COMPARING THE NARRATIVE WITH FACTS: EXAMINING THE

IMPACT OF THE PRESIDENCY ON RIGHT-WING DOMESTIC

TERRORISM IN THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT

Several studies have examined the activity of right-wing extremists in relation to the actions of President Trump (Chyzh, Nieman, & Webb, 2019; Piazza, 2020). Comparatively, little research has examined the impact of the Obama presidency on right-wing extremism despite a peak in the number of right-wing extremist groups during his second term (SPLC, 2020). The purpose of this study is to examine the unique effects of the Obama and Trump candidacies and presidencies on the frequency of attacks committed by right-wing extremists in the U.S. The results indicate that President Obama's second term was associated with a gradual, permanent increase in the frequency of attacks by right-wing extremists, while the presidency of Donald Trump was associated with an abrupt, permanent increase in the frequency of attacks. These findings suggest a number of policy implications related to political polarization and rhetoric in the U.S.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

It is well established among terrorism researchers that right-wing extremist ideologies are broadly grounded in white supremacy and anti-government sentiment (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2006; Doering & Davies, 2019; Piazza, 2020; Seegmiller, 2007). Furthermore, right-wing extremism continues to represent a clear and present danger to the safety and security of the United States (Berger, 2016; Gardell, 2003; McCooey, 2012; SPLC, 2020). Despite this persistent threat, the emergence of organizational fragmentation, movement diversification, and lone-wolf terrorism has made the study of right-wing extremism increasingly difficult (Perkoski, 2015; Spaaij & Hamm, 2015).

A potentially fruitful line of inquiry, however, is the relationship between the office of the presidency and the frequency of terrorist attacks by right-wing extremists (Kluch & Vaux, 2016; Piazza, 2020; Pilecki, Muro, Hammack, & Clemons, 2014). Researchers have long noted that 'political resentment' might serve as a powerful motivator for right-wing extremism (Piazza, 2016; Risen & Thomas, 1998; Pete Simi, 2010). Specifically, changes at the federal level of government perceived as threats by right-wing extremists may prompt increases in the frequency of terrorist attacks (Piazza, 2016; Risen & Thomas, 1998; Pete Simi, 2010). As an example, Risen and Thomas (1998) noted that the election of Democrat Bill Clinton as U.S. president triggered an increase in anti-abortion terrorist attacks. More recently, Piazza (2016) reported that

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political resentment maintained a statistically significant influence on the frequency of right-wing domestic terrorism, even after controlling for relevant economic factors.

Conversely, researchers have also described a terrorism-inducing effect associated with right-wing populism (Hewitt, 2003), whereby extremists may feel encouraged or empowered to engage in terrorist activity. As recent examples, the works of Piazza (2020) and Schaffner (2018) have described correlations between statements made by Republican President Donald Trump and terrorist attacks and hate crimes committed by right-wing extremists. Their findings coalesce with those of Chyzh and collegues (2019), who noted 'hateful' Tweets by U.S. politicians preceded increases in hate crimes, both violent and non-violent, across the United States.

Cumulatively, these studies suggest a potentially important relationship between the office of the presidency and the frequency of terrorist attacks committed by right-wing extremists in the United States. Despite the implications of such a relationship, however, the literature is noticeably absent of studies that compare the effects of multiple presidencies through the use of interrupted time-series analysis that provides evidence of causality. These gaps prompted the current study to apply Autoregressive Integrated Moving Average (ARIMA) models to monthly counts of terrorist attacks described in the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) in an effort to determine the unique effects of the Obama and Trump presidencies on right-wing extremism in the United States.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining and Framing the Threat of Terrorism

Defining terrorism has proven troublesome since the time of the French Revolution. From 1789 to 1799, the 'Reign of Terror' occurred when the 'Revolutionary government' sought to prosecute and execute traitors of the revolution after the monarchy was abolished (Teichman, 1989). The Revolutionary government was the first government of France formed as a democracy (Andress, 2006). Under this historical context, terrorism was defined as "government by intimidation," but by 1937, the League of Nations defined terrorism as criminal acts aimed against a state (Teichman, 1989). Even so, the 'Reign of Terror' contributed to the contemporary concepts of "terrorist" and "terrorism."

Roughly 160 years after the 'Reign of Terror,' in the 1960s, the U.S. Departments of State, Defense, Justice, and the FBI came to define terrorism as "a variety of criminal activity involving the unlawful use of force" (Teichman, 1989). By 1983 the U.S. Department of Defense had revised their definition of terrorism to "the use of force by revolutionary organizations" (Teichman, 1989). Following this, in 1986 'the Bush committee' defined terrorism as the "unlawful use or threat of violence against person or property to further political or social objectives; usually intended to coerce a government, individuals, or groups to modify their behavior or politics" (Teichman, 1989).

In 1993, when a group of Jihadist terrorists detonated a bomb at the World Trade Center, Americans' point of reference for terrorism was defined by this international attack. Over the next seven years, terrorism in the United States fluctuated, with the largest increase in attacks occurring between 1998 and 1999, when the total increased from 30 to 52 attacks—much of which was associated with increased activity by domestic right-wing groups (START, 2016). Just as the public's perception of terrorism began to converge with the growing threat of right-wing extremism, the United States suffered another international terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, resulting in the creation of the United States Department of Homeland Security and passage of the U.S Patriot Act (Huddy & Feldman, 2011).

> The Patriot Act also resulted in a revised definition of terrorism. According to 18 U.S.C.
> § 2331 (2001), terrorism now encompasses:
>
> acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of criminal laws of the United States or
> of any State; appear to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; to
> influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or to affect the conduct
> of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping.

Following the events of 9/11, federal response and public perception allowed for the framing of terrorism as an external threat perpetuated by international actors. Historically, however, the most consistent threat has been home-grown—and typified by acts of violence committed by right-wing extremists.

The Domestic Threat of Right-wing Extremism in the United States

While the scope of counter-terrorism efforts in the United States have been on international actors, the threat posed by right-wing extremism has been consistent. Although

right-wing extremism is composed of several different factions, they each maintain similarly

ideologies. Chermak and Gruenewald (2015, p. 140) describe right-wing extremism as:

> Fiercely nationalistic (as opposed to universal and international in orientation),
>
> anti-global, suspicious of centralized federal authority, reverent of individual
>
> liberty (especially their right to own guns, be free of taxes), believe in conspiracy
>
> theories that involve a grave threat to national sovereignty and/or personal liberty
>
> and a belief that one's personal and/or national "way of life" is under attack and
>
> is either already lost or that the threat is imminent (sometimes such beliefs are
>
> amorphous and vague, but for some the threat is from a specific ethnic, racial, or
>
> religious group), and a belief in the need to be prepared for an attack either by
>
> participating in or supporting the need for paramilitary preparations and training
>
> or survivalism.

Early examples of domestic terrorism committed by right-wing extremists were observed

in response to the rapid social changes associated with the Civil Rights era. From 1954 to 1970,

schools were desegregated, and civil rights campaigns became prevalent. In response, white

supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan became more active, participating in 588 incidents

that primarily involved the bombing and shooting of black churches (Michael, 2014).

The modern threat of right-wing extremism began around 1978 with the bombings of

abortion clinics (Michael, 2014). Michael (2014) noted that this wave of right-wing terrorism

differs from the activities of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1960s, as the scope of these incidents

extended beyond the South to a national scale. Further, right-wing extremism began to

experience 'organizational fragmentation,' a process by which smaller clandestine-like sub-

groups and individual extremists communicate, allowing for a decentralized organizational

network. More recently, with the introduction of the internet, organizational fragmentation exists as a way to communicate and interact with only a few online actors to avoid law enforcement detection (Spaaij & Hamm, 2015). Furthermore, there are four actions that occur under the process of organizational fragmentation such as movement diversification, organizational decentralization, organizational specialization, and organizational splintering (Perkoski, 2015). The first action or event leading towards organizational fragmentation occurs when sub-groups begin to splinter from an existing organized group, movement, or network with the same common interest in working towards similar goals, resulting in 'movement diversification' (Perkoski, 2015). Following that is 'organizational decentralization,' where the larger organized group or movement takes a decentralized approach to delegating command and control through a 'regional spread' (Perkoski, 2015). This approach has become a mainstay in the strategic decisions of right-wing actors, making them more difficult to detect and apprehend (Perkoski, 2015).

Organizational decentralization assists in the total structural change to achieve organizational fragmentation. Building from that is 'organizational specialization,' where extremist groups may benefit from the creation of specialized semi-autonomous groups that fulfill specified purposes (Perkoski, 2015). Although there is little research on this element of organizational fragmentation, there are some proposed reasons as to why organizational specialization occurs, specifically in cases of armed militant factions. According to Perkoski (2015), because groups may have supporters who do not condone more radical or militant operations, armed militant factions provide "a level of deniability and distance but it nonetheless produces the desired tactical capabilities" (p. 15). Another proposed explanation is that the formation of militant factions gives an opportunity for more radical supporters to join their

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organization and allows the primary organization to "maintain control over these individuals and increase their own numbers" (Perkoski, 2015, p. 15). Last to occur in the process of organizational fragmentation is 'organizational splintering.' This is, at its core, the creation of a new independent group from an existing organization. Specifically, this refers to when members break away and form a new related group that is entirely independent of their predecessor (Perkoski, 2015). Unlike the other elements of organizational fragmentation, organizational splintering is distinct in that the splinter groups are entirely autonomous and are not under the former organization's control (Perkoski, 2015).

