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Mark Potok

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Political Extremism and Domestic Terrorism in America

Mark Potok*

Well, thank you very much for coming. Thanks to Jeremy and Kristin for inviting me. I guess my job is to try and sketch out a little bit in a very few minutes what the movement looks like, the movement of the radical right in this country. Let me say by way of starters, we understand that 3,000 people died on 9/11. We understand that there are hundreds of people being killed in Paris and elsewhere, but the fact is more people have been killed in this country by Americans, mostly not Jihadists or Islamists of any stripe, since 9/11 by far than have been killed in Jihadists incidents. So, that's what I want to focus on. We have seen, just to say briefly, really a quite dramatic resurgence of radical right in this country, particularly in the last 7 or 8 years. It's been something to see. We did a report on lone wolf killers and the lone wolf phenomenon not long ago that's cited in some of the literature for this conference and what we found briefly was that these incidents were occurring on average over the last 6 years. In other words over most of Obama's administration, every 34 days, and that the vast majority of these attacks were carried out by lone wolves, single actors not helped by anyone at all.

We found 74 percent of the 63 incidents we looked at were carried out by lone wolves, and when you looked at other cases where there were just two people, typically it was a man and his girlfriend, a man and his son, two brothers, those kinds of things, it got to fully 90 percent. So, that is very much what we have been seeing in the last period of time. Just by way of remembering how important this material is, I mean let me just refer you to Charleston. I guess in today's world nine people isn't all that many, but it was a fairly incredible attack and by a person who was an ideologue absolutely; who wanted to start a race war. It is beyond me how the FBI chief could say it didn't look like a domestic terrorism

* The following is a transcription of the keynote address by Mark Potok, Senior Fellow at the Southern Poverty Law Center on November 20, 2015 on the campus of the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Florida. Only minor changes have been made to the content of the speech to improve readability.

to him. It was a case that seems perfectly obviously, in which a man absolutely driven, who may have been mentally ill in one way or another, but he was absolutely motivated by racist ideology and ideology that came really in effect straight from one of the groups we cover.

Let me mention briefly another plot just to get a sense of what is going on out there. Just a few months ago in August, a Klansman in New York State of all places, was convicted in a plot to build an x-ray weapon, a gigantic x-ray weapon. You know and if it sounds like it was something out of a Batman comic book, it really was except that this guy came perilously close to actually completing it. He was an industrial engineer at General Electric over in Schenectady, New York, and actually had quite a bit of technical know-how. He built a remote initiating device in order to turn this x-ray weapon on and completed it and tested it before he was arrested. The idea was that he was then going to get a giant x-ray, an industrial x-ray and put it in a panel truck and this truck would then be used to murder thousands of Muslims. The idea was to drive this panel truck up and park it alongside a mosque, the man gets out and walks, ten blocks down, checks himself into a hotel and presses the button. All the people in the mosque praying are irradiated, but they don't know what's going on because radiation sickness doesn't manifest itself instantly. The guy turns off the button after whatever it is, half an hour, twenty minutes, comes back gets in his panel truck and drives away, and that was the plot. He was found out because he was not terribly bright in other ways. He approached a couple of Jewish agencies asking for funding to attack the enemies of Israel. Of course the second he walked out of their offices, they were on the phone to the FBI. You know, this guy talked about this weapon as Hiroshima on a light switch. He talked about the victims he intended to produce as medical waste. So this kind of thing happens very, very frequently. We need only think back to McVeigh, as was already mentioned from this podium. So, my point is that the violence from the radical right and in particular, the racist radical right in this country certainly did not end with the civil rights movement. In fact, it has been climbing pretty dramatically as I said, especially in the last 6 or 7 years.

