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Terrorism Threat in the USA: White Supremacy

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Introduction

White supremacy is not new. It has existed in the United States (US) since the beginning of its independence.¹ However, it has evolved over time, or as per Daniel Byman, professor of terrorism and middle-east at Georgetown University USA, white supremacy movements have devolved.² White supremacy is an ideology, a pattern of values and beliefs that are ingrained among racist sections of American society. It relies on entrenched patterns, ideologies, and practices of the past to consistently render privilege to whites and disadvantage the people of color, which cannot be overcome by affirmative action alone. It is a belief that the whites are humans having inalienable universal rights and that to be a not-white means one is less than human – a disposable object for others to abuse and misuse.³ Once upon a time, groups like Ku Klux Klan (KKK) were seen as patriotic since they used to conform to societal values and adhered to segregation policies of the time, so much so that at the peak of KKK's second wave in the 1920s, 16 Senators, eleven Governors, and around 75 House members were Klan members.⁴ However, racial and other forms of discrimination are now largely abhorred and considered against American moralism, especially by the democrats.

White supremacist organizations have decentralized and turned into fragmented covert networks. No organization exists as a monolith that targets people or commits violence, rather loosely organized groups, and sometimes individuals and lone wolves undertake acts of violence. Therefore, it has become increasingly difficult to monitor and control their activities. This paper dissects the role of social media in beefing up the rhetoric of white supremacists - as witnessed by a sharp rise in a series of attacks by racist and right-wing groups - who were further emboldened by populist politics championed by the former President Donald Trump. It is also pertinent to look at how the non-white racial communities have been impacted by this. For that, it is important to take stock of recent developments in the United States.

¹ Robert Parkinson, "You cant tell the story of 1776 without talking about Race and Slavery, *Time*, 4 July 2021, <https://time.com/6077468/united-states-1776-racism-slavery/>

² Daniel Byman, "Counterterrorism and modern white supremacy", Routledge: studies in conflict and terrorism, 27 July 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2021.1956100>

³ Farhad Dalal, "Racism: Processes of Detachment, Dehumanization, and Hatred", Taylor and Francis: [The Psychoanalytic Quarterly](https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2167-4086.2006.tb00035.x), 11 September 2017, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1002/j.2167-4086.2006.tb00035.x>

⁴ Linda Gordon, "The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition", *New York: Liveright Publishing*, 2017.

Populism, the Internet, and the rise of white violence in the contemporary US

Social Media has become a powerful instrument for peddling right-wing populist propaganda which has played one of the key roles in increasing the menace of racism in US society. Populist politicians, parties, and movements have used digital alternatives to get around the mainstream media that is perceived to be partisan in its approach. Racist content thrives on social media, especially through covert tactics to incite racist hatred.⁵ Social media platforms, their policies, and processes around content moderation play a significant role in this regard.⁶ Companies like Facebook and Twitter have been criticized since they provide anonymity for harassers and trolls who attack people online with racist content disguised as humor. Since fervent interactions trigger engagement among users, they are tacitly allowed to happen on social media platforms with no consequences for those who spread hate speech.⁷

Mark Zuckerberg, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Facebook and other related apps, himself acknowledged while testifying in the US Congress that “Facebook is an idealistic and optimistic company and for most of our existence focused on all of the good that connecting people can do,” but he “didn’t do enough to prevent these tools from being used for harm as well.”⁸ Apart from Zuckerberg himself, other employees working at Facebook have expressed the same sentiments. According to a report,⁹ it was revealed that Facebook indeed played a crucial role in advancing the cause of authoritarianism in America and that the employees had raised concerns but were ignored by the Facebook administration.

Violence in the US:

The Atomwaffen Division: A Neo-Nazi group that first originated in the US in 2015 and since then has remained involved in planning attacks and killings against non-whites and other minorities.¹⁰ In 2018, five people were killed in seemingly unrelated cases. However, later on, investigations

⁵ Ariadna Matamoros-Fernandez and Johan Farkas, “Racism, Hate Speech, and Social Media: A Systematic Review and Critique”, Sage Journals, 22 January 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1527476420982230>

⁶ Jeet Heer, “Mark Zuckerberg Has Set Our Democracy On Fire”, *The Nation*, 4 September 2021, <https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/zuckerberg-facebook-political-advertising/>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “Zuckerberg Says Safeguarding Democracy is ‘Above Our Pay Grade’”, *Vanity Fair*, 27 June 2019. <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2019/06/zuckerberg-says-safeguarding-democracy-is-above-our-pay-grade-aspen-ideas>