As mentioned previously, many groups and organizations are built on right-wing ideology, some of which splinter into more radical subgroups. This splintering can be seen in cases of far-right or alt-right extremist groups who break away from larger organizations or movements such as the Patriot Front, The Base, and the Rise Above Movement, all of which identify with the overarching beliefs and sentiments of white supremacy (SPLC, 2020). These groups continue to adopt decentralized organizational strategies in order to avoid law enforcement detection, an approach that has become endemic to right-wing ideology—especially those identifying with anti-government groups. In this vein, Louis Beam, a Vietnam War veteran and Klansman, popularized the term 'leaderless resistance' in the 1980s as a method to evade detection by law enforcement (Spaaij & Hamm, 2015). Beam thought individual actors or "lone wolves," rather than organized groups, could take the initiative to launch attacks, with a much higher likelihood of success. Indeed, at that time, the number of successful attacks on intended targets by organized groups was decreasing as a result of law enforcement efforts (Spaaij & Hamm, 2015). Beam's concept of leaderless resistance led to lone-wolf terrorism, which has since become the primary method of attack by right-wing extremists in the United States.

According to Taylor (2019), contemporary right-wing extremism can be divided into two broad categories: anti-government movements and white supremacist movements. Anti-government extremism refers to a fringe ideology that rejects the idea of a governing body and includes movements such as the Patriot Movement, Sovereign Citizens, and the Militia Movement (Taylor, 2019). The Intelligence Project identified 576 active anti-government groups operating in the U.S. in 2019 (SPLC, 2020). The anti-government movement saw a rise in membership the year following the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, with 858 active groups active (SPLC, 2020). Further, the study of anti-government groups from 1995 (Clinton presidency) to 2019 (Trump presidency) found the largest peak in groups occurred during the Obama presidency, with 1,360 active groups in 2012 (SPLC, 2020). The highest concentration of these groups is observed in California (46 groups), Texas (38 groups), Ohio (32 groups), and Pennsylvania (28 groups) (SPLC, 2020).

In contrast, the ideological foundation of white supremacist movements is grounded in the superiority and preservation of the Aryan race. White supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), Christian Identity, Aryan Brotherhood, American Front, and Hammerskins generally espouse racist ideology, advocate for race- based segregation, and xenophobia (Doering & Davies, 2019; Taylor, 2019). These ideologies have been popularized in fictitious novels depicting dystopian white futures, racial genocide, and race wars. Of these works, *The Turner Diaries* (1978) and *Hunter* (1989) by William Luther Pierce are frequently referenced as seminal pieces of white supremacist propaganda. Pierce's most notable novel, *The Turner Diaries* (1978), depicts an overthrow of the U.S. government in which the main character, Earl Turner, sets out to incite a race war under the direction of an organization called "the Order" (Berger, 2016). Subsequently, Robert Jay Matthews, a white-supremacist inspired by Pierce's

novel, founded a white-supremacist group called "The Order" modeled after the novel (Berger, 2016). From 1983 to 1984, The Order committed armed robbery and murder in an attempt to provoke government interference and a race war as depicted in the novel (Berger, 2016). *The Turner Diaries* has been called the most influential work of white-supremacists propaganda, a call to action, and responsible for the murder of at least 200 people (Berger, 2016). Published in 1989, *Hunter* follows the violent campaign of the novel's protagonist, Oscar Yeager, as he murders interracial couples and assassinates public figures advocating for civil rights (Berger, 2016). While *Hunter* may not appear to be as influential as its counterpart, this novel focuses on the concept of working as an organized group, an approach perceived by Pierce as more practical (Gardell, 2003).

What remains the deadliest domestic terrorist attack in U.S. history occurred on Patriot's Day, 1995, when Timothy McVeigh, a right-wing extremist, along with two co-conspirators, bombed a Federal Building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people (McCooey, 2012). McVeigh, a U.S Army veteran who served in the Gulf War, cited the fatal sieges caused by federal agents' error at Ruby Ridge, Idaho in 1992 and Waco, Texas in 1993 as motivation for his actions and anti-government sentiments. Given the temporal proximity to the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, law enforcement officials searched for a Jihadist terrorist responsible for the Oklahoma City bombing and not a 27-year-old white male. McVeigh was caught just over an hour after the attack when an Oklahoma Highway Patrol trooper noticed a vehicle on the road with no license plate. During the stop, the trooper noticed what appeared to be a gun holster under McVeigh's jacket, and he was arrested (Madeira, 2012). Notably, William Pierce's novel, *The Turner Diaries,* gained further attention after the Oklahoma City bombing when pages of it were found in McVeigh's vehicle (Berger, 2016).

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The Oklahoma City bombing is just one example of several high-profile actions by right-wing-extremists. From 1994 through 1996, the Aryan Republican Army (ARA), a group that promoted anti-government, anti-black, and anti-Semitic beliefs, was responsible for 22 bank robberies across the Midwest (Lambret, 2011). The six-member paramilitary cell planned to use the money obtained from the robberies to fund a white supremacist overthrow of the" Zionist Occupied" U.S. government, while encouraging acts of terrorism (Kushner, 2003; Lei, 1997). From 1996 to 1998, Army veteran Eric Rudolph, also known as the "Olympic Park Bomber," detonated explosive devices at abortion clinics, a lesbian bar, and the Summer Olympics in Atlanta, killing a total of three people and injuring 150 others (Seegmiller, 2007). Although it has been debated whether he was associated with Christian Identity, a movement supporting anti-Semitic and racist theology, Rudolph expressed several anti-abortion sentiments. During his court proceedings, for example, Rudolph indicated he ''did not target them for who they were—but for what they did. What they did was participate in the murder and dismemberment of upwards of 50 children a week" (Seegmiller, 2007, p. 529). Rudolph's actions exemplify how a single individual with no confirmed right-wing group affiliations can successfully execute several attacks before apprehension. Furthermore, in accordance with Chermak and Gruenewald's (2015) definition of right-wing extremism, Eric Rudolph's targets and anti-abortion sentiments suggest he was under the belief that his 'way of life' was under attack and these targets were symbolic of the groups he saw as perpetuating the threat.

Sixteen years later, Wade Michael Page opened fire on parishioners at a Sikh temple in Wisconsin, killing six people and injuring four others (TMJ4, 2020). A seventh victim succumbed to his wounds in 2020 (TMJ4, 2020). Page, a U.S. military veteran discharged due to misconduct, had multiple ties to white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups, including the

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Hammerskins, and played in several white power bands. He committed suicide after being shot

by a police officer during the Sikh temple attack (Laris, Markon, & Branigin, 2012).

More recently, in 2019, Patrick Crusius opened fire on shoppers at an El Paso Walmart,

killing 20 people and injuring 23 others (Abutaleb, 2019). Law enforcement recovered an anti-

Hispanic and anti-immigrant manifesto posted online minutes before the attack. This manifesto,

called *The Inconvenient Truth*, included five sections entitled "political reasons for the attack,

economic reasons, equipment that will be used to carry out the shooting, the expected reaction to

the attack, and personal reasons and thoughts" (Abutaleb, 2019). Interestingly, Crusius invoked

the office of the U.S. presidency in order to absolve President Donald Trump of any potential

connection with his motivations for the attack. Indeed, Crusius (2019) explicitly cleared

President Trump of any influence on the attack, writing:

> My opinions on automation, immigration, and the rest predate Trump and his campaign
>
> for president. I am putting this here because some people will blame the President or
>
> certain presidential candidates for the attack. This is not the case. I know that the media
>
> will probably call me a white supremacist anyway and blame Trump's rhetoric.

In their totality, violence perpetrated by right-wing extremists, including the aforementioned

examples, appears driven by a process of rational choice. Specifically, and consistent with the

work of Chermak and Gruenewald (2015), right-wing extremists believe in the need to protect

and prepare themselves for an attack and when they commit an attack, it tends to be premediated

as demonstrated in previously discussed manifestos. Additionally, when considering an attack,

right-wing extremists regard their attacks as solutions to a perceived problem or need, therefore

rationalizing their choice to act.

Rational Choice Theory

       Rational choice theory is grounded in the work of Cesare Beccaria and his 1764 essay *On Crimes and Punishments*. In his essay, Beccaria advanced three tenets that were hypothesized to impact conformity and criminal offending. The first, free will, related to the ability of all individuals to make choices, whether conventionally good or bad (Beccaria, 1963). The second, rational manner, is related to how individuals act in a rational way in terms of choices that help them in achieving their goals, including personal gratification (Beccaria, 1963). The third tenet, manipulability, referred to the calculable manner of weighing available options.

       Bentham's 1789 work, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, built on the foundation established by Beccaria through the principle of utility. As described by Bentham (2000, p. 14), "nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure." In the interest of developing a utilitarian system of laws, Bentham analyzed the source, type, and measurement of pleasures and pains while introducing a set of criteria for measuring each. These criteria included intensity, duration, certainty, nearness, fecundity, purity, and were used to calculate the amount of pleasure and pain generated by an act (Bentham, 2000).