One of the things we do at the Southern Poverty Law Center is we count these crimes. It's really the only way, that we found anyway, the closest thing we can get to a real index into gauging the size of the movement. Obviously, it's an imperfect way to try and get a sense of the movement because it depends on how big each group is. Nevertheless, because it is almost impossible to count people in these groups, with very few exceptions, that's the technique we have been using for about 30 years now. And all that to say that we produce every year a list of these groups that are active in the prior calendar year and that we categorize as

either “patriot groups” meaning militias of the 1990’s returned again, or “hate groups.” Our definition of hate groups is groups that attack entire groups of people typically based on their class characteristics, typically immutable but not always immutable characteristics, sometimes it’s things like religion and so on.

Beginning around the year 2000, we began to see- you know, the militia movement had kind of risen and fallen in the 90’s like that, but as the 90’s progressed, the number of hate groups, the more hard-lined, you know, we hate you because you are black, because you are gay, because you are Jewish or whatever it may be, began to rise slightly. And that rise really started to go up fairly dramatically starting around the turn of the Millennium, around 2000. By our count there were 602 hate groups operating in the United States in 2000. By 2011, which is the recent peak, it has gone down a little bit since then, that number had reached 1,018 groups. Much more dramatically and important I think is the number of patriot groups. Let me stop and define what I mean by patriot groups. These are groups, the ideology differs from group to group to some extent, but basically all these groups share the idea that the Government, the Federal Government or a cabal within the Federal Government are involved in a plot. What is coming is: they are about at any moment to impose martial law in this country. That; probably with the aid of foreign troops like the UN blue helmets. That will be followed by a gun seizure. Everybody’s gun who is not on the side of the government, who is not an agent of the government. All who resist, all the real patriots who resist, the constitutionalists and so on, will be thrown into camps. Concentration camps that have been secretly built, or so they say, by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Which, while not very good with dealing with hurricanes is apparently very good at running concentration camps. The idea continues that ultimately what will happen next is that the United States will be forced into or led into a so-called one world government, a new world order. It will be this socialistic/fascistic government run by and for the elites of the world at the expense of all the rest of us. That is the basic idea behind these groups. There is certainly racism and anti-Semitism mixed in with the patriot movement but that really isn’t the dominant ideology.

So, all of that to say that these groups really- as I said earlier went up to about 860 groups in the 90’s. I think all of us remember these militias running around the country and then diminished for a variety of reasons and more or less went away under the two Bush administrations from 2000 to 2008. So, they were at very low levels for that whole period, 2000 to 2008 there were about 150 of the groups and then something happened. In 2008, there were 149 patriot groups in the United States, at least by our count. By 2012, the recent peak, that number had reached

1,360 groups. That's an 800 percent rise or thereabouts in 4 years. I will say that in the thirty years of counting these groups we have never seen a rise like that, it was absolutely spectacular. So, what's behind the rise in these groups? Well, there are some obvious things that happened in the fall of 2008 leading into 2009. The most obvious is that Obama was elected our first black president. That is I think, certainly the main driver of the growth of these groups although, other things happened at the same time. In particular, the sub-prime crisis and the kind of collapse of the economy. Although the economy is not always tied to the rise of the radical right, at least I don't think so; in this case it seemed clearly to be. It just added this kind of anger at the government in seeing bail outs of the bankers and auto companies and so on was infuriating to many people, not all of them on the far right, on the left as well. There was the tea party as well as occupy Wall Street and so on. There was all this kind of anger being accelerated by the economy.

But to return to Obama, let me say [that] it's not merely the man, Barack Obama and his wife and kids in the White House, it is what Obama represents that is really driving this movement. And what he represents is the demographic, the huge demographic change that is occurring in the United States as we speak. Probably most of you know that the Census Bureau has predicted that by 2043, in other words in fewer than about twenty to thirty years, whites or at least non-Hispanic whites will fall for the first time since the Colonial Era to less than fifty percent of the population. In other words, this country for the first time since the Colonial Era will become a minority-majority country. That is a huge transition. It is not merely the color of people's skin changing a little. It has all kinds of political implications; we see it in California, which made that transition in 2000. The politics of which, I think changed pretty obviously as a result. So, that's kind of the very biggest picture. What we've seen in the last two or three years is that these numbers fall off about 10-15% depending on what category we're looking at. We think that the reason for that . . . Well, really there are a number of reasons. One is that the social cost of being exposed as being a member of these groups has risen to the point where, well you think of something like Fruitland Park, Florida, where a couple of police department officials were alleged to have been Klansmen and it took a matter of two or three days before they were thrown out of the department if even that long. Steve Scalise, the man who was going to become Republican Whip at the beginning of last year, and all of a sudden it was released that ten years, twelve years earlier he had spoken to David Duke—you know, David Duke, the old Klan leader—nearly cost him that post. So what I'm saying is that's one reason we are seeing more and more people not participate in the sort of brick and mortar, on

