed at Muslims in the future.

Anti-abortion extremists are responsible for 11% of the terror incidents collected here. Compared to the incidents connected to white supremacists or anti-government extremists, the number of abortion related terror attacks and attempts is low. However, given the small number of anti-abortion extremists relative to adherents of the other, much larger movements, the consistent stream of terror incidents that flow from this movement is worrisome.

Anti-abortion extremists are an example of what is called “single-issue extremism.” Single-issue extremists are typically the extreme wing of a broader, more mainstream movement dedicated to a single cause or issue. While most people in those movements would not think of committing acts of violence, adherents of the extreme wing of those movements are more likely to consider violent activity, operating under a sense of extreme urgency and with a conviction that the ends justify the means. A few other right-wing single issue extremists, such as anti-Muslim extremists and anti-immigration extremists, have also committed violent acts included among the 150 listed here.

All of the perpetrators and alleged perpetrators listed in this report have ties to extremist ideologies, but not all of them actually have had connections to specific extremist groups. Indeed, “terrorist groups” as such—i.e., groups that form and exist largely for the purpose of committing terrorist acts—are rare in the United States, where the rule of law is strong and such groups have great difficulties in finding purchase. Even when extremists are connected to specific groups, they rarely commit their actions at the direction of the group. Rather, extremist groups in the United States tend to serve a purpose of radicalization more than anything else, whether of their own members or, as in the case of Dylann Roof, of non-members who may be influenced by their propaganda.

The perpetrators of some of the incidents on this list were part of formal groups, while others were essentially involved in “cells”—informal associations of extremists banding together to commit an act. But just as common as these two types were lone offenders—the “lone wolf” terrorists responsible for a large

number of America's terror incidents. Indeed, approximately half of the 150 incidents listed in this report involved lone wolf offenders. Today, thanks to the Internet, it is easier than ever for someone to become steeped in extremist ideologies, even to the point of being willing to commit acts of great violence, without ever being involved in an organized extremist group.

The Incidents

The list in this report includes 150 incidents involving acts, attempted acts, and plots of right-wing terrorism from 1993 through part of 2017. A few of these terror acts are well-known, such as the bombings conducted by Timothy McVeigh and Eric Rudolph, while many other incidents garnered little more than local media coverage and are unknown to most Americans. Such lists always involve some value judgments on the margins and there are some incidents on the list that some people might think don't belong on such a list, while there are items missing from the list that some people might think should be included, such as the armed standoffs involving members of the Bundy family and others in Nevada in 2014 and Oregon in 2016.

