

**Testimony of J. Richard Cohen,
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Before the
Committee on Homeland Security
United States House of Representatives**

**The Rise of Radicalization: Is the U.S. Government
Failing to Counter International and Domestic Terrorism?
July 15, 2015**

My name is Richard Cohen. I am an attorney and the president of the Southern Poverty Law Center, a civil rights organization founded in 1971 and headquartered in Montgomery, Alabama. For more than three decades, we have been monitoring, issuing reports about, and training law enforcement officials on far-right extremist activity in the United States.¹ Because of that work, I was invited in 2010 to serve on the Department of Homeland Security's Countering Violent Extremism Working Group. I am honored to appear before the Committee today.

In my testimony, I'd like to make two basic points. First, as the killings at Charleston's "Mother Emanuel" AME Church vividly illustrate, the threat of radical-right terrorism in our country is a serious one. Second, it is critical that the federal government devote sufficient attention to countering that threat and not allow its resources to be inappropriately skewed toward the fight against terrorism from Islamic extremists.

The Threat of Non-Islamic Domestic Terrorism is Extremely Serious

In the first few years of the 21st century, we began to detect a significant increase in radical-right activity in the United States. The number of hate groups—organizations that vilify entire groups of people based on their race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or some other characteristic—nearly doubled during a 10-year span—from 457 in 1999 to 926 in 2008. This growth continued during the first two years of the Obama Administration, to a record 1,018 groups in 2011. In our view, the most important factor driving this increase was a backlash to our country's changing demographics. For many on the radical right, President Obama's election symbolized the kind of "change" they fear.

Although the growth in the number of hate groups began before President Obama took office, his election did coincide with another phenomenon: the dramatic resurgence of a far-right movement that includes armed militias and other organizations that view the federal government

¹ We publish our investigative findings online and in the *Intelligence Report*, a journal distributed to more than 50,000 law enforcement officers; we maintain an extensive database, conduct an annual census of hate and antigovernment groups, and assist law enforcement officials by providing information about these groups' activities; and, each year we train thousands of officers, including many who work for federal agencies, on the dangers of domestic terrorism and hate crimes. We also have won a number of multimillion-dollar court verdicts on behalf of victims of violence committed by hate group members. These suits have financially crippled some of the country's most notorious white supremacist groups, including Klan networks that terrorized the African-American community during and after the civil rights movement.

as their enemy and generally believe that U.S. political and economic elites are part of international conspiracy aimed at creating a one-world, totalitarian government. Originally rooted in the racist ideology that animated Posse Comitatus in the 1970s, the antigovernment “Patriot” movement first appeared in its current form during the 1990s in response to federal gun control measures and the incidents at Ruby Ridge and Waco. It saw a steep decline in activity in the years following the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building by movement sympathizer Timothy McVeigh and remained largely moribund until the election of President Obama. In 2008, we documented 149 groups. By 2012, there were 1,360—an increase of more than 800 percent.

The surge in radical-right group activity peaked during the 2011-2012 period. Since then, we have seen a significant decline in the number of both hate groups (now at 784) as well as antigovernment “Patriot” groups (now at 874). Several political and economic factors account for this decline: a strengthening economy, crackdowns by law enforcement and the accelerated movement of radicals out of groups and into cyberspace. Also, movements naturally tend to lose momentum over time; in addition, President Obama’s reelection may have had a demoralizing effect on the radical right.

Despite this drop in the number of radical-right organizations, white supremacist activity has not declined. Much of it, in fact, has simply migrated to the Internet, where extremists can disseminate and absorb propaganda, and connect with other extremists in relative anonymity. Since the year President Obama was inaugurated, for example, the number of people registered on Stormfront, perhaps the most important neo-Nazi web forum, has doubled—to 300,000. About two-thirds of the site’s registered users are from this country.

