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American Terror: From Oklahoma City to 9/11 and After

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At 9:02 on the morning of April 19th, 1995, a bomb went off at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.¹ The bomb not only killed 160 people and injured over 650 more, but it also shook the illusion held by many Americans of a nation safe from the political unrest and terrorism outside its borders (an illusion that would be shattered for good on 9/11). In the hours and days following the bombing, the media and law enforcement authorities focused on the Muslim terrorists they believed were responsible,² including a Muslim Oklahoma City resident detained at Heathrow Airport in London. On April 20th, one day after bombing, another Oklahoma City resident, Iraqi refugee Suhair al-Mosawi, was attacked in his home as retaliation for the bombing.³ When Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols – two white, Christian, home-grown anti-government activists – were arrested, what became evident was that these were 'American' terrorists. In spite of the initial shock of the bombing and focus on Muslims, this was far from a new phenomenon. For many experts who had been researching and monitoring the extreme right, the bombing was the culmination of a fifteen-year trajectory of violence. In response to the bombing, hearings were held, anti-terror legislation was passed, arrests were made and numerous books written and films made about the phenomenon. Yet, following the events of 9/11, Oklahoma City and the domestic extreme right were pushed to the margins of history and memory, as terrorism and terrorists were redefined as Islamic or Islamist, and Christianity and patriotism were evoked in America's defense.

Throughout American history, both terrorism and extremism have been constructed, evoked or ignored strategically by the state, media and public at different points, in order to disown and demonize political movements whenever their ideologies and objectives become problematic or inconvenient – because they overlap with, and thus compromise, the legitimacy of the dominant ideology and democratic credentials of the state, because they conflict with the dominant ideology or hegemonic order, because they offend the general (voting) public, or because they expose the fallacies of national unity and bi-polar opposition in the face of foreign enemies or international conflicts, such as the war on terror. This chapter looks at how domestic extreme right terrorism has been constructed, represented, evoked or ignored in the American

political imagination in the post-civil rights era, with a particular focus on its changing status following the Oklahoma City bombing and 9/11.

From Oklahoma City to 9/11: transformations in terrorism, racism and representation

After over a decade in the wilderness following the triple blow to white supremacy, the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, the Voting Rights Act in 1965 and government hearings into the Klan in 1965-1966, in the late 1970s as the farm crisis was starting to affect the population of rural America and stoke existing white anger and resentment at the federal government, Texas Klansman and Aryan Nations ambassador Louis Beam Jr. issued a call to arms, 'where ballots fail, bullets will prevail',⁴ introducing a period of radicalization and violence that would become known as the 'Fifth Era'. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the American extreme right, made up of Ku Klux Klan paramilitaries, white separatists, neo-Nazis, Identity Christians and anti-government patriots such as Invisible Empire, White Patriot Party, White Aryan Resistance, National Alliance, Aryan Nations, Posse Comitatus and The Order, was implicated in numerous robberies, shootouts, murders and terrorist plots that grabbed the public and state's attention, such as the 1984 murder of DJ Alan Berg by The Order.

After a period of relative silence in the late 1980s, violent rhetoric and confrontations between the various movements and the state increased in the early 1990s. This followed the President George Bush's 'New World Order' speech in 1990 celebrating victory in the Cold War and Gulf War and inaugurating a new hegemonic order, and the 1992 siege at the Ruby Ridge home of anti-government patriot survivalist and Aryan Nations associate Randy Weaver by the FBI and ATF (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms), which resulted in the deaths of his wife and son.⁵ In the summer of 1992, members of the Christian Identity and Patriot movements convened at the Rocky Mountain Rendezvous in Estes Park, Colorado.⁶ The meeting was organized by Identity minister Pete Peters in order to come up with a strategic response to the Ruby Ridge siege.⁷ At the meeting, Beam introduced 'Leaderless Resistance', a strategy based on the formation of autonomous terrorist cells to combat a better equipped and larger state law enforcement and military.⁸ This meeting is widely believed to have influenced the development of the Militia movement. The following year, an arrest attempt at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas resulted in another ATF and FBI siege, and the deaths of over eighty adults and children.⁹ Ruby Ridge and Waco became rallying cries of the Militia movement and wider extreme right.