the ground groups, not participate necessarily in meetings and so on, but more and more be essentially cyber advocates or in many cases terrorists.

Obviously the internet has been around in most people's lives since the mid-90's, but this is now 20 years later and I think that it is really true that especially for younger people the Internet and social media have really become the only place they get information. So, in any case, we're seeing many more of these people, unaffiliated people, on the Internet. To give a brief example: before Obama was elected there were about 140,000 registered members of "Storm Front," which is the largest white supremacist web forum in the world. It's run out of here, out of Florida, West Palm Beach, by a guy named Don Black who used to be the Alabama Klan leader. The leader of the Ku Klux Klan in Alabama, [he] moved down here and runs the site. That site now has over, well over, 300,000 registered users. By registered I mean that means they can comment, they get literally millions of views. But these are people who have actually signed up so they can participate in these forums.

Dylann Roof, to me is the perfect example of the phenomenon I'm talking about. Someone who, at least as far any of us know, never had any physical contact with any group or individual. He seems to have radicalized and wrote in his little manifesto, words to that effect, entirely by cruising the Internet in the wake of the Trayvon Martin case looking for information. He punched into Google "black on white crime" and discovered a particular webpage, the "Council of Conservative Citizens," and he became enraged that white people were being subjected to genocide and so on. You know that used to be thought of as very, very unlikely that somebody would be entirely radicalized by the Internet to the point of being able to be willing to carry out a massacre, as Roof did, in Charleston. But of course, you know first came Al-Qaeda, then came ISIS, and showed that actually it was possible to radicalize people through the Internet. Perhaps the one difference is that Dylann Roof was not kind of being led down the primrose path by anyone. In other words there wasn't anybody out at the Council of Conservative Citizens or some other group that was actually communicating with him. He was just reading the websites, occasionally posting under various neo-Nazi monikers on the Web, but really had no contact with the movement at all.

So, that's where we're at. I think there are two things—two major things—that come out of this, or are associated, with this rising radical right that we see. One, and I think in many ways you could argue most important, is the infection of the political mainstream with radical right ideology and a huge set of conspiracy theories. Just to give you a sense, there are all these theories that are believed, really, by tens, hundreds of thousands of people, in some cases millions. For instance the idea that "Agenda 21," which is a completely toothless United Nations

sustainability plan—kind of a “feel good plan” for how we ought to conserve our resources globally and so on in order not to deplete them and destroy the planet we live on. But you know in the hands of the John Birch Society, and quite a large number of American politicians, Agenda 21 has been turned into a secret conspiracy to impose socialism on the United States. As a matter of fact, the national Republican Party in January of 2012, adopted a plank describing Agenda 21 as a Socialist/Marxist plan to destroy property rights and so on. The language actually is taken straight from the John Birch Society, and it’s entirely false. Anyway, that’s simply an example. Ted Cruz has said with absolutely zero basis that Agenda 21 will force us to abolish golf courses and all paved roads. I don’t think I need to tell you that that’s hogwash of the highest order.