⁹ Adrienne LaFrance, “History Will Not Judge US Kindly”, *The Atlantic*, 25 October 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/10/facebook-papers-democracy-election-zuckerberg/620478/>

¹⁰ Greg Myre, “Deadly Connection: Neo-Nazi Group Linked To 3 Accused Killers”, *NPR*, 6 March 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/03/06/590292705/5-killings-3-states-and-1-common-neo-nazi-link>

had revealed that the suspected killers were part of the Atomwaffen. The group is extreme as it celebrates personalities like Adolf Hitler and Charles Manson, promotes violence, and aims to start a race war.¹¹ Five seniors and several other members of the same group were charged and arrested for different federal crimes in 2020.¹²

Ku Klux Klan: In June 2020, Harry H. Rogers, a member of the Ku Klux Klan was arrested by law enforcement in Virginia for running over the peaceful protestors who had gathered to express solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. Later, Rogers was sentenced to prison for three years.¹³

Boogaloo Boys: It is another loosely organized movement that emerged in 2019. It was initiated by an anti-government far-right extremist group to instigate another civil war in the US. On June 3, 2020, three individuals, who were allegedly associated with the movement and were conspiring to perpetrate violence in Las Vegas through an improvised explosive device (IED), were arrested by the federal authorities.¹⁴ The movement is inherently violent, well-armed, and organized like a militia force since they wish to start a second American revolution.¹⁵ As the elections in the US approached, the armed contingents of this group were among those attempting to stop the counting of ballots in Arizona.¹⁶ They reportedly participated in a Stop the Steal event in Washington, that served as a violent precursor to the capitol insurrection of 2021. They were also behind orchestrating armed protests at various state capitols.¹⁷

Others: Around the time of BLM protests, an anarchist group was urging its supporters to hijack the BLM gatherings and instigate anti-government activities or a rebellion.¹⁸ All these extremists from all sides flooded social media with disinformation, conspiracy theories, and incitements to

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Jason Wilson, "Sweep of arrests hits US neo-Nazi group connected to five murders", *The Guardian*, 16 March 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/06/neo-nazi-arrests-deals-blow-us-group-atomwaffen-division>

¹³ Azi Paybarah, "K.K.K. Member Who Drove Into Protesters Gets More Than 3 Years in Prison", *New York Times*, 9 February 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/09/us/virginia-klk-harry-rogers-sentenced.html>

¹⁴ Katelyn Newberg, "3 alleged 'boogaloo' members charged in Las Vegas protests", *Las Vegas Review Journal*, 3 June 2020, <https://www.reviewjournal.com/crime/3-alleged-boogaloo-members-charged-in-las-vegas-protests-2044384/>

¹⁵ "Armed Extremism Primer: The Boogaloo", *The Everytown Research: Fact Sheet*, 8 November 2021, <https://everytownresearch.org/report/the-boogaloo/>

¹⁶ "Faced with defeat, armed protesters in Arizona insist election stolen", *Reuters*, 9 November 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-lawsuit-arizona-idUSKBN27N10U>

¹⁷ "Who Are The Boogalooos...", *Southern Poverty Law Center: Hate Watch*, 27 January 2021, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2021/01/27/who-are-boogalooos-who-were-visible-capitol-and-later-rallies>

¹⁸ "Anarchists infiltrating George Floyd protests in NYC", *ABC News NY*, 2 June 2020, <https://abc7ny.com/anarchists-floyd-protest-nyc-george-protests/6223320/>

violence on Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and other platforms in response to the protests following the death of George Floyd.¹⁹

The Racist Politics of Trump:

Racism and xenophobia have played a significant part in US politics, particularly in generating the rhetoric around immigration. This aspect was exploited by former president Donald Trump to win the votes of white working-class men and women. His election as president in 2016 signaled a new wave of populism. As dissatisfaction grew with the effects of globalization on jobs, wages, and culture in the United States, Trump's platform became increasingly popular. Although he won the election with the support of traditional Republicans, he appealed to other voters who were drawn to his rhetoric of nationalism, xenophobia, and anti-elitism.²⁰

Throughout Trump's presidency, populist and nationalist rhetoric was manifest in the descriptions of immigrants and people of colour. He used Twitter to communicate with the masses and profoundly used politically incorrect language for non-white races in the US, which appealed to a demographic of religious, traditional, and racist white people who find themselves left behind and threatened by the effects of globalization and neoliberal policies. He employed Twitter as a tool of power politics to disseminate his right-wing populist discourse.²¹ In response, some groups and individuals emerged to challenge what they saw as an occupation of their homeland by the outsiders.