       The work of Cornish and Clarke (1987) reconceptualized the process by which all individuals weigh the cost and benefits of their choices when committing a crime. In particular, they identified specific factors that influence the decisions to commit a crime called 'initial involvement' (Cornish & Clarke, 1987). Cornish and Clarke (1987) reference the work of Simon's (1983) 'bounded rationality' as an influence on their re-conceptualized process, which acknowledges that rationality is limited. In Simon's (1990) work, the concept of bounded

rationality holds that choices are constrained by the limits of time and ability or by the availability of relevant information.

In their paper, Cornish and Clarke (1987) illustrated this process in an 'Initial Crime Involvement Model' composed of eight stages, including: background factors (i.e., psychological, upbringing, social status, and demographics), previous experiences and learning (i.e., past contact with law enforcement), generalized needs (i.e., money, status, survival), solutions evaluated (i.e., effort or cost reviewed), perceived solution including both legitimate (i.e., work) or illegitimate (i.e., robbery) solutions, reaction to a chance event (i.e., easy crime opportunity arises), readiness of the individual, and the final decision (Cornish & Clarke, 1987). Further building on rational choice theory, their perspective included the idea of 'choice structuring properties' referring to the "constellation of opportunities, costs, and benefits attaching to particular kinds of crime" (Cornish & Clarke, 1987, p. 933). In accordance with Cornish and Clarke (1987) recommendations, several studies have followed in applying rational choice theory to different types of offenses.

Building on the work of Cornish and Clarke (1987), Nagin and Paternoster (1993) dropped the focus on situational factors and used stable criminal propensities such as "the perceived costs and benefits of crime and the objective characteristic of an offending opportunity" (p.468). In their empirical study, Nagin and Paternoster (1993) used three scenarios: drunk driving, larceny, and sexual assault, to find evidence of theorized individual differences in propensity to offend and situational factors. Furthermore, three independent variables: lack of self-control, criminal opportunity and situational factors, and perceived utility were used to measure rational choice theory concepts (Nagin & Paternoster, 1993). The independent measure 'lack of self-control' refers to a "common cluster of personal

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characteristics that both sets of authors agree predispose individuals to crime" (Nagin & Paternoster, 1993, p. 477). Criminal opportunity and situational factors were selected in accordance with the perspective that individuals are more prone to offend when the intended target is more accessible, vulnerable, and attractive (Nagin & Paternoster, 1993). Finally, perceived utility acknowledges that the decision to commit an offense is negatively related to the perceived costs of crime and positively related to the perceived rewards of crime (Nagin & Paternoster, 1993). Results from Nagin and Paternoster's (1993) efforts provided strong support for rational choice theory, given that all three offense scenarios in the study were positively and significantly related to lack of self-control, while perceptions of the certainty of formal and informal sanctions and self-imposed shame successfully controlled respondents' intentions to offend (Nagin & Paternoster, 1993).

Following this, Bouffard (2002) further explored the testability of rational choice theory. His work largely built on the concept of bounded rationality by introducing 'visceral states' as proposed by Loewensein (1996). According to Bouffard (2002), visceral states are largely emotional, and act directly on behavior beyond the control of rational decision-makers. Furthermore, visceral states are proposed to impact decision-making in three ways (Bouffard, 2002). First, visceral states can limit decision making as these emotionally driven states "act to narrow the content of one's attention to factors related to that state" (Bouffard, 2002, p. 122). Second, visceral states limit rational decision making as they can "reduce a person's time horizon, such that individuals in these states are motivated to resolve that state quickly, focusing on the short-term when making decisions" (Bouffard, 2002, p. 122). Finally, visceral states may nullify or intensely thwart rational decision-making abilities, as emotional states can drive the focus of the individual to themselves, so their "needs have primacy over concerns for others"

(Bouffard, 2002, p. 122). Although this study utilized both experimental and multivariate methods while adding to measures used in the study of rational choice theory, the hypothesis that perception of consequences mediated the effect of arousal on sexual coercion was partially supported.

Bouffard (2002) followed up his work with a second study testing rational choice theory using two types of offense scenarios: date-rape and drunk-driving. Unlike his previous work, Bouffard (2002) failed to elaborate on measures of visceral states or any conceptualization of bounded rationality but instead sought to analyze the utility of consequences by allowing participants to develop their own list of costs and benefits associated with the two offense scenarios. Certainty, severity, and salience scales were used in accordance with past rational choice perspectives for respondents to access the subject-generated item (Bouffard, 2002). Results from the study suggested that cost items tend to be negatively associated with the likelihood of offending, while benefit items tend to be positively associated with it. These findings supported rational choice theory's central propositions insofar as individuals assess the pros and cons associated with a crime and therefore act in self-interest (i.e., benefit) while attempting to mitigate potential consequences. These studies expand on the shortcomings of previous work on rational choice theory, as past perspectives have been too general and assume most individuals hold a degree (albeit minimal) of rationality and are largely able to make the appropriate calculations of pros and cons based on their ability to rationalize (Bouffard, 2002; Nagin & Paternoster, 1993). Of primary importance is how these studies were able to expand past perspectives by incorporating situational factors, choice-structuring properties, and visceral states as independent measures of rational choice (i.e., utility, self-control, etc.). Because of this,

more recent studies have been able to adapt earlier criminological perspectives to the study of crimes such as terrorism.

Applications of Rational Choice Theory to Terrorism

Prior application of the rational choice perspective to terrorism has focused on the relation between policy intervention and specific terrorist acts, such as suicide bombings, hijackings, and skyjackings. Dugan, LaFree, and Piquero (2005a), for example, tested a rational choice model examining trends in aerial hijacking worldwide from 1931 to 2003. Using data obtained from the Federal Aviation Administration and the RAND corporation, Dugan et al. (2005a) applied a continuous-time survival analysis to estimate the impact of major counter-hijacking interventions on the hazard of successful hijackings. In accordance with rational choice theory, they hypothesized that decreased probability of success, decreased perceived benefits, and increased perceived costs would each be associated with a reduction in the frequency of aerial hijackings (Dugan et al., 2005a). Consistent with these expectations, the implementation of more aggressive screening policy was associated with fewer aerial hijackings.

In a similar fashion, Tosini (2010) applied a rational choice framework to the study of suicide bombings while reconceptualizing measures for the calculation of costs and benefits in order to better understand the rationality of suicide attackers. Tosini (2010) identified an estimated 2,630 suicide attacks between November 1982 and September 2009 that were responsible for more than 26,000 deaths. Tosini's (2010) measures drew from 'situational mechanisms' that identified terrorists' "constraints and opportunities within a cultural, political, economic, and military context" that culminated with terrorist activity (p. 398). Furthermore, Tosini (2010) focused on calculated (i.e., rationalized), passionate (i.e., emotional), and pious

(i.e., morality) extremism committed by Jihadist terrorists. His work did not seek to inform future counter-terrorism policy but rather offer an explanation for suicide attacks committed by terrorists (Tosini, 2010). In particular, Tosini (2010) proposed that participation in suicide attack campaigns are motived by an array of emotions and their unconditional adhesion to "superior normative principles requiring an ultimate sacrifice and irrespective of other costs" (p.412)—a perspective that dovetails with conceptualizations of rational choice advanced by Dugan and colleagues(2005b). Indeed, Caplan (2006) concluded "an intermediate position on rationality of terrorism is appropriate," reinforcing the current study's propositions that ring-wing terrorists make a rational decision (although bounded) to act based on perceived threats to their endangered supremacy.

Moreover, Anderton and Carter (2005) applied rational choice theory to the study of terrorism by testing a benevolence approach as opposed to one of deterrence. To do so, these researchers used the Slutsky equation, "which rigorously analyzes the quantity response in one activity to a price change in another" (p.281). The purpose of their study was to explain how one activity can influence change in another activity (Anderton & Carter, 2005). Through comparison of deterrence and benevolence policies, they found that benevolence did not have a general terrorism-reducing effect. In doing so, they validated past claims that without specificity, rational choice models will fail to explain crime. Furthermore, their work strongly supports the testing of intervention components in relation to increases or decreases in terrorist activity (Anderton & Carter, 2005).

Politics, Media, and Domestic Terrorism in the United States

The relationship between the office of the presidency is complex and sometimes antagonistic. All news media outlets have a core audience to which they are responsible for catering information. Further, repeated studies have demonstrated how news sources exhibit bias through the use of media frames (Hamborg, Meuschke, & Gipp, 2018; Kim, 2019). Researchers have long argued how terrorist organizations may benefit from receiving coverage of their successful attacks, particularly in terms of recruitment (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2006; Nacos, 2003). When an attack receives news coverage, those responsible then have a platform to raise awareness for their cause or group and recruit others in the process. Indeed, previous research has found that a significant predictor of newsworthiness is higher casualties (Taylor, 2019). Furthermore, the public relies heavily on news outlets for information about terrorism, resulting in an almost educational reaction where Americans learn about the world in real-time (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2006). Unfortunately, these outlets are quick to report attacks with arguably little filter that might separate fact from fiction. These media frames can be applied to any subject matter and often target the office of the presidency. Because the president can inform the public quickly via news or social media and holds such a position of power, the language one uses surrounding any attack or topic of domestic terrorism is scrutinized extensively. However, news and media outlets utilize their platforms to quickly disseminate information and further the cyclical relationship between the office of the presidency, the media, and the state of domestic terrorism. Because presidents are figures of authority, the rhetoric used to describe persons or events often shapes the popular understanding and situates the subject in a larger moral framework (Pilecki et al., 2014).

