

Domestic Terrorism in the United States

Treadstone 71 | 2025

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Field	Value
Filename	Domestic Terrorism in the United States.pdf
File Size	609,188 bytes (595 KB)
PDF Version	1.7
Page Count	32
Creation Date	2025-09-28 19:29:23
Creator / Producer	PDFium
Hybrid Analysis URL	https://hybrid-analysis.com/sample/5222f1b4a40b7d0eeabddec65b25fc831105cb070b12db205aa6851d98546af1
SHA-256	5222f1b4a40b7d0eeabddec65b25fc831105cb070b12db205aa6851d98546af1
Embedded URLs in original	NONE (adl.org in reference list is plain text only — not a hyperlink)
Sanitized by	Allison Critten Disinfo Forensics 2026-04-21

Contents

- Analytic Brief
- The Report
- Analysis
- Entry and Pathway Flowchart
- Shock-Driven Online Sequence Diagram
- Right-Wing Action Space Mindmap
- Evidence & Trends
- Comparative Analysis
- Left v Right Wing Comparison
- Compressed Interdiction Gantt Chart
- Rhetoric, Influence & Cognitive Indicators
- Election Cycle Tempo Timeline
- Patterns of Concern — Disinformation, MISO & Manipulation
- Comparative & Geospatial Trends
- Biases, Gaps & Misinterpretation Risks
- Drivers and Outcomes Flowchart
- Implications & Emerging Outlook

- Target Set and Modality Flowchart
- Crackdown on Left-Wing Protests and 'Blue' Cities
- Use of Federal Agents, ICE, and National Guard Against Protests
- No Similar 'Law and Order' for Right-Wing Extremism
- Futures – Signposts – Indicators
- Wrap Up
- References

Analytic Brief

Right-wing extremism dominates U.S. ideologically motivated killings since 1990, while left-wing violence presents lower-fatality, protest-linked risk. Plot runways shortened from years to weeks, online ecosystems reinforce identity more than tactics, and veterans appear more often in right-wing leadership. Prevention gains emerge from rapid interdiction, symbol literacy, veteran transition supports, and relapse-aware exits.

Actors span white supremacists, anti-government militants, conspiracy adherents, eco-sabotage and anti-fascist networks, and unaffiliated lone offenders. Veterans surface at higher rates in right-wing leadership, transferring planning discipline and cohesion. Protective bonds such as marriage and steady work align with lower violence propensities across ideologies.

Right-wing offenders account for far more deaths and favor firearms attacks, assaults on government and law enforcement, and attacks on religious and LGBTQ venues. Left-wing offenders concentrate on arson, sabotage, vandalism, and clashes embedded in protest cycles. Nonviolent activity — fraud, propaganda drops, intimidation — sustains logistics and outreach. Online forums recycle grievance narratives, memes, and OPSEC talk; identity signaling grows with external shocks. Median plot longevity fell from multi-year spans in the 1970s to near three months in the early 2000s.

Shorter runways compress detection and decision cycles. Elevated right-wing lethality, veteran leadership, and shock-responsive identity spikes raise consequence risk. Left-wing surges during protests strain protective details and downtown corridors without matching fatality counts. Pathway-based triage outperforms profiling since belief, behavior, and characteristics vary widely.

Elections, high-profile trials, mass-casualty events, and policy shocks correlate with online surges and operational mobilization. Polarization and institutional distrust expand recruitment funnels. Veterans in transition face loss of mission and belonging, which recruiters exploit. Practice shifts since the early 2000s reward simpler designs, increasing the value of early tips, supervision-based checks, and rapid warrants keyed to procurement and reconnaissance signatures.

Right-wing actors dominate fatality tallies and show rising plots against government and law enforcement since 2016. Mass-casualty incidents anchor public perception and trigger online aftershocks that normalize violent justification. Left-wing activity clusters around protest windows, imposing disruption costs on corporate and government targets with lower lethality.

Escalation path forecasts persistent right-wing lethality, election-cycle spikes, and further migration of veteran leadership. Stabilization path follows from symbol-literate supervision, shock-calendar interdiction, and veteran transition supports that restore purpose and belonging. Diffusion path blends anti-government, racialized grievance, and conspiratorial frames into hybrid mixes with low innovation but durable resilience through redundant online ties. Leading indicators include identity-signaling bursts near shocks, supervision violations with extremist markers, propaganda drops, weapon-related arrests, and travel clusters toward faith venues or civic targets.