But these kinds of ideas, are even invading the presidential campaign. You think about, of course, Donald Trump always was a “birther,” he had investigators in Hawaii who were finding out amazing things, although we never heard any more of it. But as I mentioned, Cruz, Ben Carson, and Trump again on Muslims and creating a registry and so on. These are ideas that have very much taken hold in the political mainstream, I think aided and abetted really by, if not the destruction, but the real serious weakening of the traditional media, right? So if you’re a person who wants to believe these things, say you believe that Agenda 21 is a Socialist global plot, there are plenty of so-called “news organizations” on the Internet, places like World Net Daily that would tell you “absolutely, that is true” and then fill in all sorts of details.

I will just say briefly, the problem with conspiracy theories seems obvious, is that they replace any kind of reason or logic or knowledge with fear and suspicion and the result of that is that it makes it, if not impossible, certainly many many times more difficult to solve the real problems that face us than otherwise. So, if you believe that global warming is a hoax carried out by some kind of weekend coterie of scientists or others, then it obviously makes it extremely difficult, as a political matter, to solve them. And as Sarah Palin says, Obama is creating death camps to decide whether our grandparents live or die, obviously it makes it that much harder to deal with. You know, all of this polarizes people more and more and more.

The second giant effect, I said there are really two big effects associated with what seems to be the rise of the radical right, is the kind of criminal effect. And first let me say, that there are an enormous number of hate crimes in this country. I’m not really talking about the groups, the neo-Nazi or Klan groups or anything like that; I’m talking about fairly normal people. There have been academic studies that have shown that about 95% or more of hate crimes are carried out by people

who are not associated with groups of any kind, these political groups. The FBI has been printing national hate crime statistics since 1995 so we have big data running, almost 20 years. But when you look at those statistics, they show a total annual count of hate crimes of between about 6,000 and about 11,500 a year for each of those years. Many of us who do this work understood that those numbers were almost certainly low, but we didn't have a very good method of finding out how low they were. Ultimately, the Bureau of Justice statistics, which is a sub-agency of the Department of Justice, did three different studies and the bottom line is they concluded that at least in recent years, the real level of hate crime in America has been close to 260,000 hate crimes a year, which means, 25, 30 to 40 times higher than what the FBI numbers said. My point is, and by the way I'm not criticizing or attacking the FBI because all they're doing, as they're mandated under federal law, they are simply collecting statistics, compiling statistics, and publishing them to tables, that are given to them by local departments.

Part of the reason for this incredible disparity between the real numbers and the reported numbers are something like 56% of hate crimes are never reported to police at all. The remaining 44% or whatever it is, way more than half are mis-caterogorized by police officials. Another point I want to make is that hate crimes, although, as I said the vast majority are not committed by members of hate groups, nevertheless it is the ideology and propaganda, I think of these groups that very much enable hate crimes, in the sense that they provide a milieu of justification. I mean if you're feeling uptight about the world getting "less white" around you, well, there are groups out there that will tell you, as they do today, that there is a genocide being carried out against white people and so on. And that is the very idea that Dylann Roof went into that church in Charleston, in order to carry his murders out with. A few other cases, Donald Trump, talking about Mexicans are rapists and drug dealers—"some I assume are good people." You know, it wasn't long after that speech that a man was beaten up with a steel pipes in Boston after a Red Sox game by a couple of brothers who told the police immediately after their arrest, that they agreed with Donald Trump and he had the right idea, and so on. And there are many, many other cases we've seen over the years. You probably remember Lou Dobbs on CNN, for years, going on about, sort of a rant about, "immigrants are bringing leprosy to this country; immigrants have a secret plan called the *plan de Atzlan* to re-conquer the American southwest, et cetera. All of these things are true, but, I'm sorry, are quite false! But, I will say that in the years that Dobbs was really doing his thing on CNN, there were about three years in particular [that] we saw anti-Latino hate crimes in America

go up by about 50%. So, there were many cases we don't have time to go into.