In Piazza's (2020) study on domestic terrorism and hate speech by politicians, for example, he identified at least 15 countries since 2000 where politician hate speech targeting "ethnic, racial, social, or religious minorities," as well as some rival political groups, had been a factor in domestic terrorism. In his analysis of previous work Piazza (2020) found no empirical research where the link was fully determined, despite a 2019 study conducted by Chyzh et al. which found that hateful Twitter speech by U.S. politicians predicted increases in a range of anti-minority incidents both violent and non-violent across the U.S. Additionally, a number of previous studies have established a link between hate speech made by politicians and increases in minority targeted crimes, racism, and discrimination (Piazza, 2016, 2020; Schaffner, 2018). Multiple studies have linked racially charged or prejudiced statements made by President Trump to increases in hate crimes and non-violent attacks (Müller & Schwarz, 2018; Piazza, 2020; Schaffner, 2018). Muller and Schwarz (2018), for example, found that President Trump's tweets regarding Muslims and Islam were highly correlated with subsequent anti-Muslim hate crimes in Germany when studying the relationship between social media and hate crimes.

Piazza (2020) cites political polarization as a leading factor in conditions that increase the propensities for domestic terrorism when the rhetoric or language used directly condemns a particular group. With that, he acknowledges the effect on both out- and in-group members, noting that "hate speech facilities the dehumanization of out-group members which makes it easier for militants to commit acts of political violence against them" while such speech or attitudes encourage "greater unity and conformity" among in-group members (p. 436). Additionally, political polarization has been linked to terrorism in countries during periods marked by higher levels of political polarization and has been weakly associated with right-wing militia activity in the U.S. (Piazza, 2020). In line with previous research, Piazza (2020) found

that hate speech by politicians is a statistically significant driver of domestic terrorism, an effect that is largely mediated through political polarization.

During the span of the past two presidencies, the division or 'political polarization' expressed by U.S leaders has particularly evinced the potential duality of right-wing extremism motivations during the past decade. That being one president crudely symbolizing the perceived threat to the far-right's way of life and the other a national safeguard. Barack Obama's campaign for presidency may have awoken a scheme of right-wing extremists feeling their country had been on a steady decline. Obama's official election into office ensured his status as the leader of the United States, and indeed, as a Black man. While in office, the Obama administration passed the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and brokered the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or the 'Iran Nuclear Deal', both receiving significant attention from the media and right-wing extremists. In addition to this, President Obama spoke on the killings of several black men and condemned far-right ideologies. In turn, this added to any existing racial tensions and resentment toward President Obama. The media's relationship with politics has been growing, and as a result. Donald Trump's presidency received significant media coverage. Many of President Trump's statements regarding groups like the Proud Boys or Black Lives Matter have furthered existing rifts in both the political spectrum and the nation's communities, promoting a 'in-group' versus 'out-group' perspective and advancing political polarization. The contrast in sentiments held by the last two U.S. presidents provides an interesting look into how the office of the presidency can influence terrorism.

The current study, detailed in the next section, seeks to further explore the relationship between the office of the presidency and right-wing extremism in the United States by comparing the impact of the Obama and Trump presidencies on terrorist attacks committed by

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right-wing extremists. Building from previous research, there is reason to further analyze the extent to which the U.S presidency may be related to trends in domestic terrorism associated with right-wing extremists. Utilizing a rational choice theory, I propose that under Obama's presidency, right-wing extremists made a rational decision to commit an act of terror because of their racial resentment for the president. In contrast, during the Trump presidency right-wing extremists, may have rationally committed acts of terror if they felt their actions were either condoned or encouraged. To further explore this relationship, a time series analysis will be applied in the form of Autoregressive Integrated Moving Average (ARIMA) models to monthly aggregates of terrorist attacks committed by right-wing extremists from June 3, 2006 through January 7, 2018, with a total of 141 identified incidents.

CHAPTER III

CURRENT STUDY

As noted in the literature review, the threat of domestic terrorism in the United States is largely defined by right-wing extremism. Because of this, the purpose of this study is to further examine the relationship between the office of the presidency and right-wing extremism in the United States. Specifically, this study compares right-wing domestic terrorism trends during the presidencies of Barack Obama and Donald Trump. Though there is a body of literature dedicated to the impact of the Obama presidency on international terrorism, little empirical research exists on the impact of the Obama presidency on domestic terrorism (Pilecki et al., 2014). Despite scarce empirical research on the Obama presidency and domestic terrorism, some research alludes to the overarching importance that those in office refrain from alienation and discrimination (Cameron, 2002). In contrast, there is a growing body of research that has examined the relation between the Trump presidency and domestic terrorism—specifically right-wing domestic terrorism (Fullerton, 2017; Piazza, 2020; Rubin, 2020). Research on hate speech by politicians suggests there is a significant relationship between those who hold office and hate crime trends highlighting the aforementioned importance of those holding office as the President of the United States (Müller & Schwarz, 2017; Piazza, 2020; Schaffner, 2018). Although most studies have focused solely on the Trump presidency, this study uses a rational choice framework to examine domestic terrorism trends between the two presidencies to better understand the relation between the office of the presidency and right-wing extremism.

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CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY

Based on previous research, there is reason to analyze the extent to which the U.S

presidency may be related to trends in domestic terrorism associated with right-wing extremists.

These gaps in knowledge prompted the primary research question: What is the relationship

between the office of the presidency and right-wing extremism in the United States? To explore

this relationship, a time-series analysis is applied in the form of Autoregressive Integrated

Moving Average (ARIMA) models to monthly aggregates of terrorist attacks committed by

right-wing extremists from 2006 through 2018.

Data and Sample

Data used in this study are obtained from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), an

open-source database containing information for more than 190,000 incidents of terrorism from

1970 through 2018 created by researchers Erin Miller, Gary LaFree, and Laura Dugan (START,

2021). The GTD is maintained by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and

Response to Terrorism (START). This consortium is headed by Dr. Gary LaFree and supported

by a team of terrorism experts, university administrators, scholars, and students at the University

of Maryland (START, 2021). Furthermore, START works with leading social scientists at over

four dozen other academic and research institutions, including the Center for Terrorism and

Security Studies, the United Nations Department of Safety and Security, in the scientific study of

"causes and human consequences of terrorism in the United States and around the world" (START, 2021). START's efforts are further supported by the U.S Department of Homeland Security's Science and Technology Directorate, along with funding from a variety of academic institutions, federal agencies, and private foundations (START, 2021). All incidents recorded in the GTD meet the criteria of a terrorist attack, which includes "the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political-economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation" (START, 2021). Further, all recorded incidents include such information as the date, location, target type, weapons used, number of casualties, perpetrator, and motivation of the attack (START, 2021).

The current study maintains a specific interest in the impact of the Obama and Trump presidencies on right-wing extremism in the United States. It is possible, however, that the front-runner status of either candidate during their respective primaries may have influenced right-wing extremists long before they were inaugurated. After securing enough delegates to clinch the nominations of their respective parties, each candidate and his platform would have benefited from increased media visibility. Barack Obama, for example, secured enough delegates to clinch the Democratic Party nomination on June 3, 2008. In accordance with rational choice theory, right-wing extremism may have increased in response, as individual actors perceived the potential election of a Black president as a threat to white supremacy. To account for this possibility, as well as trends in right-wing extremism that preceded the Obama candidacy, this study examined all incidents of terrorism committed by right-wing extremists in the United States between June 3, 2006 and December 31, 2018—the last date for which terrorism information is available in the GTD. To achieve this, information for all incidents of domestic terrorism occurring between these dates was closely inspected, including the perpetrator

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(individual and/or group), target, and motivation for the attack. This resulted in the identification of 141 terrorist attacks committed by right-wing extremists. For the purposes of the analysis described below, these incidents were aggregated into monthly counts, resulting in a final sample of 151 monthly observations.

Dependent Variable

The primary question of this study is, "What is the relationship between the office of the presidency and right-wing extremism in the United States?" For the purposes of this study, right-wing extremism is conceptualized as an attempted or successful symbolic attack motivated by right-wing ideology. As described by Chermak and Gruenewald (2015), this ideology encompasses white supremacy, anti-Semitism, anti-immigration, anti-government, and anti-abortion tendencies. Individuals who commit such attacks are often 'fiercely nationalistic,' believing there is a threat to national sovereignty and/or their personal liberty and way of life are under attack by ethnic, racial, or religious groups (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2015). Examples of right-wing extremist groups include the Patriot Front, United Aryan Empire, Sovereign Citizens, and Minutemen American Defense.

In accordance with this conceptualization, right-wing extremism is operationalized through monthly counts of attempted or successful symbolic terrorist attacks motivated by right-wing ideology in the United States between June 3, 2006 and December 31, 2018. As aggregate monthly counts, the dependent variable represents a ratio level of measurement because it is mutually exclusive, exhaustive, can be ranked in a logical order, exhibits equal distance between each value, and maintains a true zero.