Violence committed by non-Islamic domestic extremists also has continued at alarming levels. A July 2014 intelligence assessment by the DHS warned of a “spike within the past year in violence committed by militia extremists and lone offenders who hold violent anti-government beliefs.”² In February 2015, the DHS released a report warning of attacks by “sovereign citizens”—extremists who do not recognize the authority of the government—citing 24 acts of ideology-based violence, threats or plots (mostly against law enforcement targets) since 2010.³ The data we’ve collected reflects an uptick in racist crimes and terrorist plots in recent years.⁴ The backdrop to this increase is important. A 2013 study by West Point’s Combating Terrorism Center found that right-wing violence in the 2000-2011 period surpassed that of the 1990s by a factor of four.⁵

In some ways, the suspect in the Charleston massacre, Dylann Roof, represents the new face of domestic terrorism: the extremist who acts alone after being radicalized and inspired online by an extremist ideology. The Charleston attack came 14 months after a neo-Nazi and

² *Domestic Violent Extremists Pose Increased Threat to Government Officials and Law Enforcement*, Office of Intelligence and Analysis, Department of Homeland Security, July 22, 2014.

³ *Sovereign Citizen Extremist Ideology Will Drive Violence at Home, During Travel, and at Government Facilities*, Office of Intelligence and Analysis, Department of Homeland Security, Feb. 5, 2015.

⁴ *Terror from the Right: Plots, Conspiracies and Racist Rampages since Oklahoma City*, Southern Poverty Law Center, at <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/publications/terror-from-the-right>.

⁵ *Challengers from the Sidelines: Understanding America’s Violent Far-Right*, Arie Perliger, Combating Terrorism Center, Jan. 15, 2013.

former Klan leader named Frazier Glenn Cross (also known as Frazier Glenn Miller) murdered three people at a community center and a retirement facility, both with Jewish affiliations, in Overland Park, Kansas. It came nearly three years after another white supremacist, Wade Michael Page, walked into the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin near Milwaukee and opened fire with a 9 mm pistol, killing six worshipers, including the temple's president and three priests, and wounding four other people. The wounded included the first police officer to respond; he was shot multiple times.

In each case, the attacker was an avowed white supremacist. And in each case, the shooter targeted members of a minority group (though in Kansas, the victims were not actually Jewish). But, unlike the attackers in Wisconsin and Kansas, Roof apparently had not been a member of a racist hate group. From what we now know, he had only recently been radicalized and indoctrinated into the world of white nationalism. And his radicalization, according to a manifesto published on a website registered to him and that authorities believe he wrote, occurred online.

Roof left many clues about his motivations and the process that led him to commit an act of terror. He was seen in a Facebook photo wearing a jacket adorned with patches representing the flags of former regimes in South Africa and Rhodesia that brutally enforced white minority rule. In his approximately 2,400-word manifesto, he described becoming “racially aware” in the echo chamber of white supremacist websites following the controversy over the death of Trayvon Martin in 2012. On the site of the racist Council of Conservative Citizens, he found “pages upon pages of these brutal black on White murders.” He “saw the same things happening in England and France, and in all the other Western European countries,” then “found out about the Jewish problem.” Roof wrote further that “by no means should we wait any longer to take drastic action.” As he was murdering his victims, Roof told them that black people were “taking over our country” and “rap[ing] our women.”

Roof's words and the symbols he used are instructive. They show that he was thoroughly indoctrinated into a transnational white nationalist movement that is emerging as the world grows more connected by technology. The days are gone when white supremacists fought to maintain Jim Crow segregation or white hegemony in the South.⁶ Today, they promote a narrative of an ongoing “white genocide”—the idea that white people are being displaced by people of color across the globe. This message has been distilled into what is known in white nationalist circles as “the mantra,” a 221-word attack on multiculturalism that reads in part: “Anti-racist is a code word for anti-white.” Its author, Robert Whitaker of Columbia, South Carolina, is now the 2016 vice presidential candidate for the white nationalist American Freedom Party.