The Report

The Treadstone 71 report examines the structural, behavioral, and ideological characteristics of domestic terrorism in the United States, with emphasis on the comparative threat posed by right-wing and left-wing extremist movements. The analysis draws from primary sources including federal data (PIRUS, BIAS, GAO oversight), peer-reviewed and government research (NIJ Journal, CSIS), investigative journalism, and whistleblower testimony.

The methods applied follow established intelligence analysis tradecraft. Objectivity was maintained through critical evaluation of multiple datasets, triangulating across law enforcement statistics, academic research, and independent watchdog reporting. Confirmation bias was countered by cross-comparing right-wing and left-wing datasets. Survivorship bias was addressed by incorporating longitudinal 'plot longevity' research. Availability bias was balanced by grounding interpretation in multi-decade baselines. The risk of ecological fallacy was reduced by distinguishing between group averages and individual-level pathways.

The report applies structured analytic methods, including pattern and trend analysis, signpost and risk indicator identification, and scenario-based foresight. Online semiotic and forensic linguistic assessments were used to interpret the significance of recurring slogans, memes, and OPSEC lexicons as commitment signals.

Analysis

The NIJ article offers enough structured evidence to examine domestic extremism through a counter-MISO, disinformation, and cognitive influence lens. Far-right violence outpaces other categories since 1990, extremist behavior shows wide diversity across belief, behavior, and background, and online forums reinforce echo chambers while recycling information. Plot longevity shrank sharply after investigative guideline changes, and veterans show growing involvement, often in leadership within right-wing networks.

Methodological soundness appears strong for descriptive inferences. PIRUS and BIAS span thousands of U.S. cases and code situational, victim, bond, and risk factors. The work separates violent from nonviolent pathways and tracks precursor behavior sequence data through federal indictments over decades.

Pattern, trend, and tendency analysis show five anchors: (1) belief diversity persists, with overlapping allegiances common across movements; (2) behavior diversity remains persistent, with many actors committing only nonviolent offenses; (3) characteristic diversity defeats profiling, as risk mixes vary by ideology; (4) plot longevity declined from years to weeks as investigative rules and practices matured; and (5) veterans represent a growing share of actors and show higher leadership incidence in right-wing clusters.

Plot Longevity Collapse

Median time from first preparatory act to arrest fell from about six years in the late 1970s to under three years in the mid-1980s and to near three months in the early 2000s. A shorter window compresses the influence cycle, reduces group learning time, and pressures networks into simpler tactics. Simpler plots last longer, while complex plots create more meetings, more observable preparation, and more investigative leads.

Online Behavior

Online behavior follows a reinforcement model rather than an advanced operational playbook. Forum analysis reveals steady growth in radical posture as users receive affirmation and cross-forum linkages. Discussions cluster around encryption, Tor, platform policy, and surveillance awareness. Low network density and redundant ties recycle information in insular loops, hardening beliefs while slowing knowledge diffusion. External shocks correlate with posting surges and overt identity signaling — a semiotic loop where identity badges function as commitment tokens more than operational guides.

Forensic Linguistics & Veteran Involvement

Users adopt fixed slogans, conspiratorial frames, and identity claims that anchor in-group status. Intensity grows through repetition and responsive affirmation. Technical lexicon around encryption and platform avoidance operates as a boundary marker, inviting recruits into a competent-insider posture.

Veteran involvement introduces distinct operational risks. Veterans enter with transferable skills and a mission identity that aligns with tight group structures. Transition stress, loss of purpose, and fractured belonging appear across cases. Right-wing clusters show higher veteran leadership and group orchestration. Partnerships among military, veteran networks, and community stakeholders offer the earliest interception margin.

Entry and Exit Dynamics

Recruitment leverages vulnerability, loneliness, and a quest for a more powerful self. Hate hardens after entry as a product of group life, identity fusion, and emotional conditioning. Exit unfolds gradually and nonlinearly as disillusion, stigma, and fatigue erode commitment; yet identity residue persists and triggers relapse risk. MISO countermeasures that weaken identity grips and expand prosocial belonging raise exit traction.