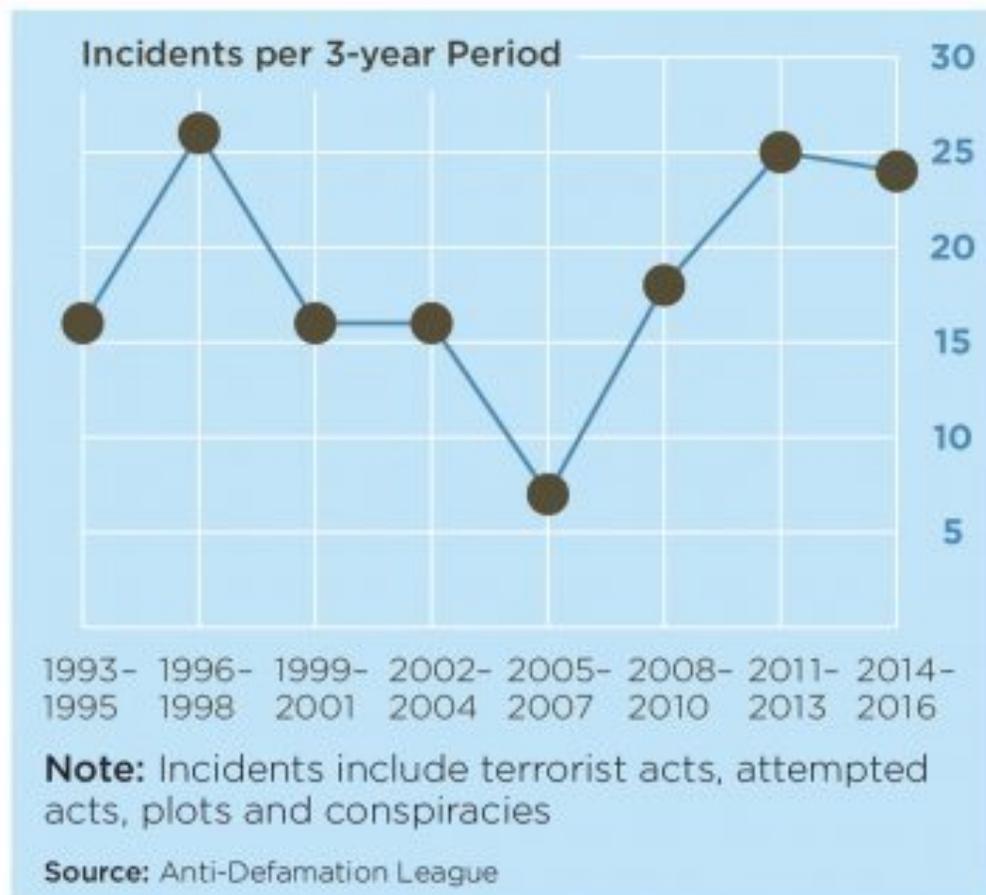
In many cases where a possible incident was not included, it was for one of several reasons. First, for some reported incidents, an extremist connection has never been satisfactorily established or has in fact been disproved. For example, in 2014 Dennis Marx attempted to use firearms and explosives to attack an Atlanta courthouse; some media outlets reported or speculated that Marx was a sovereign citizen. However, no evidence confirming this ever emerged and the police eventually acknowledged he had not been involved in the movement. Similarly, some media speculated that Jared Lee Loughner, who shot Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and 18 others in a 2011 shooting spree in Arizona, was a sovereign citizen, but this also turned out to be untrue.

An additional group of incidents did not make the list because, while an extremist definitely committed an act of significant violence, the act was a spontaneous act

of violence without noticeable premeditation; such acts are usually not included here. Finally, some incidents—usually discoveries of extremists with major illegal arsenals of weapons and/or explosives—were not included because there was insufficient evidence of any target or intent to use the weapons for an act of terrorism. The incidents in these two categories are serious criminal violations but not really incidents of terrorism.

Those omissions still leave 150 terror incidents from the last quarter-century. This lengthy string of dangerous attacks and plots illustrates how deeply seated the threat of right-wing terrorism is in the United States.

Right-wing Terror Incidents in the United States 1993–2016



A look at these 150 incidents over time reveals that two specific surges of right-wing terrorism have occurred over the past 25 years. The first was the surge of the mid-to-late 1990s, a result of a great increase in right-wing extremism as a result of a variety of factors that include the election of Bill Clinton, the passage of NAFTA, the passage of gun control measures such as the Brady Law and the Assault Weapons Ban, and the deadly standoffs at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, in 1992 and Waco, Texas, in 1993, which energized white supremacists and anti-government extremists, respectively.

The 1990s surge had died down by the turn of the century and right-wing terrorism occurred less frequently in the early-to-mid 2000s. Events ranging from the non-event of a Y2K-related disaster to the replacement of Bill Clinton with George W. Bush to the 9/11 terror attacks all played a role in dampening right-wing furor.

Unfortunately, this state of affairs did not last. Near the end of Bush's second term, right-wing terror incidents began to increase again and this trend accelerated by 2009, thanks in part to the election of Barack Obama, whom both white supremacists and anti-government extremists hated, and to the major economic disasters of the Great Recession and the foreclosure crisis. The latter two in particular allowed the sovereign citizen movement to greatly expand. The result was a second surge of right-wing extremism, one that was accompanied by a surge of right-wing terror incidents. This increased level of terror-related activity remains high today, though whether or not it will sustain itself during a Trump administration remains to be seen.