Well, let me say briefly another good example Pam Geller, the woman who held the "Draw Mohammad" contest, maybe some of you remember in Garland, Texas last year? Pam Gellar in 2010, started to build a movement in New York City around the so called "Victory Mosque," which was of course, neither a mosque nor did it have anything to do with victory; it wasn't really at ground zero either. But there she was in the largest media market in the world, in New York City, and did manage to gin up this idea that this mosque was this loathsome thing that was going to celebrate the murders of 3,000 Americans and so on. The very same year, an American named David Yerushalmi drew up the "American Laws for American Courts" legislation. That's the legislation that purports to prevent Sharia Law from being imposed on American courts, which of course is an impossibility under the Constitution; pure fear mongering. My point though, is that in that single year after a long decline since 9/11 of anti-Muslim hate crimes, we saw anti-Muslim hate crimes go up by 50%. In 2010 if you think back, there were no real jihadist attacks in the United States, nor abroad of any real significance. In other words it wasn't driven by a Charlie Hebdo kind of attack or something like that; it was driven by the kind of propaganda that was pushed into the political mainstream.

The other piece of hate crimes that I've talked about, the other piece of course is the criminal effect, what we're really here to talk about of course, and that's domestic terrorism. We'll talk a little bit about it, we don't have much time, but let me just say, for those who feel that the Islamist threat is far larger, and so on, I don't mean to diminish it in any way. There was a Klan plot, not the x-ray Klan plot, but another Klan plot just a few years ago, in which in Wise County, Texas, three Klansmen and a Klanswoman decided they were going to blow up a natural gas processing plant in Wise County, Texas, northwest of Fort Worth. Their idea was that they would blow this up; it was right next to an elementary school. It would cause so much chaos and death that it would draw all of the police forces, all of the law enforcement forces, all the medical people, EMT's and so on to this huge disaster, and this little crew of Klansmen would go across the county and start robbing banks in order to raise money to fund the coming race war. The real point of this story is that the plot was stopped because the leader of that Klan group could not live with the idea of murdering all those children in the elementary school next door to the plant, so he went to the Feds and to this day, he's still in the witness protection program. So, it was stopped, but the point of my story is that when the FBI announced the arrests, they

said that had these people, this little crew of people, been successful, they would have murdered between ten [thousand] and 30,000 people. In other words, ten times the number of people who were killed on 9/11.

So, Jeremy asked me to talk just a little bit, and I realized I don't have that much time— about the kinds of groups we cover, and very briefly kind of sketch out the scene. I thought I would do it in this way, just tell you a little bit about the sectors of the radical right. I've already talked a little bit about the Patriot groups, and I won't mention them again, but I want to sketch out, very briefly, the world of hate groups. About 36% of the groups we cover are neo-Nazi groups. That includes suit and tie National Socialists, it includes neo-Nazi skinheads, it includes the racist music organizations, distributors and the creators of white power music, which I a big thing in the world I cover, and holocaust denial outfits. This is the movement to which people like Kevin Harpham belong. Kevin Harpham tried to set off an IED he had built in Spokane, Washington, alongside a Martin Luther King Day march in 2012. They marched right by, and the guy left this IED on a bench. As it happens, somebody saw it and the cops did quite a job dismantling this weapon, and ultimately arrested him. But there are a whole series of those kinds of crimes that come out from the neo-Nazis. Here in Florida, just as local reference, the World Church of the Creator, which now has a different name, was begun here in Florida by Ben Klassen in the early 70's. Klassen was two things: he was a Florida state legislator and he was inventor of the electric can opener. He's long dead now, but that movement grew enormously. I think it's fair to say that the neo-Nazi sector of these groups we cover produce the most violence. Arie probably agrees, but in any case, we've certainly seen the most violence coming out of that world.

The Klan groups are about 9% of the groups we cover. There are only about 72 Klaverns, or local chapters according to our count. However, we think that quite a lot of them may have gone underground in the last couple of years. They've started talking about: "they can't be outed anymore, too many people lose their jobs" and so on. So there's some real indications that there are a number of Klan groups that simply do not appear on the Internet, that don't tell anyone where they are, and operate secretly. What we've seen from Klan groups, mostly, is not so much group action, it's more individuals: like the guy in New York with the x-ray weapon, like that very small group in Fort Worth in Wise County. We're not seeing this much violence coming from the Klan world, but there are some incredibly violent individuals in that world. And they've also, I should say parenthetically, been making quite a lot of time in the wake of Charleston as the Klan has come out to defend the

Confederate battle flag, as it came under attack because of Dylann Roof's association with the flag.