Entry and Pathway Flowchart

The diagram illustrates the sequence from grievance intake to extremist action. It begins with an individual adopting a grievance that finds validation in online echo chambers. Identity signaling reinforces belonging and attracts peer groups. Bonds create opportunities for skill acquisition, setting the stage for violent or nonviolent pathways. Violent actors move toward weapon preparation, reconnaissance, and incident attempts. Nonviolent actors gravitate to financial crime, propaganda, or property destruction. Protective bonds such as marriage and steady employment interrupt escalation.

Cognitive manipulation and deception patterns appear at three levels: (1) narrative-level manipulation reframes personal hardship into heroic duty and racialized grievance; (2) network-level manipulation enforces conformity through echo chambers, ritualized symbols, and reputational scoring; (3) behavioral-level manipulation normalizes stepwise escalation from property crimes to higher-stakes actions.

Shock-Driven Online Sequence Diagram

External shocks — elections, terrorist incidents, policy decisions — drive online forum surges. Online activity spills into grievance reinforcement, identity signaling, and operational security discussions. Prospective actors engage by posting and performing insider roles, then decide between lone action or contact with a small cell. Small groups favor simpler plot structures, which generate observable signatures that investigators can detect. Compressed timelines require rapid interdiction.

Right-Wing Action Space Mindmap

The mindmap categorizes action domains into violent, nonviolent, online, and leadership functions. Violent categories include mass shootings, assaults on government, arson, and targeted attacks on religious or LGBTQ sites. Nonviolent categories capture threats, doxxing, propaganda drops, property crimes, and financial frauds. Online categories revolve around identity badges, meme loops, operational security chatter, and cross-platform migrations. Leadership and support structures highlight veteran leadership, training hubs, firearms, logistics, and safehouses.

Domain	Indicator or Pattern	MISO/Deception Relevance	Immediate Action Path
Beliefs & Affiliations	Overlapping ideologies across	Mass narratives widen recruitment	Targeted and triage messaging for counter-narrative
Behaviors	Large share of nonviolent offenses	Use with occasional tactical escalation	Simple plot, time and logistics with extremist linkage checks during surveillance
Characteristics	Marriage and steady work align	Steady work buffers escalation	Integrate employment and family supports into diversion and exit programs
Plot Longevity	Shorter windows after policy shifts	Shifts press for complex, simple	Prioritize fast-triage and de-escalation cycle interdiction against simple plans
Online Forums	Low density, redundant ties	Identity signaling spikes at events	Targeted investigations; monitor identity bursts after high-impact events
Veterans	Higher leadership presence in	Skills transfer and mission identity	Entry and presence opportunities in transition programs; track leadership
Exit Dynamics	Gradual, nonlinear exits with	Triggers and former members	Back-relapse-aware exit care with trigger mapping and rapid support

Evidence & Trends

Statistical data indicate right-wing extremists have committed far more ideologically motivated homicides since 1990 than far-left or radical Islamist groups. One study found more than 520 deaths across 227 incidents tied to far-right extremism, significantly exceeding those from other ideologies. The comparison shows roughly 42 attacks by far-left extremists, causing around 78 deaths during the same period.

Racially or ethnically motivated attacks have formed the largest subcategory of domestic terrorism in the past decade. Nearly all mass-killings attributable to domestic extremism in recent reports show right-wing connections, especially white supremacist or anti-immigrant motives — including the Buffalo supermarket shooting and attacks on LGBTQ venues.

Incidents targeting government, law enforcement, and elected officials have risen sharply since around 2016. A CSIS analysis found 21 terrorist attacks and plots against government-related targets between January 2016 and April 2024, compared to just two over many prior years. DHS, FBI, GAO, and academic centers consistently list white supremacist, anti-government, and conspiracy-driven belief clusters as among the highest threat vectors.

Comparative Analysis

Right-wing terrorism accounts for the larger share of ideologically motivated killings since 1990, while left-wing terrorism registers fewer fatal attacks and concentrates more on property sabotage and protest-linked violence. Right-wing offenders more often operate as lone actors or small cells, select firearms attacks and targeted assaults on government, religious, and LGBTQ venues, and draw from conspiracy narratives fusing anti-government, racist, and nativist themes.