Independent Variables

For the purposes of this study, the Obama presidency is conceptualized as the duration during which Barack Obama transitioned from the Democratic party nominee to the end of his second term in office. In comparison, the Trump presidency is conceptualized as the duration during which Donald Trump transitioned from Republican party nominee to the end of his second year as president. As previously noted, the truncated nature of the Trump presidency is a product of a limitation in the GTD, which has been updated through December 31, 2018. This study uses multiple intervention components associated with the candidacies and presidencies of Barack Obama and Donald Trump to test the effects of each on right-wing extremism. Each intervention component was selected based on the expectation that it should elicit a response from right-wing extremists in the form of terrorist attacks.

Specific to Barack Obama, the following events were selected as intervention components: (1) Candidate Barack Obama secures enough delegates to clinch the Democratic Party nomination (June 3, 2008), (2) August 27, 2008 Candidate Barack Obama is formally named the Democratic Party nominee, (3) November 4, 2008 Barack Obama is elected president, (4) January 20, 2009 Barack Obama is inaugurated as the 44th president of the United States, (5) November 6, 2012 Barack Obama is re-elected as U.S. president, and (6) Barack Obama is re-inaugurated as the 44th president, beginning his second term as president of the United States. Specific to Donald Trump, the following events were chosen as intervention components: (1) May 26, 2016 candidate Donald Trump secures enough delegates to clinch the Republican Party nomination, (2) July 19, 2016 candidate Donald Trump is formally named Republican Party nominee, (3) November 11, 2016 Donald Trump is officially elected president, and (4) January 20, 2017 Donald Trump is inaugurated as the 45th president of the United States. In accordance

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with assumptions of interrupted time-series analysis described below, these measures are operationalized as dichotomous intervention components (0 = pre-intervention, 1 = post-intervention). As such, the intervention components represent a nominal level of measurement because each is mutually exclusive and exhaustive.

Analytic Strategy

This study adopts a quasi-experimental, longitudinal design. Specifically, interrupted time-series analyses are used to assess the impact of the Obama and Trump presidencies on right-wing terrorism across time. Time-series designs are frequently adopted in longitudinal studies of crime outcomes, including terrorism (Carson, 2014; Jacobs & Carmichael, 2002), and provide an effective method of determining the impact of a discrete intervention on a social process (Dugan, n.d.; McDowall, 1980). Interrupted time-series analysis, in particular, allows researchers to discern the effect of social policy and legislation on crime through comparison of observations (e.g., terrorist attacks) that precede and follow the introduction of an intervention (Dugan, 2009; McDowall, 1980). This analytical approach is desirable because it is capable of modeling and controlling for serial dependence that frequently manifests in criminal justice research (Dugan, 2009; McDowall, 1980).

As described by McDowall et al. (1980), trend, seasonality, and random error represent the three sources of noise that may obscure the effect of an intervention. This study utilizes Autoregressive Integrated Moving Average (ARIMA) models, which control for all three sources of noise (Dugan, n.d.; McDowall, 1980). An ARIMA model includes three structural parameters (p, d, q) that describe the relationships between random shocks and the time series (McDowall, 1980). A random shock is a unit with a zero mean and constant variance randomly drawn from a

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time-series distribution. The structural parameters of an ARIMA model (p, d, q) filter random shocks into observations (McDowall, 1980).

Structural parameter p represents the number of autoregressive processes in the model. Autoregression occurs when the current time series observation (Yt) is comprised of a part of the previous observation (Yt-1) and a random shock (a_t) (Dugan, n.d.). This ARIMA process (1,0,0) is denoted in Equation 1.

$$Y_t = \phi_1 Y_{t-1} + a_t \qquad\qquad (1)$$

Structural parameter q describes the total moving average structures in an ARIMA model (Dugan, n.d.). Moving average is a common form of serial dependency and occurs when the current observation (Y_t) is a product of the current random shock (a_t) and portions of the preceding random shock (a_{t-1}) (Dugan, n.d.). This ARIMA (0,0,1) process is denoted in Equation 2 and is distinguishable because of a significant correlation in the autocorrelation in the first lag (Dugan, n.d.; McDowall, 1980).

$$Y_t = a_t - \theta_1 a_{t-1} \qquad\qquad (2)$$

Structural parameter d is an indicator that the time series model has been differenced. Differencing is a solution to a unit root, which is common when a series is non-stationary. This corrective action amounts to "subtracting the first observation in the series from the second, the second from the third, and so on" (McDowall, 1980, p. 16). Random walk with drift or trend are examples of non-stationary processes (McDowall, 1980). In cases where a trend is present, the time series will move either upward or downward. In cases of drift, however, the time series will shift upward then downward, or downward then upward. In either case, integrated processes occur when random shocks are integrated, resulting in time series observations (Y_t) that are comprised of all preceding random shocks ($Y_{t-1} + a_t$) (McDowall, 1980). If differencing is not

used to correct these non-stationary processes, changes in the series may be incorrectly attributed to the intervention component, resulting in Type 1 error (Dugan, n.d.). In the case of the present study, the augmented Dickey-Fuller test, which determines the presence of a unit root, will be applied to each series prior to assessing the impact of the intervention components. An ARIMA (0,1,0) process is demonstrated in Equation (3).

$$Y_t = Y_{t-1} + a_t \tag{3}$$

Finally, as explained by McDowall et al. (1980), seasonality represents a cyclical pattern in a time series. In relation to the study of terrorism, for example, terrorist attacks might be expected to consistently increase or decrease during specific months or seasons from year to year. Furthermore, because some months are longer or shorter than others, aggregation may impact seasonality (McDowall, 1980). Similar to an ARIMA (p,d,q) model, seasonal autoregressive and moving average structures are denoted by P and Q, while D denotes seasonal nonstationarity (e.g., annual drift or trending) that requires seasonal differencing (Dugan, n.d.; McDowall, 1980). For monthly data, the seasonal nonstationarity is denoted in Equation (4).

$$Y_t - Y_{t-12} = \theta_0 \tag{4}$$

If the current observation is dependent upon the corresponding observation from the preceding year, the model exhibits seasonal autoregression (Dugan, n.d.; McDowall, 1980). For monthly data, this process is described in Equation (5).

$$Y_t = \phi_{12} Y_{t-12} + a_t \tag{5}$$

Dependence between the current observation and the random shock from the preceding year is indicative of a seasonal moving average (Dugan, n.d.; McDowall, 1980). For monthly data, this process is described in Equation (6).

$$Y_t = a_t - \theta_{12} a_{t-12} \tag{6}$$

Prior to intervention analyses, the autocorrelation function (ACF) and partial autocorrelation function (PACF) of the series will be examined for evidence of the need to address monthly and seasonal autoregressive, integrated, and moving average processes. Once the appropriate model (p,d,q,P,D,Q) is identified.

Model Building

Examination of the 151 monthly counts of right-wing terrorist attacks revealed a mean of .841 (approximately 1) right-wing terrorist attacks per month during the observation period. There was, however, a high degree of skewness (2.02) and kurtosis (7.60) in the data. As such, a square root transformation of the dependent variable was performed. The transformed data were then subjected to the Augmented Dickey-Fuller test to determine if there was a unit root and, in turn, the need for differencing. Each critical value (1% = -3.493, 5% = -2.887, 10% = -2.577) was smaller in absolute magnitude in comparison to the test statistic (-7.458) and grew smaller in magnitude. Considered in tandem with the MacKinnon approximate p-value (0.0000), it was concluded that the series was stationary and did not require differencing.

A visual inspection of the autocorrelation function (ACF) and partial autocorrelation function (PACF) was then performed for evidence of autoregressive and moving average processes. A funneling effect was observed in the ACF and PACF functions, suggesting a first order autoregressive (AR) process. Further, the presence of a spike at the 12th lag of the PACF suggested a possible seasonal effect defined by a first order moving average process. In tandem, the nature of the ACF and PACF functions suggested prompted tentative identification of an ARIMA $(1,0,0)(0,0,1)_{12}$ model for the right-wing terrorist attack series. Model parameters were then estimated and the statistical significance of the AR1 and seasonal MA1validated the use of

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an ARIMA $(1,0,0)(0,0,1)_{12}$ model. Further examination of ACF and PACF residuals confirmed that the residuals were not different from white noise at a statistically significant level.

Hypotheses

As noted in the literature review, right-wing extremism is influenced by a variety of ideological motivations, including white supremacy and anti-government sentiments (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2015). Further, these groups and actors frequently exhibit nationalist tendencies and espouse violence in response to perceived threats posed by infringements on personal liberty, as well as ethnic, racial, and religious groups (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2015). Based on these belief systems, groups or individual actors may make a rational choice to commit an act of terrorism in response to a perceived threat (e.g., challenge to white supremacy, government infringement on personal liberty). Right-wing extremists maintaining white supremacist ideologies, for example, may have perceived the election and inauguration of Barack Obama, as well as his status as a viable presidential candidate, as a direct threat to the political dominance of Whites. Both his candidacy and election received significant coverage in the media (Boyd, 2008), which may, in turn, have mobilized right-wing extremists. In accordance with this perspective, it is expected that:

> H1: Candidate Obama securing of enough delegates to clinch the democratic party nomination will be positively related with violent acts of terrorism committed by right-wing extremists.