Another sector, about 24% of groups we cover, we characterize as white nationalists, and by white nationalists I mean these are more kind of suit and tie people, not typically involved in political violence, who are building a kind of intellectual rationale for this movement. Similar people in Europe, and there are also quite a few connections between people in the white nationalist world in the United States and Europe. It also includes sector neo-Confederates; people like the "League of the South," who want the South to secede again. They want the South to become the wonderful place it was before the Civil War, and so on. And it also includes, I think, anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim groups, the very hard lined groups, because they all are built around the idea of "this is a civilization, the United States, Europe, these are civilizations that are fundamentally white. Everything that really animates them comes from the wonderful brains of white people, and that's the way it ought to stay." Just to characterize white nationalists generally, is that this is the sector that certainly has the most political traction. There are many politicians out there who clearly agree with some of the fundamentals of white nationalism, although they won't associate, or at least not without peril to their political careers, with the groups. But they are driving ultimately a lot of the violence and hatred we see directed against immigrants in general and now especially violence against Muslims.

About 6% of groups are anti-gay; anti-LGBT groups and they are quite different in character from the others. The Klan, neo-Nazis, none of them like gay people, but I'm talking about the big Christian right organizations that consistently, well some in many cases, consistently lie about gay people. The kind of the classic lie is the claim that gay men are sexual predators. That gay men are child molesters, pedophiles, at rates vastly higher than straight men which, as a matter of real science, is simply false. That's not so. These are organizations like the American Family Association. It has a \$25-30 million budget, owns 200 radio stations, and so on. While these groups don't engage in any violence of their own, they are, in my opinion, very certainly driving a lot of the violence that we see directed against gay people. I should say that we've done an analysis that shows very clearly, that if you look at the FBI hate crime stats, that LGBT people in the United States are the most targeted minority in this country in terms of hate crimes.

About 14% of the groups we cover are black separatists, or black supremacists, kind of depending on how you want to characterize them. What I would say briefly about that sector is that, although there's plenty of sort of nasty propaganda about white people in that world, there's not much political violence at all out of that sector. There once was, South

Floridians will remember Yahweh ben Yahweh and his murder of, I think it was 14 people. You know, "bring me back the ears of white people who you've murdered for the cause" and so on. But Yahweh ben Yahweh is dead. The Nation of Yahweh is basically defunct, and we don't see a lot of that kind of violence anymore.

Then there are a few odds and ends, smaller groups that I won't mention. I think I've run over my time. All I'd like to say by way of wrapping up is that we're in a very difficult period. This is perhaps merely my opinion, but I think that ultimately, were heading for a better place. It doesn't matter, even if the border is completely sealed off tomorrow, this transition to a minority-majority country is going to happen anyway. It's just a matter of differential fertility rates from different groups. I think that ultimately we're going to be one of the only countries, if not the only country, that really has made this quite remarkable transition. That is something, it seems to me, to be glad for. We really will be at one point a truly multi-racial democracy, in which no one racial group is running the show, as has been the case for most of our history. One indication that this is happening is, you can look at the attitudes toward same-sex marriage and how they've changed dramatically, and maybe more importantly, if you look at polling on attitudes toward interracial marriage, which is the big bugaboo that goes back to the Klan of the 1870's. When you look at the youngest cohort, its 14-24 or something like that, it's like 95-96% of that cohort have absolutely no problem with interracial relationships or marriages and so on. So that's the future. I think we're in for a rough spell. We may well see more Timothy McVeigh's out there. When you look at something like the x-ray Klan plot, you realize there are people out there who very much would like to murder a whole lot of people, so it's not for want of trying. In any case, thank you very much for listening, and I appreciate it.