

**Testimony of J. Richard Cohen
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before the
Subcommittees on National Security and Government Operations
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
U.S. House of Representatives**

**Radicalization in the U.S and the Rise of Terrorism
September 14, 2016**

My name is Richard Cohen. I am an attorney and the president of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), a civil rights organization founded in 1971. 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. I have served on the Department of Homeland Security's Countering Violent Extremism Working Group and have testified on terrorism issues before the House Committee on Homeland Security and

As the members of the subcommittees know, however, our country faces serious threats from other sources as well. The death toll in our country from terrorism associated with radical forms of Islam since the start of 2001 has been far higher than that from the radical right; however,

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 antigovernment movement, a movement that has engaged in armed confrontations with law enforcement officials in recent years. This movement emerged in its current form during the 1990s in response to federal gun control measures and the deadly standoffs at Ruby Ridge and Waco. It comprises hundreds of armed militias and other organizations that typically subscribe to a hodgepodge of antigovernment conspiracy theories, including the belief that U.S. political and economic elites are part of international conspiracy to create a one-world government known as the “New World Order.” It also includes so-called “sovereign citizens,” who have committed a variety of violent acts and believe that they are exempt from federal and state laws.⁷ Many of the beliefs prevalent in the antigovernment movement are rooted in the racist, anti-Semitic ideology that animated the Posse Comitatus (Latin for “power of the county”) in the 1970s.

In the 1990s, this movement produced numerous acts and plots of domestic terrorism targeting federal officials and facilities. These include a failed attempt to blow up an IRS building in Reno, Nevada, with an ammonium nitrate bomb; an arson attack on an IRS building in Colorado Springs; a planned invasion of Fort Hood in Texas to slaughter foreign troops that extremists believed to be stationed there; a plot to blow up the FBI’s fingerprint records center in West Virginia; and scores of others.⁸ The deadliest, of course, was the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, which killed 168 people and injured nearly 700.

As a result of law enforcement crackdowns and other factors, the radical antigovernment movement went into a steep decline after the Oklahoma City bombing and remained largely moribund until President Obama was elected. In 1996, we counted 858 conspiracy-minded antigovernment groups; in 2008, 149. But by 2012, we counted 1,360 such groups, an increase of more than 800 percent. Among the factors contributing to this surge has been the perception – one that surfaced even before President Obama was inaugurated – that his Administration would push gun control measures similar to the Brady Bill and the ban on assault weapons that were passed during the Clinton Administration.⁹

As the number of radical-right groups has increased in recent years, so has the level of violence. The 2012 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.¹⁰ In one plot, neo-Nazi Kevin Harpham hid a bomb packed with rat poison-coated fishing weights in a backpack along the route of the MLK Day Parade in Spokane in January 2011. Harpham rigged the bomb to

⁷ “Sovereign Citizens: A Growing Domestic Threat to Law Enforcement,” FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, Counterterrorism Analysis Section, September 2011, at <https://leb.fbi.gov/2011/september/sovereign-citizens-a-growing-domestic-threat-to-law-enforcement>.

⁸ For a list of radical-right terrorist incidents since the Oklahoma City bombing, see *Terror from the Right*, Southern Poverty Law Center, at <https://www.splcenter.org/20100126/terror-right>.

⁹ Brian Montopoli, “NRA Begins Push to Tarnish Obama on Guns,” CBS News.com, Sept. 23, 2008, at <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/nra-begins-push-to-tarnish-obama-on-guns/>; Donna Leinwand, “Record Number of Anti-Government Militias in USA,” *USA Today*, March 5, 2013, at <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/03/05/southern-poverty-law-center-militias-gun-control/1964411/>.

¹⁰ Arie Perliger,

detonate with a remote car starter device he had in his pocket. When the suspicious backpack was spotted, the MLK parade was rerouted and a bomb squad deactivated the weapon.