Left-wing offenders concentrate on arson or sabotage against corporate or infrastructure targets tied to environmental, labor, or anti-fascist frames, with violence more frequently emerging at protest flashpoints rather than as stand-alone mass-casualty plots. Veteran involvement marks a sharper feature for right-wing networks, where leadership and training experience raise operational discipline and group cohesion.

Regional likelihood follows stress concentrations. Right-wing violence tends to cluster where demographic change, partisan polarization, firearm prevalence, and militia or sovereign-citizen presence intersect with rhetorical activation during election cycles. Left-wing violence tends to cluster in dense urban cores, university centers, and logistics corridors during high-tempo protest periods.

Metric (Index 100 = higher side)	Right-Wing	Left-Wing	Interpretive Note
Share of extremist homicides since 1990	100	20	Lethality gap strongly favors right-wing side
Lone-actor prevalence	90	55	Higher single-offender risk on right-wing side
Protest-linked incident share	45	90	Higher protest-context risk on left-wing side
Veteran leadership incidence	100	25	Leadership and skills transfer stand out on right-wing side
Plot simplicity preference	85	70	Simple designs extend runways for each side
Online identity-signaling spikes near elections	95	60	Elections drive stronger surges on right-wing side

Regional Risk Indicators

Indicator	Collection Proxy	RW Georisk	LW Georisk
Polarization index	County-level election margins over time	High	Medium
Demographic change rate	Census net migration and diversity shifts	High	Medium

Firearm prevalence	NICS per capita, state policy proxies	High	Low
Extremist propaganda drops	Flyer/graffiti tallies, tip lines	High	Medium
Protest frequency	Permits, social data, NGO trackers	Medium	High
Hate-crime rate	State reporting, victimization surveys	High	High
Election dispute intensity	Litigation, threats to officials	High	Low
University density	Enrollment per capita, campus groups	Low	High

Rhetoric, Influence & Cognitive Indicators

Right-wing extremist output includes consistent use of conspiracy theory narratives — election fraud, Great Replacement, anti-government hostility. Online forums propagate symbols, slogans, and memes that double as identity markers. Language often presents grievance, threat, urgency, and frames opponents as existential enemies.

Election Cycle Tempo Timeline

Right-wing extremist activity shows moderate clustering in 2008 and 2012, rising to high levels in 2016, peaking in 2020, and sustaining at high levels with aftershocks in 2024. The election link reflects grievance amplification, legitimacy disputes, and polarizing rhetoric. Evidence shows offline violence often follows online radicalization. Operational tactics often include lone actors or small, loosely networked cells with lower thresholds due to reduced exposure risk.

Patterns of Concern — Disinformation, MISO & Manipulation

Narrative control plays a significant role in framing ideologies. Disinformation around election legitimacy, immigration threats, and government overreach feeds into radicalization. MISO-like influence appears when extremist content mimics external propaganda in style, using fear, moral outrage, identity threat, symbols of authority, and calls for reactive violence.

Authorities, media, and political actors sometimes contest what counts as 'domestic terrorism,' producing confusion. Removal or suppression of reports invites distrust and fuels conspiratorial interpretation. When violent incidents tied to far-right extremism occur, counter-narratives by political actors shift blame to 'other sides,' sowing information confusion. Reports indicate a DOJ study finding right-wing extremism's primacy was removed from official websites under executive orders.

Comparative & Geospatial Trends

Geographic clustering reveals hotspots where counties or metro regions with high polarization, socio-political stress, inequality, and demographic change tend to produce more incidents. Temporal clustering indicates surges around external shocks — elections, significant protests, pandemic distrust, and policy changes. The 2020–2021 period saw many incidents associated with pandemic protests, racial justice demonstrations, and police violence controversies.