In light of such developments and activity, on October 24th, 1994, less than a year prior to the Oklahoma City bombing, Morris Dees of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) in Montgomery, Alabama issued a letter to United States Attorney General warning of the Militia threat:

Dear Attorney General Reno,

On Behalf of the Southern Poverty Law Center and its supporters, I urge you to alert all federal law enforcement authorities to the growing danger posed by the unauthorized militias that have sprung up in at least eighteen states [...] We have substantial evidence that white supremacists are infiltrating the leadership of such organizations. In our view, this mixture of armed groups and those who hate is a recipe for disaster [...]¹⁰

Following Dees' letter to Reno and only nine days prior to the bombing, Kenneth Stern, the American Jewish Committee's expert on hate groups and former director of the National Organization against Terrorism, issued a report with a similar warning, entitled *Militias: A Growing Danger*.¹¹

In light of these events and warnings, why did the public, media and law enforcement officials immediately suspect Muslim terrorists for the attack? The choice of target was also significant and indicated domestic as opposed to international terrorism. A federal building in Oklahoma City which housed the ATF would be an ideal target to the patriot and militia movements following Ruby Ridge and Waco, as opposed to the World Trade Center and Pentagon, which were targets of international economic and military significance and symbolism. In fact, it was on the second anniversary of Waco that McVeigh and Nichols bombed the Murrah Federal Building, and McVeigh himself later claimed that the bombing was a 'retaliatory strike' for the actions of the federal government, FBI and ATF at Ruby Ridge and Waco.¹² Moreover, the Oklahoma City bombing occurred not only on the anniversary of Waco, but also the 220th anniversary of the Battle of Lexington, the first of the American Revolution,¹³ another significant date on the Patriot calendar.

In spite of this, the first World Trade Center bombing on February 26th, 1993, set the most recent and visible precedent for a terrorist attack. Moreover, the attack was the easiest to understand and incorporate into existing racial/racist and national/nationalist frameworks for clearly differentiating and defining the terrorist and terrorized, the criminal and the victim, Americans and others. In terms of the popular imagination, the news, books and films were filled with images of white Christian American terrorists, most notably in Oliver Stone's *Talk Radio* (1988) and Costa-Gavras' *Betrayed* (1988) both of which focused on The Order and the murder of Alan Berg.¹⁴ Yet, it would be the more commercial and less politically sophisticated *True Lies*,¹⁵ released in 1994, between the first World Trade Center bombing and Oklahoma City, that cemented the image of the Arab or Muslim terrorist in the mind of the American

public (much as *Executive Decision* and *The Siege* would when they came out in 1996 and 1998 respectively, right between the Oklahoma City bombing and 9/11).¹⁶ It was not hard considering the wealth of images of the evil Arab or Muslim terrorist in films, particularly in relation to global politics and foreign policy, as catalogued by Melani McAlister in *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, & U.S. Interests in the Middle East Since 1945* (2001) and Jack G. Shaheen in *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (2003).¹⁷

In terms of the racial and racist representation of the terrorist, even when the police sketches of the two anonymous white male suspects (later identified as McVeigh and Nichols) were made public, not all white males came under suspicion, nor were they demonized, interrogated at airports, questioned about their patriotism or made to account or apologize for their religion. In spite of this, both the racial dimension and effect of the bombing were questioned and interrogated. In his essay 'Can Whiteness Speak?', Mike Hill discusses the *Time* magazine issue on the Oklahoma bombing and the cover image of McVeigh's mug shot with the headline 'The Face of Terror'.¹⁸ In that issue's lead article, *Time* reporter Elizabeth Gleick claimed that 'a sense of guilty introspection swept the country when the FBI released the sketches of the suspects, distinctly Caucasian John Does one and two'.¹⁹ Hill responds to this by arguing that, more than guilt and introspection, the image and headline were terrifying to *Time*'s implied white readers because it rendered whiteness distinct or particular, as opposed to universal, and it implicated whiteness in the terror.²⁰ Although such an effect and response would be politically important and welcomed, it did not occur as the opposite of white universalism is not particularism, but individualism. Once the 'face of terror' was identified, he would become an individual with a biographical, political and psychological narrative that causally explained him away as an aberration, a racist terrorist as opposed to a racial subject, which addresses the problem Gleick and Hill claim may have existed for the white public; thus, no need to account or apologize, like Muslims are called on to do.

In response to the bombing, the government established an FBI counter-terrorism taskforce in the Pacific Northwest to deal with such movements, as well as five Senate sub-committee hearings held between May and November 1995, beginning a month after the bombing. The hearings included: *Combating Domestic Terrorism, The Militia Movement in the United States* and *The Nature and Threat of Violent Anti-Government Groups in America*.²¹ At these hearings, representatives from government, law enforcement, watchdog organizations and militias were invited to testify. In addition to these, knowing the relationship between the growth of the Militia movement, the bombings and the government's actions at Ruby Ridge and Waco, they also held the following hearings: *The Federal Raid on Ruby Ridge, ID., The Activities of Federal Law Enforcement Agencies Toward the Branch Davidians*.²² The bombing also provided Congress with the impetus to pass the 1995 Antiterrorism bill (which became the 1996 Antiterrorism Act) that had

been controversial and resisted because of the potential threat it posed to civil liberties, and negative implications for Irish-American and Arab-American populations.²³ It is ironic that an attack by racist right-wing terrorists made those threats an acceptable price to pay for national security.