In 2017, Unite the Right rally took place in Charlottesville in which people from white supremacists and other right-wing groups participated against the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee, a Confederate-era general. In response to this, anti-racists also undertook a counter-protest but soon a car rammed into those protestors. The man driving the vehicle was later on arrested and charged with murder, as a person was killed. In response to this then-President, Donald Trump had said that there were 'some fine people on both sides' and refused to denounce the actions of white supremacists in the rally.²² During a presidential debate in September 2020, Trump had refused to denounce white supremacy, due to which white supremacist groups like

¹⁹ Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, and Nicholas Harrington, "The Escalating Terrorism Problem in the United States", *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS): Brief*, June 2020. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/escalating-terrorism-problem-united-states>

²⁰ Gatz, M. and Darling, J. "Through the Lens of Populism: the 2016 Election. Informing Policy in Health, Economics, and Wellbeing", *University of Southern California*, 2016, <https://healthpolicy.usc.edu/evidence-base/lens-populism2016-election/>

²¹ Ramona Kreis, "The Tweet Politics of President Trump", *Journal of Language and Politics: University of South Florida*, June 2017, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317549039_The_Tweet_Politics_of_President_Trump

²² "President Trump Again Blames 'Both Sides' for Charlottesville Violence", *Time*, 15 August 2017, <https://time.com/4902129/president-donald-trump-both-sides-charlottesville/>

Proud Boys were encouraged and posted Trump's remarks on their pages, signifying that he had popular support among racist groups.²³

When the result of the 2020 US presidential elections was announced, Trump refused to accept Biden's victory and continued to claim that the election was stolen.²⁴ Consequently, chaos erupted on 6th January as the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives met to certify Joe Biden's victory. Trump's 'Save America'²⁵ speech on the same day is a perfect example of how populist statements can sway the masses. He reiterated false claims that the election was stolen and urged his supporters to march on the Capitol to pressure lawmakers to reject the results. Swathes of people stormed the US capitol to protest. The capitol was vandalized and people were attacked inside the building. During the subsequent investigations, among the 570 people arrested for the alleged attacks the most common denominator was that they supported Trump owing to his populist agenda during the two election campaigns. Many of them were incited through social media groups and pages, including Trump's own account. It was claimed that never before in the history of the Justice Department has any investigation been so tangled up with social media.²⁶ In the wake of these events, President Trump's Twitter account and Facebook page were suspended as his tweets had instigated the attackers.

Targeted attacks on non-whites

The attacks against Asian and African American communities living in America have risen, specifically more so in the past few years. According to a report by the FBI, 7759 hate crimes had taken place against Blacks and Asians during 2020,²⁷ which was a 6% increase from 2019. The organization Stop A.A.P.I Hate documented 6,603 hate incidents from March 2020 to March 2021²⁸ and leaders said the true number is much higher as many hate crimes go unreported. The

²³ Sarah Mccamon, "From Debate Stage, Trump Declines To Denounce White Supremacy", *NPR*, September 30, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/30/918483794/from-debate-stage-trump-declines-to-denounce-white-supremacy>

²⁴ Linda Qu, "Trump has amplified voting falsehoods in over 300 tweets since election night", *New York Times*, 16 November 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/16/technology/trump-has-amplified-voting-falsehoods-in-over-300-tweets-since-election-night.html>

²⁵ Justin Vallejo, "Trump's Save America rally speech", *The Independent*, 13 January 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-election-2020/trump-speech-6-january-transcript-impeachment-b1786924.html>

²⁶ Adrienne LaFrance, "History Will Not Judge US Kindly", *The Atlantic*, 25 October 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/10/facebook-papers-democracy-election-zuckerberg/620478/>

²⁷ David Nakamura, "Hate crimes rise to highest level", *Washington Post*, 30 August, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/hate-crimes-fbi-2020-asian-black/2021/08/30/28bede00-09a7-11ec-9781-07796ffb56fe_story.html

²⁸ National Report, *Stop AAPI Hate*, March 2021, <https://stopaapihate.org/national-report-through-march-2021/>

number of hate crimes reported has also alarmingly increased by nearly 42 percent since 2014, according to federal data.²⁹ Civil society groups have linked these figures with increasing white nationalism, populism, and anti-minority sentiment. Some civil rights advocates have cited xenophobic language used by former President Trump as being an instigator. China was blamed for the novel coronavirus continuously which contributed to a backlash against Asians living in America.³⁰