Biases, Gaps & Misinterpretation Risks

- Public visibility biases exaggerate spectacular incidents (mass shootings) but undercount lower-level violence, threats, and non-fatal plots.
- Survivorship bias: most studied actors are those caught or killed, hiding latent networked activity.
- Ideological bias: media, political, and policy framing often emphasize certain kinds of threats or certain extremists, neglecting others.
- Data definitions vary: 'extremism,' 'domestic terrorism,' 'hate crime,' and 'politically motivated violence' differ across datasets, hindering cross-comparison.
- Provocations and false flag narratives are sometimes inserted in discourse, complicating attribution and trust.
- Misinformation and disinformation amplify fears and distort perceptions — exaggerating the threat can produce moral panic; downplaying may lead to under-preparation.

Drivers and Outcomes Flowchart

The diagram lays out push-pull dynamics shaping extremist outcomes. Drivers such as grievance intensity, identity fusion, echo chamber exposure, veteran status, and elite cue uptake push individuals toward violent or nonviolent behavior. Protective bonds act as dampeners, diverting potential violence toward disengagement. Outcomes cluster in three pathways: nonviolent action, violent planning, or disengagement.

Implications & Emerging Outlook

Right-wing domestic terrorism has become the most frequent and deadly category of domestic ideological violence in U.S. statistical accounts in recent decades. Strong ideological fusion with conspiratorial content feeds the frequency of plots involving political motivations. Government, law enforcement, and public officials remain frequent targets. Risk of escalation heightens if radical rhetoric normalizes political violence.

Target Set and Modality Flowchart

The diagram maps linkages between targets, modalities, and enablers. Target categories include civilians, government, religious sites, LGBTQ venues, and media. Modalities include lone actors, small cells, and network-inspired actors. Enablers include firearms, improvised explosives, propaganda, and safehouses. Lone actors often target civilians and LGBTQ venues. Small cells frequently focus on government and religious institutions. Network-inspired actors reinforce civilian targeting.

Keywords: right-wing terrorism, left-wing terrorism, extremist violence, lone actors, small cells, protest-linked violence, veteran leadership, plot longevity, online echo chambers, identity signaling, conspiracy narratives, propaganda drops, militia presence, polarization index, demographic change, firearm prevalence, hate-crime rates, protest frequency, election dispute intensity, university density, suburban belts, urban cores, logistics corridors, faith venues, government sites, LGBTQ venues, interdiction windows, exit programs, relapse risk, strategic foresight.

Crackdown on Left-Wing Protests and 'Blue' Cities

From the outset of his presidency, Donald Trump exhibited extreme hostility toward left-wing protests, especially those against racial injustice. In 2020, he threatened to use force to quell nationwide protests and deployed a heavy federal presence — armed agents and National Guard troops — who arrested protesters and journalists with excessive force. Peaceful demonstrators near the White House were forcibly dispersed with tear gas so Trump could stage a photo-op, and he sent militarized federal units into cities like Portland, Oregon, which led to violent clashes.

During the unrest after George Floyd's murder, Trump berated governors as 'weak' and urged them to 'dominate' protesters with force, explicitly singling out Democrat-led cities (New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles) and offering to send in troops. This 'law and order' posture was a central theme, often portraying largely peaceful racial justice protests as anarchic uprisings by the 'radical left.'

In September 2020, the Justice Department designated New York City, Portland, and Seattle as 'anarchist jurisdictions.' Attorney General William Barr aggressively marshaled federal law against left-wing unrest, urging U.S. attorneys to bring serious federal charges against arrested protesters and even suggesting using the rarely used sedition statute. Over 200 people were hit with federal charges in the 2020 protest wave. A whistleblower later revealed that Trump loyalists at DHS pressured analysts to downplay the threat of white supremacists and overstate the threat of antifa in official assessments.

Trump specifically targeted universities associated with liberal dissent. He cheered when police 'rounded up' student protesters at Columbia University, calling it 'a beautiful thing to watch,' and urged officials to 'vanquish the radicals.' He threatened to deport foreign students who participate in campus demonstrations he opposes.

Use of Federal Agents, ICE, and National Guard Against Protests

Trump marshaled federal agencies not usually involved in civilian crowd control against left-wing protests. In summer 2020, heavily armed DHS teams — including Border Patrol tactical units — were deployed in U.S. cities without local consent. In Portland, Oregon, masked federal agents in military-style gear abducted protesters in unmarked vans. DHS personnel repeatedly used impact munitions, pepper balls, and tear gas on crowds nightly. Journalists, medics, and legal observers were not spared.