In addition to swift government action, within a year of the bombing, numerous books were published between 1996 and 2001, first amongst which were Morris Dees' *Gathering Storm: America's Militia Threat* (1996) and Kenneth Stern's *A Force upon the Plain: The American Militia Movement and the Politics of Hate* (1996). In both books, the authors retrospectively retrace the history and development of the extreme right from the 1980s until the bombing and reassert their earlier warnings. For Dees, '[t]he chain of events that led up to the Oklahoma City bombing dates back to the early 1980s. It is a continuing threat that promises to cause further destruction',²⁴ a fear shared by Stern who claimed that the bombing represented a 'warning shot' of things to come.²⁵ Joel Dyer's *Harvest of Rage: Why Oklahoma City Is Only the Beginning* (1997) placed the warning in its very title.²⁶ In almost every case, the Oklahoma City bombing not only features prominently but is used as the cover image and point of departure, such as Chip Berlet and Matthew Lyon's *Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort. Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort* (2000). While Berlet and Lyons looked back into populism and terrorism in American history, in *The New Face of Terrorism: Threats from Weapons of Mass Destruction*, Nadine Gurr and Benjamin Cole looked forward into the next century, including the extreme right as part of the global proliferation of 'weapons of mass destruction', which so concerned the Bush administration and neo-conservatives post-9/11.²⁷ Many films were also inspired by the Oklahoma City bombing and the movements associated with it, including: *Arlington Road* (1998), *The Patriot* (1998), *Brotherhood of Murder* (1999) and *Militia* (2000).²⁸

According to the SPLC, between the Oklahoma City bombing and 9/11, there were approximately forty terrorist plots, violent incidents and attacks linked to the extreme right, including a 1997 Klan bomb plot that, had it not been foiled, would have killed approximately 30,000 people, ten times more than the attacks of 9/11.²⁹ Another notable case was that of Eric Rudolph, a Christian Identity adherent, wanted for the 1996 bombing of the Atlanta Olympics and the 1997 bombings of a lesbian bar in Atlanta, Georgia, an abortion clinic in Sandy Springs, Georgia and the 1998 nail bombing of the New Woman All Woman clinic in Birmingham, Alabama.³⁰ Rudolph remained on the run until he was caught in 2003 and convicted in 2005.³¹

In spite of this overwhelming evidence, warnings and a growing interest in the extreme right, when 9/11 occurred officials did not go searching for white Christian Americans. Only three months earlier, on June 11th, 2001, McVeigh had been executed by lethal injection in Terre Haute Indiana Federal Prison,³²

symbolically exorcising the white ‘face of terror’ from the public’s view and allowing it to be replaced with that of the 9/11 hijackers and those that looked like them, belonged to the same religion or came from the same region (in spite of the continuing FBI manhunt for Rudolph).

Since 9/11, terrorism has become identified as a Muslim problem by the state, media and public. Yet, if one is willing, all they have to do is look back at the history of terrorism in America, or America’s experience of terrorism and other forms of political violence prior to Oklahoma City: the largest single group of perpetrators have been, like McVeigh and Nichols, domestic, Christian, white, nationalist, and self-proclaimed patriots. In terms of domestic terrorism, between 1954-2000, 31.2% of terrorist incidents and 51.6% of fatalities have been committed by ‘White Racist/Rightist’ perpetrators, while 21.2% of incidents and 2.0% of fatalities were committed by the ‘Revolutionary Left’, 14.7% of incidents and 25.0% of fatalities by ‘Black Militants’, 6.2% of incidents and 0.9% of fatalities by anti-abortion terrorists and 3.6% of incidents and 0.8% of fatalities by Jewish terrorists. Islamist terrorism during the same period accounted for 1.1% of incidents and 1.7% of fatalities. In fact, Islamist terrorism, which falls under the category of ‘foreign terrorism’, comes in last after Cuban émigrés, Puerto Rican and ‘other foreign’ terrorists during this period.³³