The number of organized hate and radical antigover

the support of hundreds of sheriffs and promotes the doctrine that sheriffs should resist the enforcement of federal laws they consider to be unconstitutional.²⁴

Two months later, two antigovernment zealots who had been at the Bundy ranch, Jerad and Amanda Miller, murdered two police officers in cold blood at a Las Vegas

military veterans and others as members,²⁸ said, “We vow to continue on with LaVoy’s legacy; his sacrifice will not be in vain.”²⁹ In June, a Finicum associate who had been at the Bundy ranch and who leads a Utah militia group was charged with plotting to blow up a BLM cabin in Arizona.³⁰

We Must Combat All Forms of Violent Extremism

After the shock and horror of the 9/11 attacks, a dedicated, comprehensive and forceful response to the threat associated with radical forms of Islam, both here and abroad, was an absolute necessity. No one could possibly argue otherwise. The question we have raised at various points is whether threats from other forms of terrorism have been given the attention they require.

We have had reasons to be concerned. After the deadly Oklahoma City bombing on April 19, 1995, then-Attorney General Reno formed a special task force, the Domestic Terrorism Executive Committee, 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, the task force did not meet again for 13 years.

The shadow of 9/11 has not been the only factor leading to a reduced focus on other forms of terrorism. Partisan politics appear to have played a role as well. In April 2009, a DHS intelligence assessment intended for law enforcement officials, entitled *Rightwing Extremism: Current Economic and Political Climate Fueling Resurgence in Radicalization and Recruitment*, was leaked to the news media.³¹ 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.”³²

Daryl Johnson, the former DHS senior domestic terrorism analyst who was the principal author of the 2009 report, later stated, “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.”

In 2010, the year after the DHS *Rightwing Extremism* report was withdrawn, I was asked to serve on Secretary Napolitano's Countering Violent Extremism Working Group.³⁴ At my request, one of my colleagues, a federally certified law enforcement trainer, was invited to serve as a subject matter expert for the Working Group. Neither of us had success in getting the group to focus on the threat of terrorism from the radical right.

Over the last two years, we have seen renewed attention to the threat of radical-right terrorism from the federal government. In 2014, for example, after white supremacist Frazier Glenn Miller killed three people he thought were Jewish in Overland Park, Kansas, Attorney General Holder reconstituted the domestic terrorism task force that Attorney General Reno originally established after the Oklahoma City bombing. More recently, Attorney General Lynch created a new position, the Domestic Terrorism Counsel within the Counterterrorism Section of the Justice Department's National Security Division, to better address domestic terrorism issues. Still, there are indications that the threat of radical-right terrorism may not be getting the attention it requires.

In February 2015, for example, when President Obama addressed the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism, the first terrorist incident he mentioned was the Oklahoma City bombing. But the discussion that followed focused almost exclusively on the threat associated with radical forms of Islam. Similarly, last year – just two weeks after the Charleston massacre – the House Committee on Homeland Security released a Terror Threat Snapshot that contained no mention of Charleston or the threat of terror from the radical right.³⁵

Hearings on the government's response to terrorism committed by ISIS or other groups or individuals who espouse a radical version of Islam are surely appropriate. But so are hearings on the government's response to other forms of terrorism, including that which poses a danger to federal employees, federal lands, and the public from the antigovernment terrorism we've seen rising in the West.

Stigmatizing the Muslim Community Undermines Trust

Muslim-American communities have been vital in the effort to combat violent extremism.³⁶ As Michael Leiter, former director of the National Counterterrorism Center, said, “[W]e have to

According to a recent study funded by the Justice Department and conducted by the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security,³⁹ there are numerous factors behind the tension and mistrust. But they start with the Muslim community's perception – one based on fact – that a double standard is at work,

alienation and one that may contribute to radicalization.⁴⁴ The first spike began immediately after the deadly attacks launched by al Qaeda that killed almost 3,000 innocent victims, including a number of Muslims. The FBI hate crime statistics for 585 (or ..2 (i) 585 (or 870.2 (s) -0.2 d)] TJ ET1,6 (nps