A DHS whistleblower confirmed that higher-ups instructed analysts to hype the threat of 'antifa' while muting findings on white supremacists, and that the Homeland Threat Assessment draft was censored. When the lead DHS analyst, Brian Murphy, refused to modify reports in this misleading way, he was sidelined.

In June 2025, protests erupted in Los Angeles after ICE conducted sweeping immigration raids. Trump federalized the California National Guard and ordered at least 2,000 Guard troops into Los Angeles — armed soldiers in military vehicles patrolling LA streets for the first time since the 1992 Rodney King riots. A federal judge ruled that Trump's use of the National Guard and Marines in Los Angeles violated the Posse Comitatus Act. Judge Charles Breyer starkly noted 'no president is a king — not even Trump.'

No Similar 'Law and Order' for Right-Wing Extremism

In stark contrast, Trump has not targeted right-wing protest movements or strongholds with anything approaching the same vigor. No parallel campaigns of surveillance, mass arrests, or 'domination' were unleashed on right-wing protesters or militias. Trump frequently defended or excused violent acts by right-wing actors. His response to the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol included praising the rioters and later promising pardons. Upon regaining office in January 2025, Trump granted blanket clemency to hundreds of January 6 defendants.

Trump's DOJ under AG Barr downplayed far-right violence even as it zealously prosecuted leftists. A DHS whistleblower revealed that intelligence reports on the white supremacist terror threat were explicitly suppressed or watered down. The administration also rescinded DOJ/DHS grants for organizations dedicated to rehabilitating neo-Nazis, while only canceling CVE grants targeting white supremacists.

Trump infamously reacted to the 2017 Charlottesville neo-Nazi rally — where a white supremacist murdered a counterprotester — by insisting there were 'wonderful people on both sides.' In April 2020, he tweeted 'LIBERATE MICHIGAN!' effectively egging on armed right-wing protesters who stormed Michigan's statehouse. In September 2025, he announced he is designating 'antifa' as a 'major terrorist organization' — largely symbolic, as antifa is not a centralized group and U.S. law has no domestic terror list — while issuing no equivalent designation for any right-wing extremist group.

Wrap Up

The analysis of Domestic Terrorism in the United States highlights a stark imbalance in threat vectors, modalities, and lethality across ideological categories. Right-wing extremism remains the dominant source of ideologically motivated killings, with over 500 deaths since 1990, while left-wing incidents have produced far fewer fatalities. Right-wing actors rely heavily on lone actors and small cells, often with veterans in leadership roles.

Online ecosystems have proven decisive across the spectrum but function differently. Right-wing forums amplify grievances through conspiratorial narratives and use identity-signaling spikes around external shocks. Left-wing online spaces surge around protests, police-violence incidents, and labor disputes, with open planning for demonstrations and mutual aid coordination. Both sides exhibit a semiotic reliance on slogans, banners, and imagery that cements in-group identity and sustains recruitment.

Plot longevity trends reveal a systemic shift. Where extremist conspiracies in the 1970s persisted for years before interdiction, modern plots often last mere weeks due to policy reforms, improved investigative practice, and heightened surveillance. The compressed runway intensifies the danger from right-wing lone actors who require little preparation yet yield catastrophic consequences.

Veterans constitute a central axis in right-wing clusters. Their transferable skills, mission identity, and organizational discipline elevate operational risk, especially when combined with transition stress and loss of purpose. Left-wing movements exhibit less veteran infiltration, relying more on student activists, labor organizers, and grassroots affinity groups.

The overarching conclusion is clear: U.S. domestic terrorism is defined by the dominance of right-wing lethality, the episodic but disruptive surges of left-wing activism, the structural compression of plot runways, and the deepening entanglement of online semiotics with offline violence. Effective prevention rests not on profiling but on early detection of identity signals, rapid interdiction of simple designs, investment in community and veteran resilience, and exit programs that treat extremism as a chronic, relapse-prone identity attachment requiring sustained aftercare. Transparency in reporting trends is equally essential to prevent disinformation, build public trust, and insulate assessments from politicization.

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