The worst right-wing terror attack, the Oklahoma City bombing, killed 168 people and injured hundreds more. Thankfully, none of the other incidents achieved anywhere near that level of lethality and destructiveness. In large part, this has been due to effective law enforcement, at both the federal and state/local levels, who have uncovered and prevented many attempts at terrorist acts. Indeed, only a minority of the incidents recorded here—65 out of 150--could be considered

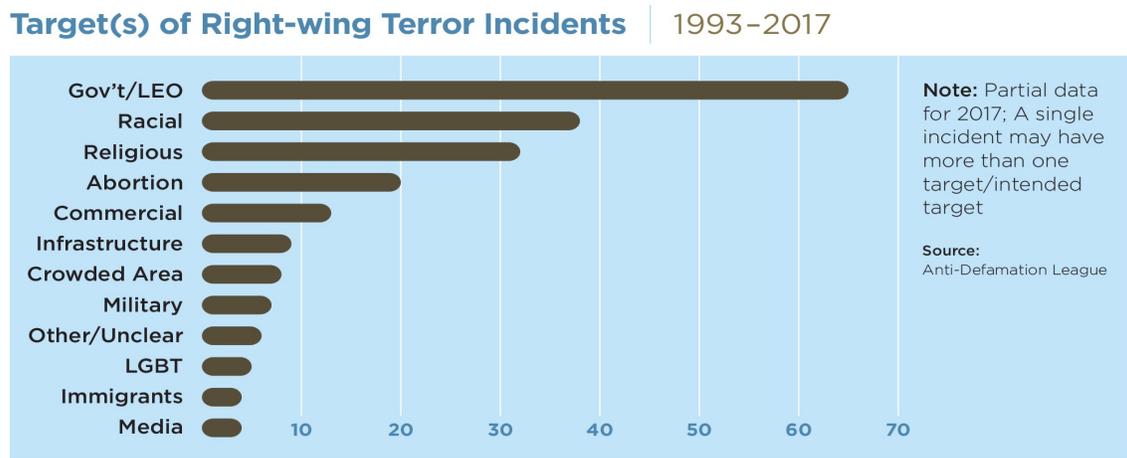
“successful” acts, by which is meant that the terrorist(s) succeeded in carrying out part or all of their plan or were able to wreak some sort of damage (such as shooting someone) while attempting to carry out their plan. This does not include bombs that were successfully planted but which failed to go off.

Some of the attempted acts never had a good chance of success, while others could easily have been deadly. Even though most terror incidents were not successes, the minority that did succeed resulted in 255 deaths and approximately 603 people injured (not all injury counts are consistent). Were it not for the efforts of law enforcement to detect and prevent right-wing acts of terror, that deadly toll would be far higher still.

To accomplish their deadly aims, extremists used a variety of tools and tactics, but overwhelmingly firearms and explosives were the most common weapons chosen. Indeed, 55 of the 150 terror incidents involved use or planned use of firearms, while another 55 involved explosives. Moreover, of the 17 incidents involving multiple weapons types, firearms and explosives were by far the most common combination.

It is worth noting that, although bombs were used or considered by extremists just as often as firearms, their *successful* use rate was much lower. This is largely due to the fact that explosives are far more difficult to obtain and to use in the United States than are firearms, which are abundant, easy to use, and very deadly. There is far better regulation of explosives than firearms in the United States.

In a minority of cases, right-wing extremists attempted arsons or incendiary devices such as Molotov cocktails; abortion clinics were a frequent target of such violence. And, from time to time, extremists would select more exotic means of murder, such as using the deadly toxin ricin or poisoning a water supply or trying to build a radiological weapon.



Whatever weapon they planned to use against their targets, right-wing extremists have had no shortage of targets. Indeed, some ambitious plots have contained an entire array of targets slated for death and destruction.

Of the various targets of right-wing anger, it is governmental and law enforcement institutions that are most often threatened. Of the incidents examined here, 66 involved some sort of government-related target. This is largely due to the fact that white supremacists and anti-government extremists alike, as well as most of the lesser right-wing movements, hate government and law enforcement. This category includes federal, state and local branches of government and law enforcement.

White supremacists are responsible for most of the racial and religious targeting. Virtually any person or institution associated with a non-white race can be a potential target for white supremacists, but African-Americans, Hispanics, and multi-racial couples/families have been the most common groups victimized. The most frequent religious targets were, not surprisingly, Jews and Muslims (including non-Muslims perceived as Muslims). Actual or perceived immigrants, as well as LGBT targets, were also subject to victimization.