Anders Behring Breivik, who slaughtered 77 people in 2011 because he thought they were enabling Muslim immigration, expressed sentiments remarkably similar to those encapsulated by the white nationalist mantra and cited by Roof. Breivik was also, at one time, a registered user of Stormfront. Our 2014 report on Stormfront—which provides a window into

⁶ “White Supremacists Without Borders,” Morris Dees and J. Richard Cohen, *The New York Times*, June 22, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/22/opinion/white-supremacists-without-borders.html?_r=0.

the online radicalization process—showed that its users have committed nearly 100 murders, including Breivik’s, since 2009.⁷ Almost all of the killers had regularly posted comments on Stormfront and other racist sites in the 18 months prior to their attacks. The forum appears to have helped nurture and rationalize their racial hatred.

Stormfront is merely one example of web forums that promote racial hatred. Frazier Glenn Cross regularly posted comments on Vanguard News Network, a neo-Nazi forum with the slogan “No Jews. Just Right.” Racist and anti-Semitic threads can be found on many other sites, including mainstream forums like Reddit, which now has a community of crudely anti-black sites known as “the Chimpire.” In addition, hate music used to recruit young people can be purchased from even some of the largest online music retailers, though several—including iTunes and Spotify—have taken steps in recent months to remove such music, at our urging.

As further evidence of this globalization of white nationalism, we have documented more than 30 instances in the past two years of movement leaders traveling abroad to strengthen their international ties. After one such trip to England and France, Jared Taylor of American Renaissance, a group that publishes material purporting to show the inferiority of black people, wrote that: “The fight in Europe is exactly the same as ours.”⁸

This message is used to recruit and radicalize young men like Roof, who absorb propaganda online and then may act alone or in small groups. Earlier this year, we issued a study—*The Age of the Wolf*—finding that 46 of 63 domestic terror incidents (74%) culled from academic databases and the SPLC’s own files over the previous six years were the work of a “lone wolf,” a single person. Ninety percent were the work of no more than two people. These are the kinds of attacks that are the most difficult for law enforcement to detect in advance and the most likely to succeed. Our report also found that a domestic terrorism incident, either an attack or foiled plot, occurred on average every 34 days during the period examined, from 2009 to 2014.⁹

Government Must Ensure Resources Devoted to Non-Islamic Domestic Terrorism are Commensurate with the Threat

After the deadly Oklahoma City bombing on April 19, 1995, then-Attorney General Reno formed a special task force to coordinate the country’s response to the threat of domestic terrorism. The task force was scheduled to hold one of its monthly meetings on September 11, 2001, but did not do so for obvious reasons. But the task force did not miss just one meeting. As the country’s focus shifted to the new and devastating threat of Islamic terrorism, the task force did not meet again for 13 years. Only after Miller killed three people at Jewish facilities in Overland Park, Kansas, in April 2014 and public pressure mounted did the Justice Department reestablish the task force.

⁷ *White Homicide Worldwide*, Southern Poverty Law Center, April 16, 2014, at <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/publications/White-Homicide-Worldwide>.

⁸ American Renaissance website, at <http://www.amren.com/features/2013/04/report-from-france-and-britain/>.

⁹ *The Age of the Wolf*, Southern Poverty Law Center, Feb. 12, 2015, at <http://www.splcenter.org/lone-wolf>.

The shift in focus to the threat of terrorism from Islamic extremists in the aftermath in 9/11 was not surprising. That event was the Pearl Harbor of our time. It led to the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, over which this Committee exercises oversight, as well as to our country's involvement in two wars. But as the history of the Justice Department's task force reflects, the pendulum swung too far in the direction of Islamic terrorism, at the expense of other threats, after 9/11.