Religion in the United States also carries a racial designation. Despite the 30% of the Muslim population constituting no single racial identity, Muslims are termed as a racial community of color.³¹ For more than a decade Americans have consumed media headlines about the Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan wars, violent extremist organizations, and the Muslim ban, which eventually perpetuated a link between Muslims and terrorism. In response to these stereotypes, hate crimes against Muslims as well as other racial identities in the United States increased. In 2015, there were 257 hate crimes against Muslims and 307 in 2016.³² During the first months of the Trump administration, the Pew Research Center reported that roughly 75% of Muslim American adults said there is a lot of discrimination against Muslims in the U.S.³³ As terrorist events happened or elected officials spoke negatively about Islam and related ethnic communities, discriminatory offenses rose along with internet news searches about them.³⁴

Similarly, across the US, Black people have also reported incidents of alleged hate crimes not only by individuals but also by authorities in the form of police brutality.³⁵ A political and social justice movement that had initiated back in 2013. The Black Lives Matter, again rose in 2020 to rally demonstrations in response to George Floyd's murder by the police. The incidents of racial

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Besheer Mohamed, "A New Estimate of the U.S. Muslim Population", *Pew Research Center*, 6 January 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/06/a-new-estimate-of-the-u-s-muslim-population/>.

³² "Explaining the rise in hate crimes against Muslims in the US", *The Conversation*, 20 July 2017, <https://theconversation.com/explaining-the-rise-in-hate-crimes-against-muslims-in-the-us-80304>

³³ "U.S. Muslims Concerned About Their Place in Society, but Continue to Believe in the American Dream", *Pew Research Center*, 26 July 2017, <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/07/26/findings-from-pew-research-centers-2017-survey-of-us-muslims/>

³⁴ Janna Ramadan, "Perpetuating Islamophobic Discrimination in the United States: Examining the Relationship Between News, Social Media, and Hate Crimes", *The Washington Post*, 20 May 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/05/20/i-think-islam-hates-us-a-timeline-of-trumps-comments-about-islam-and-muslims/>

³⁵ Wenei Philimon, "Black Americans report hate crimes", *USA Today*, 7 July 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/07/07/black-americans-report-hate-crimes-amid-black-lives-matter-gains/3259241001/>

violence left many fearing for their safety. The people from the white working-class demographic became increasingly disenchanted with the movement. Some of them thus tried to infiltrate the movement to incite riots and stir racial tension,³⁶ which jeopardized the aims of the peaceful protest. A Pew Research poll was conducted in September 2020 according to which the support for BLM among American adults had dropped to 55%, with notable declines among whites and Hispanics, while support remained widespread among black adults.³⁷ In the wake of this situation, attacks against black protestors further increased along with domestic terror attacks in the US in 67% of which white supremacists and other right-wing extremists had been involved.³⁸

Violent supremacist challenge for the US

In 2021, the US intelligence agencies warned that white supremacists and other right-wing extremists are a top terrorism threat in the USA.³⁹ In the past few years, violent attacks against racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, especially Muslims have increased manifold. Seth G. Jones et al have outlined three broad types⁴⁰ of right-wing terrorist individuals and networks prevalent in the United States: white supremacists, anti-government extremists, and online trolls. There are many differences between these types; however, some aspects of all three categories overlap with each other, giving rise to some commonalities: (i) terrorists in all of these categories operate under a decentralized model, (ii) most of these networks operate and organize online, due to which law enforcement face a challenge to identify potential attackers, (iii) right-wing extremists have adopted some tactics that are similar to other right-wing terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda.⁴¹

These white and right-wing terrorists have used various combinations of social media sites to contact people and connect with others, which makes it difficult to identify their activities. They

³⁶ Karma Allen, "Man who helped ignite George Floyd riots identified as white supremacist: Police", *ABC News*, 30 July 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/man-helped-ignite-george-floyd-riots-identified-white/story?id=72051536>

³⁷ Deja Thomas, Julianne Menasce Horowitz, "Support for Black Lives Matter has decreased since June but remains strong among Black Americans", *Pew Research Center*, 16 September 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/16/support-for-black-lives-matter-has-decreased-since-june-but-remains-strong-among-black-americans/>

³⁸ Lois Beckett, "White supremacists behind majority of US domestic terror attacks in 2020", *The Guardian*, October 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/22/white-supremacists-rightwing-domestic-terror-2020>

³⁹ "Domestic Violence Extremism Poses Heightened Threat in 2021," *Office of the Director of National Intelligence*, 1 March 2021, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/UnclassSummaryofDVEAssessment-17MAR21.pdf>

⁴⁰ Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, and Nicholas Harrington, "The Escalating Terrorism Problem in the United States", *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS): Brief*, June 2020.

https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200612_Jones_DomesticTerrorism_v6.pdf.