> H1B: Candidate Obama being formally named as the democratic party nominee will be positively related with violent acts of terrorism committed by right-wing extremists.

H1C: The election of Barak Obama to the presidency will be positively related with violent acts of terrorism committed by right-wing extremists.

H1D: President Obama's inauguration as the 44th president will be positively related with violent acts of terrorism committed by right-wing extremists.

In addition to his status as a Black man, several of President Obama's statements and actions may have been poorly received by right-wing extremists. The Affordable Care Act (ACA), for example, was a hallmark of the Obama administration and represented increased government involvement in the sphere of health insurance. The ACA was signed into law on March 23, 2010, and most of its major provisions were phased into practice by January 1, 2014. Despite its numerous benefits, the individual mandate of the ACA has remained a contested issue under the Trump administration (Barnes, Marimow, Goldstein, & Windfield-Cunningham, 2020). The ACA was also associated with increased premiums and deductibles, as well as a reduction in employer-sponsored insurance plans (Uberoi, Finegold, & Gee, 2016). President Obama also assumed a vocal, proactive position in response to the highly publicized killings of young black men, including Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, that brought increased attention to race-based disparities in the criminal justice system coupled with calls for reform (Joseph, 2016). President Obama advocated additional reforms following the mass shooting that occurred at Sandy Hook. Specifically, on January 16, 2013, President Obama announced a plan for reducing gun violence that included bans on 'assault weapons' and high-capacity magazines, as well as closing loopholes for background checks (Obama, 2013). Finally, the Obama administration brokered the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, commonly referred to as the Iran Nuclear Deal, which was designed to provide economic relief and support for nuclear power in Iran in exchange for the abandonment of its nuclear weapons program (Obama, 2015). Again,

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each of these events received significant attention from the media and may have represented perceived threats to the white supremacist, nationalistic, and anti-government ideologies of right-wing extremists (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2015). It is therefore hypothesized that:

H1E: President Obama's re-election will be positively related with violent acts of terrorism committed by right-wing extremists.

H1F: President Obama's re-inauguration as the 44th president will be positively related with violent acts of terrorism committed by right-wing extremists.

Within the context of rational choice, the candidacy and presidency of Donald Trump might also have influenced the frequency of violent terrorist attacks by right-wing extremists, but for reasons that stand in sharp contrast to those associated with Barack Obama. As a candidate, Trump espoused an 'America-First' approach to a number of global issues ranging from trade to climate change (Duzor, 2020). Rooted in nationalism, his policy proposals extended to immigration, which included the construction of a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border to prevent unauthorized crossings and increased deportations of undocumented persons of Central and South American origin (Trump, 2017). As president, Trump followed through with several of these campaign promises, including border wall construction, renegotiation of trade agreements, and use of tariffs on imports (Horsley, 2019). Furthermore, President Trump withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action brokered between the U.S. and Iran and implemented an immigration/travel ban from several Muslim-majority countries. Each of these decisions drew significant, albeit critical, coverage from the media. In particular, several mainstream media outlets labeled President Trump's platform and statements as 'racist' and supportive of white supremacy (Gabbatt, 2020). For example, in response to the murder of a counter-protestor by a white supremacist at a "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, North Carolina, President

Trump explicitly condemned white supremacy. He also stated that, among the protestors and counter-protestors, "You had some very bad people in that group, but you also had people that were very fine people, on both sides" (POLITCO, 2017) . Multiple media outlets declined to publicize the president's condemnation of white supremacists. Instead, these outlets framed an excerpt of the president's statement that there were "very fine people, on both sides" as an endorsement of white supremacists" (POLITCO, 2017).

Each of the aforementioned incidents garnered significant and sustained coverage within the media. In support of the findings of Piazza (2020) and Muller and Shwarz (2017), right-wing extremists may have perceived President Trump as sharing and endorsing their racist, anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, and anti-government ideologies. As a consequence, right-wing extremist groups and individual actors may have felt encouraged and empowered to engage in violent acts of terrorism more frequently. Consistent with this expectation, and the definition of right-wing extremism by Chermak and Gruenewald (2015), it is hypothesized that:

H2: Candidate Trump securing enough delegates to clinch the Republican Party nomination will be positively related with violent acts of terrorism committed by right-wing extremists.

H2B: Candidate Trump being formally named as the Republican Party nominee will be positively related with violent acts of terrorism committed by right-wing extremists.

H2C: The election of Donald Trump to the presidency will be positively related with violent acts of terrorism committed by right-wing extremists.

H2D: President Trump's inauguration as the 45th president will be positively related with violent acts of terrorism committed by right-wing extremists.

CHAPTER V

RESULTS

Once model parameters for the ARIMA model were estimated, the effects of each of the intervention components could then be measured. This process is demonstrated in Equation (7), whereby an intervention component is added to a specified noise model (McDowall, 1980). In this case, N_t represents the ARIMA $(p,d,q)(P,D,Q)_s$ model, and $f(I_t)$ is the intervention component.

$$Y_t = f(I_t) + N_t \qquad\qquad (7)$$

As described by Dugan (2009) and McDowall (1980), three distinct patterns can be expected when assessing the impact of an intervention: abrupt and temporary, gradual and permanent, or abrupt and permanent. A fourth pattern, gradual and temporary, is rarely observed in research and is extremely difficult to model (Dugan, 2009; McDowall, 1980). Dugan (2009) and McDowall (1980) suggest that researchers should first model abrupt, temporary effects because the significance and magnitude of the slope maintain implications for the likelihood of permanent effects. In particular, if while modeling abrupt and temporary effects, the slope is near one and statistically significant, then the effects are more likely to be permanent. Equation (8) describes an abrupt, temporary effect whereby δ represents the slope and ω represents the coefficient of change (McDowall, 1980). The term P_t represents the intervention component as a pulse function in which P_t is equal to one at the moment of intervention but zero both before and after.

$$Y_t = \delta Y_{t-1} + \omega P_t + N \qquad\qquad (8)$$

If the slope of intervention is near one and statistically significant, Dugan (2009) and McDowall (1980) suggest that gradual, permanent effects should then be modeled. This effect, which is described in Equation (9), is the most common in the social sciences and involves replacing the pulse function (ωP_t) with a step function (ωI_t).

$$Y_t = \delta Y_{t-1} + \omega I_t + N \qquad\qquad (9)$$

If while modeling gradual and permanent effects the slope is statistically non-significant, this may suggest that the effect is abrupt and permanent. This effect is described in Equation (10) and involves removing the slope component of the equation for gradual, permanent effects.

$$Y_t = \omega I_t + N \qquad\qquad (10)$$

Hypothesis 1 expressed the expectation that candidate Obama securing of enough delegates to clinch the democratic party nomination would be positively related with violent acts of terrorism committed by right-wing extremists. Following the recommendations of McDowall (1980), abrupt and temporary effects of Candidate Obama clinching enough delegates to secure the Democratic nomination were the first to be modeled. The slope at the first lag was both near one *($\delta = .566$)* and statistically significant *($p = .000$)*, suggesting an increased likelihood that the influence of the intervention was permanent (see Table 1). Gradual permanent effects were then modeled. The resulting slope was both near one ($\delta = .552$) and statistically significant *($p = 0.000$)*. However, the intervention component was not statistically significant *($p = .382$)*. This finding indicated that Candidate Obama securing of enough delegates had no influence on right-wing domestic terrorism, prompting rejection of Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 1B expressed the expectation that Candidate Obama being formally named the democratic party nominee would be positively related with violent acts of terrorism

committed by right-wing extremists. Following the recommendations of McDowall (1980), abrupt and temporary effects of Candidate Obama being formally named the democratic nominee were the first to be modeled. The slope at the first lag was near one ($\delta = .559$) and statistically significant ($p = .000$), suggesting an increased likelihood that the influence of the intervention was permanent. Gradual permanent effects were then modeled, resulting in a slope near one ($\delta = .548$) and statistically significant ($p = .000$). However, the intervention component was not statistically significant ($p = .277$). This finding indicated that Candidate Obama being formally named the democratic nominee had no influence on right-wing domestic terrorism, prompting rejection of Hypothesis 1B.

Hypothesis 1C expressed the expectation that the election of Barack Obama to the presidency would be positively related with violent acts of terrorism committed by right-wing extremists. Following the recommendations of McDowall (1980), abrupt and temporary effects of the election of Obama into the office of the presidency were first to be modeled. Modeling of abrupt temporary effects revealed the slope at the first lag was both near one ($\delta = .544$) and statistically significant ($p = .000$), suggesting an increased likelihood that the influence of the intervention was permanent. Gradual permanent effects were then modeled. The resulting slope was both near one ($\delta = .534$) and statistically significant ($p = .000$). However, the intervention component was not statistically significant, indicating Obama's election to the office of the presidency had no effect on right-wing domestic terrorism. This finding prompted the rejection of Hypothesis 1C.

