

Amid reports of a rise in attacks linked to right-wing extremism on both sides of the Atlantic, **John Chisholm** examines the motivations of those driven to kill for their views

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In Europe and the United States, a new generation of right-wing political groups has arisen. Anti-Islam, anti-globalisation, anti-progressive, these movements have often resorted to violence. Either through mob-like behaviour or direct terrorist action, the message has been pretty similar: we do not like the look of the present and fear the future.

In the US, the existence of a Democrat president has often seen the bubbling up of insurgent right-wing groups who feel the traditional Republican movement is failing to deliver adequate political results. That the current president is not only a Democrat but also black and has the middle name Hussein (encouraging one in seven Americans to believe him a Muslim) should not be lost here. The traditional Republican Party has proved unable to meet the demands of many people on the right who feel the US is somehow heading in the wrong direction. This has proved a fertile recruiting ground for movements who profess a more radical approach is needed to “turn the country around”. For these groups, the federal government is corrupt and tyrannical, and has a permanent agenda to curtail individual “liberties”; as an alternative the groups promote ideas of civil activism, individual freedom and self-government. They are also predominantly white, Christian, and have a strong feeling of paranoia.

The most obvious manifestation has been the Tea Party movement, which has engaged in a bitter ideological battle for the soul of the Republican party. The internecine splits this has caused has effectively crippled the Republicans, and many moderate members of that party who feel bipartisan co-operation with right-wing Democrats could deliver better government are hamstrung by the constant threat of being labelled a traitor to the cause. The Tea Party is, of course, a legitimate political movement, but is often the last stop of political legitimacy in a railway journey that can go far beyond it. But Tea Party commentators have often helped set the tone for how right-wing terror is perceived in the US. When Dr George Tiller, an abortion doctor, was killed in 2009, Ann Coulter – the darling of the neocon movement – appeared on Fox to make the joke that she did not see the death of Tiller as a murder, but rather that “it was terminating Tiller at the 203rd trimester”. Fox host Bill O’Reilly didn’t help by labelling the victim “Tiller the baby killer”. In other words, the implication created by these paragons of the “legitimate right” is that terror activities against individuals of whom they are inherently critical politically – like abortion doctors – are far less serious than, for example, a Muslim attack on a police officer. That another commentator could say: “over 50,000,000 of those they [the Federal government] have slaughtered were defenceless American infants; the most dangerous place on earth



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for a human being to be in the womb of an American woman”, indicates the general perspective. In other words, the legitimate political right in the United States provides a comfortable sea in which the terrorists of the far right can swim.

For the US citizen on the right, the world has just become an increasingly unfamiliar place since Roe vs Wade ended racial segregation. The culture war that was thought won under George W Bush now looks increasingly lost. Gay marriage looks set to make a clean sweep across the country, underpinned by an anticipated Supreme Court ruling. The recent outpouring of criticism heaped on Indiana for enshrining discrimination in law behind a smokescreen of religious tolerance has been a very telling indication of the way the wind is blowing. The governor of Arkansas, whose state passed a similar law, illustrated the generational gap by revealing he

Turning right: Support for far-right political parties has spread across Europe in recent years

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got a letter from his own son pleading not to sign it into law and has returned it to the state legislature for "clarification". Issues such as an amnesty for illegal immigrants, "Obamacare", money for environmental programmes; all are indicators that the US is heading towards a culture that emphasises more future- or progressive-oriented, civil rights, minority rights and the balance of power. But conservative perspectives are more past-oriented and, in general, are interested in preserving the status quo. The far right represents a more extreme version of this conservatism, as its political vision is usually justified by the aspiration to restore or preserve values and practices that are part of the idealised historical heritage of the nation or ethnic community.

So how has this manifested itself? There has been no return to the "militia movements" of the Clinton years, and it seems that far right terror is more focussed

on smaller groups or individuals rather than growing out of a broader movement. On 28 November 2014, 49-year-old Larry McQuilliam embarked on a rampage through Austin, Texas which eventually ended with his death at the hands of the police. Starting with the new Federal Courthouse, he moved on to attack the Mexican Consulate and ended with an attack on the city police headquarters, where he was shot dead by a mounted police officer who was putting away his horse. The police chief said that the shooter's "violent anti-government behaviour" – as evidenced by attacking buildings that belong to Mexico's government, the US government and, in the police headquarters, the city government – may have come from "ongoing and often vitriolic debates in society".

The assumption was that this attack was primarily stimulated by hostility to immigration, another bete noir of the right. The knowledge that the US is no longer going to be a majority white and Christian country is something that the right looks upon with horror. Another extremist, Eric Frein, was less ambiguous about his motive which, according to his own notes, was to "make a change (in government) and that voting was insufficient to do so, because there was no one worth voting for". Frein, a military re-enactor who lived with his parents, killed a Pennsylvania police officer and attempted to kill a state trooper, and left a detailed journal which included a description of the killing. A survivalist, Frein evaded the authorities for several days until being captured. He went on to describe the murder as an "assassination" and felt driven to this by the need to "wake people up".