The shadow of 9/11 has not been the only factor leading to a reduction in the resources and attention paid to non-Islamic terrorism in our country. Partisan politics also appear to have played a role. In April 2009, DHS released an unclassified intelligence assessment to law enforcement officials entitled *Right-wing Extremism: Current Economic and Political Climate Fueling Resurgence in Radicalization and Recruitment*.¹⁰ Yet, despite the report's accuracy, then-DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano withdrew it following an outcry by those who claimed, falsely, that the report tarred conservatives as potential domestic terrorists. More significantly, the DHS unit responsible for the report was allowed to wither. In the wake of the controversy over the report, the *Washington Post* reported that DHS "cut the number of personnel studying domestic terrorism unrelated to Islam, canceled numerous state and local law enforcement briefings, and held up dissemination of nearly a dozen reports on extremist groups."¹¹

Daryl Johnson, the former DHS senior domestic terrorism analyst who was the principal author of the 2009 DHS report, wrote on *The New York Times* website on June 24, 2015, that "through reckless neglect at nearly all levels of government, domestic terrorism not tied to Islam has become a cancer with no diagnosis or plan to address it." There are, he wrote, hundreds of government analysts looking for Islamist threats but "mere dozens" monitoring non-Islamic threats.¹²

Over the last 18 months, my colleagues and I have seen renewed attention to the threat of non-Islamic terrorism at both the Justice Department and DHS. Still, there are indications that radical-right terrorism continues to take a back seat to Islamic terrorism. In February, for example, when President Obama addressed the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism, which I attended, the first terrorist incident he mentioned was the Oklahoma City bombing. But the discussion at the summit itself focused almost exclusively on the threat of Islamic terrorism. In this Committee's Terror Threat Snapshot released on July 2, 2015—two weeks after the Charleston massacre—there was no mention of the threat of terror from the radical right.¹³

¹⁰ PDF on Southern Poverty Law Center website, at

http://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/downloads/resource/DOJ_rwextremism2009.pdf.

¹¹ "Homeland Security Department curtails home-grown terror analysis," *Washington Post*, June 7, 2011, at http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/homeland-security-department-curtails-home-grown-terror-analysis/2011/06/02/AGQEA_DLH_story.html.

¹² "For Domestic Hate, Apply the Vigor and Strategy Used for Muslim Terror," Daryl Johnson, *The New York Times*, June 24, 2015, at <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2015/06/24/charleston-and-the-threat-of-homegrown-hate-groups-for-domestic-hate-apply-the-vigor-and-strategy-used-for-muslim-terror>.

¹³ <http://homeland.house.gov/sites/homeland.house.gov/files/documents/July%20Terror%20Threat%20Snapshot%200.pdf>.

As I indicated in the previous section, however, the threat from the radical right is very real. In fact, in a study released in June 2015, the Triangle Center for Terrorism and Homeland Security found that “law enforcement agencies in the United States consider anti-government violent extremists, not radicalized Muslims, to be the most severe threat of political violence that they face.”¹⁴ And, according to a widely cited report by the New America Foundation, far more people have been killed in this country since 9/11 by right-wing terrorists than by Islamic extremists.¹⁵

Of course, had the New America Foundation report started its count of deadly attacks a day earlier, the figures would be much different. Just as it would be a mistake to discount the threat of radical-right terrorism, so it would be a terrible mistake to minimize the threat of terrorism from Islamic extremists in any way. As a country, we have made that mistake before. What is required—what is critical—is that we take all forms of terrorism seriously and that we never allow anything to skew the resources that we devote to fighting that which threatens our great country.

Thank you.

¹⁴ “Law Enforcement Assessment of the Violent Extremism Threat,” Charles Kurzman and David Schanzer, Triangle Center for Terrorism and Homeland Security, June 25, 2015, at http://sites.duke.edu/tcths/files/2013/06/Kurzman_Schanzer_Law_Enforcement_Assessment_of_the_Violent_Extremist_Threat_final.pdf.

¹⁵ <http://securitydata.newamerica.net/extremists/analysis.html>.