Hypothesis 1D expressed the expectation that President Obama's inauguration as the 44th president would be positively related with violent acts of terrorism committed by right-wing extremists. Following the recommendations of McDowall (1980), abrupt and temporary effects

of President Obama's inauguration were first to be modeled. The slope at the first lag was both near one ($\delta = .577$) and statistically significant ($p = .000$), suggesting an increased likelihood that the influence of the intervention was permanent. Gradual permanent effects were then modeled. The resulting slope was near one ($\delta = .542$) and statistically significant ($p = .000$). However, the intervention component was not statistically significant ($p = .242$), suggesting Obama's inauguration into the office of the presidency had no influence on right-wing domestic terrorism. Thus, Hypothesis 1D was rejected.

Hypothesis 1E expressed the expectation that President Obama's re-election would be positively related with violent acts of terrorism committed by right-wing extremists. Following the recommendations of McDowall (1980), abrupt and temporary effects of Obama's re-election were the first to be modeled. Modeling of abrupt temporary effects revealed the slope at the first lag to be both near one ($\delta = .569$) and statistically significant ($p = .000$), suggesting an increased likelihood that the influence of the intervention was permanent. Gradual permanent effects were then modeled. The resulting slope was near one ($\delta =.449$) and statistically significant ($p = .001$). The impact of the intervention component was also statistically significant ($p = .011$). This finding suggested that President Obama's re-election had a positive, statistically significant, gradual, and permanent influence on counts of right-wing domestic terrorism. This finding prompted acceptance of Hypothesis 1E.

Hypothesis 1F expressed the expectation that President Obama's re-inauguration as the 44th president would be positively related with violent acts of terrorism committed by right-wing extremists. Following the recommendations of McDowall (1980), abrupt and temporary effects of President Obama's re-inauguration were the first to be modeled. The slope at the first lag was both near one ($\delta = .555$) and statistically significant ($p = .000$), suggesting an increased

likelihood that the influence of the intervention was permanent. Gradual permanent effects were then modeled. The resulting slope was near one ($\delta = .438$) and statistically significant ($p = .001$). Additionally, the intervention component was statistically significant ($p = .006$) suggesting Obama's re-inauguration was associated with a positive, statistically significant, gradual, and permanent effect on counts of right-wing domestic terrorism. As a result, Hypothesis 1F was accepted.

Hypothesis 2 expressed the expectation that Candidate Trump's securing of enough delegates to clinch the Republican Party nomination would be positively related with violent acts of terrorism committed by right-wing extremists. Following the recommendations of McDowall (1980), abrupt and temporary effects of Candidate Trump's securing of enough delegates to clinch the Republican Party were the first to be modeled. The slope at the first lag was both near one ($\delta = .562$) and statistically significant ($p = .000$), suggesting an increased likelihood that the influence of the intervention was permanent. Gradual permanent effects were then modeled. The resulting slope was near one ($\delta = .356$) and statistically significant ($p = .050$). The intervention component was statistically significant ($p = .004$), suggesting Trump's clinching of enough delegates to secure the nomination had a positive, statistically significant, and gradual permanent effect on counts of right-wing domestic terrorism. This finding prompted acceptance of Hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 2B expressed the expectation that Candidate Trump being formally named as the Republican Party nominee would be positively related with violent acts of terrorism committed by right-wing extremists. Following the recommendations of McDowall (1980), abrupt and temporary effects of Trump being formally named as the Republican Party was the first to be modeled. The slope at the first lag was both near one ($\delta = .573$) and statistically

significant ($p = .000$), suggesting an increased likelihood that the influence of the intervention was permanent. Gradual permanent effects were then modeled. The resulting slope was small ($\delta = -.057$) and not statistically significant ($p = .807$), indicating the need to test for abrupt, permanent effects. Subsequent modeling indicated that Candidate Trump's formal nomination as the Republican presidential candidate had an abrupt, permanent, positive, and statistically significant impact on counts of right-wing extremism ($p = .000$). This finding prompted acceptance of Hypothesis 2B.

Hypothesis 2C expressed the expectation that the election of Donald Trump to the presidency would be positively related with violent acts of terrorism committed by right-wing extremists. Following the recommendations of McDowall (1980), abrupt and temporary effects of Trump's election as the president of the United States were the first to be modeled. The slope at the first lag was both near one ($\delta = .575$) and statistically significant ($p = .000$), suggesting an increased likelihood that the influence of the intervention was permanent. Gradual permanent effects were then modeled. The resulting slope was small ($\delta = .263$) and statistically non-significant ($p = .218$), indicating the need to test for abrupt, permanent effects. Subsequent modeling indicated that Trump's election as the 45th president had an abrupt, permanent, positive, and statistically significant impact on counts of right-wing extremism ($p = .000$). This finding prompted acceptance of Hypothesis 2C.

Hypothesis 2D expressed President Trump's inauguration as the 45th president would be positively related with violent acts of terrorism committed by right-wing extremists. Following the recommendations of McDowall (1980), abrupt and temporary effects of President Trump's inauguration into the office of the presidency were the first to be modeled. The slope at the first lag was both near one ($\delta = .569$) and statistically significant ($p = .000$), suggesting an increased

likelihood that the influence of the intervention was permanent. Gradual permanent effects were then modeled. The resulting slope was small ($\delta = -.108$) and statistically non-significant ($p = .582$), indicating the need to test for abrupt, permanent effects. Subsequent modeling indicated that Trump's inauguration as the 45th president had an abrupt, permanent, positive, and statistically significant impact on counts of right-wing extremism ($p = .000$). This finding prompted acceptance of Hypothesis 2D.

Table 1.1 Time-Series Analysis of the Impact of the Presidency on Right-wing Extremism

Intervention	Effect	ω	SE	z
Obama Term 1				
Delegates Clinched	Abrupt, Temporary	-.363	1.430	-0.25
	Gradual, Permanent	.132	.151	0.87
Formal Nomination	Abrupt, Temporary	-.393	2.438	-0.16
	Gradual, Permanent	.162	.149	1.09
Election	Abrupt, Temporary	1.067	1.998	0.53
	Gradual, Permanent	.177	.152	1.17
Inauguration	Abrupt, Temporary	-.496	3.106	-0.16
	Gradual, Permanent	.157	.140	1.12
Obama Term 2				
Election	Abrupt, Temporary	-.239	2.044	-0.12
	Gradual, Permanent	.319*	.126	2.54
Inauguration	Abrupt, Temporary	-.548	4.891	-0.11
	Gradual, Permanent	.348**	.127	2.73
Trump Term 1				
Delegates Clinched	Abrupt, Temporary	.493	1.219	0.40
	Gradual, Permanent	.540**	1.885	2.86
Formal Nomination	Abrupt, Temporary	.661	2.050	0.32
	Abrupt, Permanent	.871***	.203	4.29
Election	Abrupt, Temporary	.509	2.137	0.24
	Abrupt, Permanent	.916***	.208	4.39
Inauguration	Abrupt, Temporary	1.033	1.195	0.86
	Abrupt, Permanent	.908***	.218	4.16

***significant at p< .001   **significant at p< .01   *significant at p< .05

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION

Throughout the history of right-wing extremism, racism and anti-establishment sentiments have been cited as ideological cornerstones and, at times, motivation to act (Ferguson, Page, Rothschild, Chang, & Chen, 2020; Salmela & von Scheve, 2017). Beginning in the Reconstruction era, the KKK felt the federal government was depriving states of their right to govern in regard to maintaining slavery in the South (Alexander, 2020). Timothy McVeigh expressed that the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah federal building was retribution for the federal government's sieges at Ruby Ridge in 1992 and Waco in 1993 (Pruitt, 2018). The increased activity among right-wing extremist groups, both in terms of recruiting and attacks, evinces the need for additional study of this movement (Peter Simi, Windisch, & Sporer, 2016). Moreover, the work of Piazza (2020) and others (Berlet & Sunshine, 2019; Müller & Schwarz, 2017) suggest that research should further explore the impact of political leaders, particularly the office of the presidency, on right-wing domestic terrorism in the United States. This thesis represents an effort to undertake such exploration.

Though Piazza (2020) was unable to fully establish a direct link between hate speech by politicians and domestic terrorist attacks, his work suggested that political polarization fosters an in-group mentality that leads to the discrimination of out-group members. In Piazza's (2020) findings, he concluded that hate speech by politicians was a statistically significant driver of domestic terrorism, an effect that was largely mediated through political polarization.

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Furthermore, Chyzh, Nieman, and Webb (2019) found that in the U.S., politicians' hate speech on Twitter predicted increases in a range of anti-minority incidents, both violent and non-violent. Several studies have specifically analyzed racially charged or prejudiced Tweets made by Donald Trump during his presidency in relation to minority-targeted crimes, but there is a lack of similar studies applied to Barack Obama (Crandall, Miller, & White, 2018; Müller & Schwarz, 2018; Piazza, 2016, 2020; Schaffner, 2018). Simi (2010) argued that the Obama administration was the 'tipping point' that mobilized right-wing recruitment efforts in the U.S. Specifically, he argued that Obama's candidacy for presidency posed a threat to white supremacy by way of his racial and ethnic heritage.

In view of this assertion, each hypothesis spanning from candidate Barack Obama's securing enough delegates to clinch the Democratic Party nomination (H1) through his inauguration as the 44th president (H1D), was expected to have a positive influence on right-wing domestic terrorism. If, as asserted by Simi (2010), Obama's race and status in a position of power may have been perceived as a threat to white supremacy, then right-wing extremists would be expected to make a rational choice to increase the frequency of their attacks in response to this challenge. The results of ARIMA analyses, however, offered no support for these hypotheses. These findings suggest that right-wing extremists' reasoning for increased activity is likely more complex than issues related to racism and white supremacy alone.