A bloodier attack occurred in Las Vegas in June 2014. A married couple, Jerad and Amanda Miller, killed two police officers who were eating in a restaurant before fleeing into a Walmart store. There they were confronted by an armed member of the public, who they also shot. They themselves died in a later shoot out with police. A search of their apartment revealed detailed plans to take over a courthouse and execute public officials. Jerad was described as often talking about conspiracy theories, dressing in camouflage, and espousing his hatred of the federal government and President Barack Obama while his wife made the chilling Facebook entry: "To the people in the world... your lucky i can't kill you now but remember one day one day i will get you because one day all hell will break lose and i'll be standing in the middle of it with a shot gun in one hand and a pistol in the other." Admittedly this was accompanied by pictures of the pair dressed as super-villains from Batman, which illustrates how hard it is to differentiate truly-held desires to kill from patent buffoonery.

Jerad had been present at the so-called "Bundy Standoff" a few months earlier, when a group of armed

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supporters had rallied around a Nevadan farmer, Cliven Bundy, who was about to have his cattle taken away for unpaid grazing fees. Right wing commentators initially supported Bundy as the archetypal small man standing up to the government, although when he started making overtly racist statements about “negroes” they dropped him very quickly. The fact that the state backed down to de-escalate an increasingly tense situation was seen by Jerad as a victory, and seems to have emboldened him and his wife to undertake the Las Vegas killings.

It is important to note these people were/are not members of some sort of organised movement. But the way their activities have been portrayed in the US media, especially on the right, is as crazed loners or gun nuts who have no political agenda. In fact, they all had a very clear and strikingly similar political underpinning: hostility to federal government. If they were not white, Christian and “of the right”, it is pretty much guaranteed that their reception would have been somewhat different.

In Europe the far right have been more active electorally than violently. Unlike the US, there is far less emphasis on the role of the state (Anders Brevik, however, proves this is not a given), and instead has been more a reaction against immigration, and specifically Muslim immigration. But the backdrop is still broadly the same: economic decline, social change and globalisation have created a feeling among groups on the right that they have lost control of the agenda and have no legitimate voice in government.

It is also, like the US, a broadly populist and politically insurgent movement hostile to political elites and offering simplistic solutions. The fact that Europe has proven far more vulnerable to terrorist attacks by Muslim radicals is also a factor, although it is ironic that the targets for the Islamic fundamentalists are also often the same critics of the radical right. Both fear the liberal, democratic, civil society agenda that is an open and direct challenge to the authoritarian and structurally rigid societies they both endorse.

The attacks by Muslim radicals on the Charlie Hebdo offices in Paris stimulated a wave of comments from far right political leaders in Europe. It also stimulated a series of revenge attacks in France. None of these were lethal but, to create an atmosphere of terror, death is not necessary. From grenades thrown at mosques to boar entrails draped over the doorway of a mosque in Corsica and graffiti encouraging violence against Muslims, this was widespread across France and beyond. Riots erupted in Cologne, Germany, in October 2014 following a rally attended by 5,000 demonstrators, right-wing extremists and football hooligans. Fired up by a performance of right-wing rock band Kategorie C (which sings lyrics like: “Today they are slitting the throats of sheep and cows, tomorrow it may be Christian children”), they filled the Cologne city centre and trouble flared. By the time the march came to an end, 49 police officers had been injured, a police van had been flipped over and much property had been damaged.

This is the most violent manifestation of a growing alliance of football hooligan groups, right wing skinheads



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A member of the American National Socialist Movement neo-Nazi group

and other fringe organisations which have found in hostility to Islam a rallying cry to bring together groups that have traditionally been hostile to each other. This is the flip side of the anti-Muslim “Pegida” movement which, like the Tea Party in the US, presents itself and its agenda as politically legitimate – and part of a defence of liberal democracy against Islamic fundamentalism.

Spain and Italy have also not been immune to this sort of movement. Their geographical situation means they have been the first port of entry for immigrants fleeing an increasingly unstable north Africa. In Italy, the spirit and memory of Mussolini never quite died – you can still buy wine with his picture on the label – and Silvio Berlusconi gave him a posthumous endorsement when he noted that, apart from siding with Hitler, Mussolini “did a lot of good”. Indeed, the 1920s and 1930s are being portrayed as a “mild dictatorship”. So, the dictator has constantly been wheeled out by the far right in Italy, and is now being held up as a figure who would be anti-immigrant. The right wing Forza Nuovo, backed by Alessandra Mussolini, calls for “humane repatriation” of immigrant families from Italy to wherever they may have originally come from. Acts of vandalism, graffiti, random violence and a broad hostility to immigrants in general – and Islam in specific – characterises both Italian and Spanish political discourse.

It is no surprise that right wing terror continues to cause concern in both Europe and the United States. Violent, often random, sometimes movement-based, sometimes just a single individual, it promises to continue as long as there are people with a grievance against the present, have a fear of the future and are seduced by promises of a better yesterday.

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