⁴¹ "Texas Department of Public Safety", *Texas Domestic Terrorism Threat Assessment*, Austin:Texas, January 2020, https://www.dps.texas.gov/director_staff/media_and_communications/2020/txTerrorThreatAssessment.pdf.

also use computer games and forums to recruit people or influence them to carry out violent attacks.⁴² This rise in right-wing activity is of national concern. Owing to the power of 21st century social media platforms, the threat of white nationalism and far-right extremism is evolving rapidly.

Response of Biden administration

Congressional Democrats and civil rights advocates have criticized the race-based hate crimes and other incidents, saying that the reported numbers were actually undercounted and the local police are poorly trained in identifying and cataloguing hate crimes. There is also difficulty and lack of sufficient resources or interest in identifying and investigating them. These incidents instill fear across communities and undermine principles of American Moralism and democracy. President Joe Biden, while addressing the joint session of the congress in April 2021, termed white supremacy as a ‘domestic terror threat that the country must remain vigilant against.’⁴³ ‘We won't ignore what our intelligence agencies have determined to be the most lethal terrorist threat to our homeland today: white supremacy is terrorism,’⁴⁴ Biden warned. Speaking before the Senate Appropriations Committee in May 2021, Attorney General Merrick Garland had said, “The top domestic violence extremist threat we face comes from racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists, specifically those who advocate for the superiority of the white race”.⁴⁵

In May 2021, Congress approved the Covid-19 Hate Crimes Act,⁴⁶ which requires the Justice Department to appoint an official to expedite investigations into hate crimes reported to federal authorities. The act also seeks to improve reporting among the locals by making online channels accessible while also offering resources in more languages to help immigrants. Vice President V.P Kamala Harris also acknowledged the threat posed by racism and xenophobia in America and thus showed the resolve that effort would be made to curb this injustice.⁴⁷ In June 2021, a plan

⁴² “How Do Violent Extremists Make Contact?” *Federal Bureau of Investigation*, Washington DC, 2020, <https://www.fbi.gov/cve508/teen-website/how>.

⁴³ Matthew Brown, “White supremacy is terrorism: Biden”, *USA Today*, 28 April 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2021/04/28/biden-calls-white-supremacy-terrorism-speech-congress/4884034001/>

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ “Garland, Mayorkas, warn white supremacy is now top security threat in the country”, *Changing America: The Hill*, 12 May 2021, <https://thehill.com/changing-america/respect/equality/553197-garland-mayorkas-attorney-general-warn-white-supremacy-is>

⁴⁶ S.937 - COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act, 2021 <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/937/text>

⁴⁷ Barbara Sprunt, “Here's What The New Hate Crimes Law Aims To Do As Attacks On Asian Americans Rise”, *NPR*, 20 May 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/20/998599775/biden-to-sign-the-covid-19-hate-crimes-bill-as-anti-asian-american-attacks-rise>

was laid out by the Biden administration to curb white supremacist violence which aimed to increase communication between federal and local officials and social media companies, more resources to identify and prosecute threats as well as new deterrents to prevent Americans from being part of violent militias and dangerous groups. The administration vowed to strengthen the federal government's screening methods to identify insider threats and when to remove influenced members from the military according to reviews by the Department of Defense.⁴⁸

Recommendations

As white supremacist violence has been termed as the top domestic terrorism threat in the United States of America according to American Homeland Security Officials, it is imperative upon the present administration to take steps to address this threat. The Biden administration, therefore, should take the following measures on a priority basis:

- Provide resources to tackle white supremacist groups instead of focusing on Islamic Jihadists, as the former has become a deadlier threat to the domestic security of the US.
- Accountability of and action against white supremacist groups and individuals that are found involved in violent attacks.
- Sanction police and law enforcement agents that engage in racist behavior or are found involved in race-based brutality.
- Enhance mechanisms to identify, track and rehabilitate white supremacy advocates that are engaged in planning violent activities and recruit vulnerable people online.
- Engage social media companies to develop a mechanism to investigate and remove harmful social media content that targets people of color, ban violent users, and disrupt related groups from assembling online.
- The state officials and organizations in the US must be encouraged to publicly denounce and delegitimize supremacy advocates, and the harm done by the officials of the previous administration that provided moral support to white supremacists.

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⁴⁸ Jarret Renshaw, Jan Wolfe, "U.S. lays out plan to confront white supremacist violence", *Reuters*, 16 June 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/biden-administration-unveils-plan-tackle-domestic-terrorism-2021-06-15/>