Abortion-related targets, typically clinics that provide abortion services as well as the people who work at such places, were also common. While anti-abortion extremists were the extremists most likely to attack abortion-related targets, other right-wing extremists, most noticeably white supremacists, also occasionally attempted such attacks.

Right-wing extremist have also taken aim at a variety of other targets. Commercial targets have included various businesses and, in particular, financial institutions. Infrastructure targets include a wide range of installations, from refineries to dams to water supplies. In some cases, extremists have simply targeted crowded public areas, hoping to cause significant human casualties.

The Present and Future of Right-Wing Terrorism

Over the past 25 years, right-wing terrorism has exhibited a considerable amount of stability. Part of this is due to the fact that most of it comes from two mature and well-established movements: the white supremacist movement and the anti-government "Patriot" movement. They have specific goals and specific enemies and can be expected to produce a steady stream of extremists willing to use violence to achieve those goals or harm those enemies. Moreover, though fringe movements, they nevertheless have deep roots in American society and cannot simply be rooted out or eliminated. Right-wing terrorism is not going away anytime soon.

On the plus side, law enforcement is collectively far more familiar with right-wing extremist movements than it may be with newer types of extremist movements, which enables it to utilize informants and undercover officers to a much fuller extent than might otherwise be the case. It is no coincidence that a number of the prevented acts recounted in this study were prevented thanks to “sting” operations, which are one of the most consistently successful law enforcement tools against terrorism—as long as law enforcement is sufficiently familiar with the relevant movement(s).

Most of the 25 years examined here for right-wing terrorism have occurred in what can be deemed the “Internet era.” However, the Internet of the mid-1990s was very different than that of ten years later or today’s on-line world. Overall, right-wing terrorism has remained pretty consistent throughout this era, but the evolution of the Internet has resulted in some changes.

In particular, the social networking revolution that occurred during the period 2006-2009 has made it easier for extremist ideas and tactics to spread very far, very fast. This can allow new extremist movements, such as the white supremacist Alt Right, to quickly gain purchase, and can allow established movement, such as the sovereign citizen movement, to rapidly resurge. Social networking has also allowed extremists to meet each other and even to plot on-line. The October 2008 school attack plot in Tennessee and the Georgia militia plot of February 2014 are two examples where extremists who met on-line later joined up in the “real world” to plot terrorist acts.

The Internet may also have made lone wolf terrorism—terrorism committed by a lone perpetrator not acting at the behest of any organized group—a more common phenomenon, because one can now self-radicalize using on-line resources with little need to engage with other extremists in the “real world.” The shooting sprees of Keith Luke in 2009 and Dylann Roof in 2015 are examples of terrorist acts committed by lone extremists who radicalized on-line with little or no real

interaction with other extremists. Lone wolves have long existed within America's radical right, but could be even more likely in the future.

Finally, for the past quarter of a century, right-wing terrorism has been a consistent feature in the landscape of American violence, but it has garnered far less notice than some other forms of terrorism, most notably Islamic terrorism. Though a few incidents, such as the Oklahoma City bombing, or the bombings of Eric Rudolph, received extensive media coverage, many of the incidents collected here received scant media attention, particularly from major national media sources.

One reason for this under-coverage may be very simple: a surprising number of the terrorist acts and plots listed here originated away from major media centers. While some incidents took place in locations such as New York City, Chicago, or Los Angeles, many others occurred in out-of-the-way places such as Garden City, Kansas; Fairbanks, Alaska; or Lenoir, Tennessee. As a result, such incidents are less likely to get national media attention and, if they get any, less likely to get sustained coverage.

Whatever the reasons for the lack of coverage, one of its consequences has been an inadequate awareness among policy-makers and the public alike of the threat posed by violent right-wing extremists. Today, the United States still does not even have a federal domestic terrorism statute. Federal spending on training law enforcement on issues such as right-wing violence and terrorism is extremely low.

One thing is certain: if the United States does not treat right-wing terrorism as a real threat and react appropriately, there is no chance of lessening the danger posed by violent right-wing extremists and the 150 terror incidents described in this report will be joined by still more.