Comparatively, hypothesis H1E and H1F expressed the expectation that President Obama's re-election would also be associated with an increase in right-wing extremism, but for reasons beyond the overly simplistic explanation of race. Indeed, the literature points to an increase in populist and anti-establishment activity associated with the right-wing in response to a number of factors that occurred during the Obama administration (Berlet & Sunshine, 2019).

The failure of the federal government to hold Wall Street accountable for the Great Recession, coupled with a slow economic recovery, may have signaled to some the Obama administration's protection of the wealthy and the failure of the federal government to help the working class—millions of whom had lost their homes and livelihoods (MacAskill, 2009).

Further, President Obama signed the Affordable Care Act (ACA) into law, renewed major provisions of the Patriot Act, and brokered the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Each of these initiatives was poorly received by the far right and may well have influenced activity by right-wing extremists. Although the ACA was proposed to expand the number of U.S. citizens' access to comprehensive healthcare, it also held an individual mandate that all Americans were required to have health insurance or pay a fine. To many, this signaled an extension of government oversight into the sphere of health care that bordered on socialism (Thompson, 2015). Given the historical significance of the linkage between perceived government overreach and anti-government sentiments, this may have elicited a rational response from right-wing extremists. Certain consequences of the ACA may have exacerbated such sentiments. In particular, despite promises to the contrary, millions of Americans lost their insurance plans. Further, between 2011 and 2016, deductibles, co-payments, and out-of-pocket maximums grew significantly faster than wages for group market participants (Hamel, Firth, Levitt, Claxton, & Brodie, 2016).

Moreover, conservatives criticized the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, arguing that it undermined the security of the U.S. while promoting and legitimizing Iran's nuclear capability (Cohen, 2012). The Obama administration's response to the attack on U.S. personnel in Benghazi on 9/11/12, role in the Arab Spring from 2010 to 2012, and extension of key provisions of the Patriot Act that allowed for the violation of U.S. citizens' privacy rights might also have

served as individual motivations for increased activity by right-wing extremists. These may, in turn, have culminated with a gradual, permanent increase in the frequency of attacks associated with President Obama's re-election and re-inauguration. Indeed, each event received sustained media coverage, as well as traction on social media platforms.

In their totality, the findings as they relate to the Obama administration suggest that 'white supremacy' is too simplistic to explain the timing of the increase in the frequency of attacks by right-wing extremists. If racism was the sole determinant of increases in activity within the far right, then increases in the frequency of attacks should logically have been observed due to the intervention components associated with his first candidacy and election. Instead, the gradual and permanent increase in attacks by right-wing extremists that began with President Obama's re-election may be attributed to heightened anti-government beliefs as a result of actions taken by his administration during his first term. One should also be mindful that several comments made by President Obama, even prior to his first election, may have planted the seeds of anger and resentment toward the federal government. For example, when describing the impact of the loss of manufacturing jobs on working-class Whites in the Northeast and Midwest, Obama was quoted as saying, "They get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations" (Pilkington, 2008).

These comments were seized by Hillary Clinton, who described them as "demeaning," "elitist," and "out of touch" (Pilkington, 2008). It is possible that these and other statements created feelings of alienation and disenfranchisement among a demographic that had already pushed to the fringes of the economic system—creating a group of individuals primed for recruitment by the far right. The Obama administration's aforementioned activities may have

served to further cultivate discontent, even in liberal strongholds. Indeed, in addition to a rise in right-wing activity following President Obama's re-election in the Rust Belt (DHS, 2009; McQuarrie, 2017; SPLC, 2020), Donald Trump swept each of these states in his first presidential run.

Accordingly, public comments and Tweets made by Donald Trump, both as a candidate and president, likely energized certain right-wing extremist groups in addition to political conservatives. As indicated by the ARIMA models used in this study, each intervention component associated with the Trump candidacy and presidency was associated with a statistically significant increase in the frequency of attacks by right-wing extremists. Trump's attacks on the political establishment, as well as nationalistic approaches to trade, manufacturing, and immigration, provided absolution to a demographic increasingly abandoned by the Democratic party. In addition, they likely emboldened right-wing extremists. In this vein, the findings presented in this thesis are largely supportive of prior works that describe a connection between President Trump's comments and increases in minority-targeted crimes (Crandall et al., 2018; Müller & Schwarz, 2018; Piazza, 2016, 2020; Schaffner, 2018). Several of these comments were incendiary, such as broad claims about Mexican immigrants as "murderers" and "rapists," along with suggesting he would "be a little more violent" during a campaign rally (Cineas, 2021; Ha, 2016). Others were taken out of context and reframed by the media as supportive of white supremacist and anti-government groups, such as President Trump's statements concerning the Unite the Right protest in Charlottesville, Virginia. Furthermore, criticisms of Trump by the left and the media may have been interpreted by working class white males, a demographic at particular risk of radicalization, as attacks on their own status and beliefs. As this process intensified through Trump's campaign and presidency, so too did activity

by the right wing—possibly as a matter of defending themselves, their beliefs, and their president.

Although analyses cease at the end of 2018 due to data limitations associated with the GTD, recent events provide strong support for this assertion. On January 6th, 2021, President Donald Trump held a rally in front of "thousands of people" in Washington D.C. (Blake, 2021). This rally was a culminating event related to his assertions that the presidential election results were fraudulent—claims that were treated as credible by a number of prominent political leaders (Inskeep, 2021). In turn, this belief was internalized by a substantial number of conservatives and Trump supporters (Inskeep, 2021). Whether or not President Trump is *legally* responsible for the subsequent siege on the Capitol continues to be a subject of debate, despite his acquittal in the Senate. What transpired on U.S Capitol grounds that day does, however, suggest that the words of presidents matter—and can influence abrupt shifts in right-wing domestic terrorist activity.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of the presidency on right-wing

extremism in the U.S. The results of time-series analyses used in this study suggest that the

office of the presidency does influence the frequency of attacks by right-wing extremists. In this

vein, the methodology adopted by this thesis represents a substantive contribution to the

literature. This study does, however, exhibit several limitations that merit further discussion.

First, time-series analyses frequently experience a trade-off between statistical power and

stability (Dugan, 2009). This study is no exception. Terrorism is a statistically rare event, and

although the use of a smaller temporal unit (e.g., weeks) would increase statistical power, it

would also result in decreased model stability. Thus, the selection of months as the temporal unit

represents an imperfect but necessary approach. Relatedly, as noted by Dugan (2009), temporal

aggregation runs the risk of imposing false homogeneity across heterogenous events, while

masking the effects of intervention components, as well as context-specific rather than temporal

dependence. Further, this thesis likely experiences a 'binning effect' by aggregating all events in

the United States during the observation period, which may mask regional variation in right-wing

extremism. Because right-wing terrorist attacks are statistically rare, however, these

shortcomings are difficult to adequately address.

It should also be acknowledged that the intervention components adopted in this thesis

are quite broad in scope. As noted above, individual comments and actions by presidents and

other political leaders may influence extremist activity. Given the preliminary findings advanced by this study, future works are encouraged to explore this possibility more deeply. Finally, this study fails to incorporate potentially important controls. As noted in the review of the literature review, for example, media attention and social media traction associated with comments and actions by political leaders may exert their own unique influence on extremist activity. Future studies are therefore encouraged to control for such factors as the number of views, news stories, and amount of airtime devoted to contentious comments and actions of political leaders.

Despite these limitations, the findings presented here carry with them important implications, particularly in light of the increasing polarization of the two-party system in the U.S. Political leaders on the left and the right, as well as media pundits, must be more cognizant of the effects of their rhetoric and its ability to alienate individuals and mobilize both extremist groups and individuals. Their comments now spread across television and social media at the speed of thought, and though protected by the 1st Amendment, there must be some effort to rein in the rhetoric. Our nation's leaders must not condone or encourage violence in the name of any cause—left or right. President Biden has said as much, expressing his desire for unity across the political spectrum (Biden, 2021). It is imperative that the media and political leaders, particularly members of Congress, keep this message in mind. Second, and relatedly, in the wake of the rise in right-wing extremism, federal officials must take care to avoid heavy-handed responses that result in a backlash effect, whereby extremist groups benefit from increased sympathy and recruitment from the general population (Lafree, Dugan, & Korte, 2009). Given this implication, federal officials and media pundits must reflect on the failed federal sieges at Waco and Ruby Ridge and the subsequent increase in right-wing activity (Lind, 2016; Pruitt, 2018; Seegmiller, 2007; Simi et al., 2016).

Finally, efforts must be made by political leaders, media pundits, and researchers to avoid mischaracterizing movements within the far right. At present, several movements, including Boogaloo and the Proud Boys, are comprised of rather loose affiliations and chapters that frequently express an appreciable degree of variation in doctrine (Miller, 2020). Overgeneralizing may result in broad, one-size-fits-all responses that are unlikely to be effective in reducing recruitment and activity within these groups. Failure to abide by these recommendations risks deepening a divide to the point that it cannot be reconciled—and, in turn, the end of the American experiment.

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VITA

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