This history and evidence was overshadowed not only by 9/11 itself, but by the mass production of new books, articles, documentaries, reports, academic courses and proliferation of experts working in the media and/or with government officials developing new profiles, counter-terrorism strategies and legal measures. Focus on domestic terrorism, right-wing extremism, white separatism, neo-Nazism, Christian Identity, patriotism, militias, tax protest and fertilizer bombs, was quickly replaced by that on international terrorism, Islam, the Koran, al Qaeda, Jihad and suicide bombs. Not only were all terrorists Muslim now, but even the profile of the American terrorist became Muslim, through religious conversion, in the form of John Walker Lindh, the ‘American Taliban’, and Jose Padilla, the ‘Dirty Bomber’. Yet these were unique cases, the terrorist profile was no longer even American, like McVeigh, but foreign like the 9/11 hijackers. As David Cole points out, immediately following 9/11, Attorney General John Ashcroft created a ‘Foreign Terrorist Tracking Force’, as opposed to a ‘Terrorist Tracking Force’, focusing on non-citizens and utilizing immigration law.³⁴ Moreover, the PATRIOT Act and immigration law were used to round up Muslims in dragnets.³⁵

Predicting this response, a select few commentators did highlight this potential danger and hypocrisy almost immediately following 9/11. In his article ‘Terror in America’, published on September 12th, 2001 in *The Nation*, Robert Fisk reminded the nation that ‘... the last act of barbarism, in Oklahoma, turned out to be the work of home-grown Americans ...’.³⁶ Also immediately following the attacks, Mike Davis held a

teach-in at SUNY-Stony Brook, where he not only discussed terrorism, the Middle East, US foreign policy and possible responses by the Bush administration, but also Timothy McVeigh and the role of the first Gulf War in the political ideologies and terrorist actions of both McVeigh and bin Laden.³⁷

By interesting coincidence, in the September 2001 issue of *Vanity Fair* magazine Gore Vidal published the essay 'The Meaning of Timothy McVeigh'.³⁸ Although the essay is followed by 'Black Tuesday', his essay on 9/11, in the collection *The Last Empire: Essays 1992-2001* (2002),³⁹ the two events are reframed and explicitly linked in Vidal's *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace: How We Got To Be So Hated – Causes of Conflict In The Last Empire*. In the introduction, Vidal returns to the *Time* magazine cover of McVeigh discussed by Gleick and Hill and juxtaposes it, along with McVeigh's story, to the image and story of Bin Laden. Vidal, like Davis, finds commonality in the influence and experience of the first Gulf War and American imperialism, as well as their representation by the media and state.⁴⁰

As the country readied for war and experienced a series of real and suspected anthrax attacks, Jonathan David Farley returned to the white face of terror. In the essay 'My Fellow Americans: Looking Black on Red Tuesday' from the 2002 collection *Beyond September 11: An Anthology of Dissent*, Farley discusses the history of terror as experienced by African-Americans:

Even now, while our FBI is arresting anyone whose first name rhymes with Osama, groups like the Klan operate openly and legally in all 50 states. Next time you're in Tennessee [...] come visit Nathan Bedford Forrest Park, named after the founder of America's al-Qaida, the KKK. Absurdly, we're supposed to breathe a sigh of relief now that we think the anthrax was sent, not by Arabs, but by white supremacists ... Has U.S. Attorney-General John Ashcroft detained 1,000 Christians without charge? Is everyone with links to Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh now under surveillance? And what terrorist harboring state will be bombed next? Alabama.⁴¹

Such interventions were (and still are) rare. Within weeks of the attacks, expert consultants, scholars and journalists, almost regardless of their political or ideological perspective, started creating an industry in which they have not only reported on the war on terror, Islamist terrorism and Islam itself, but have been agents in this paradigm shift. The theoretical frame that enabled this was the 2002 republication of Samuel Huntington's 1997 book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*.⁴² That same year, a seemingly endless flow of books on Islam, Islamism and terrorism started coming out with titles such as *War Without End: The Rise of Islamist Terrorism and Global Response* (2002), *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (2004) and *A Fury for God: The Islamist Attack on America* (2004).⁴³

Additionally, Islamist terrorism became fodder for popular American films and TV shows such as *24* (2002-Present), *The Grid* (2005), *Sleeper Cell* (2005), *The Kingdom* (2006) and *The Unit* (2006-2009).⁴⁴

There have also been many books on the more general phenomenon of terrorism in which Muslims figured predominantly or disproportionately and American terrorists often not at all. When Phil Rees went *Dining with Terrorists* in 2003, he either did not invite or was not invited to dine with Americans.⁴⁵ In the authoritatively titled *The Terrorism Reader*, David Whittaker fails to examine American terrorists in the post-9/11 second edition, the post-7/7 third edition and even in the first edition, which came out prior to 9/11 in 2001, when Oklahoma City was still the largest terrorist attack on American soil.⁴⁶

Some authors did address and include the American extreme right (and other non-Islamist terrorists) into work on the wider phenomenon of terrorism. Some were new introductions to and surveys of terrorism, such as Jeffrey Ian Ross's *Political Terrorism: An Interdisciplinary Introduction* (2006) and Mark Hamm's *Terrorism as Crime: From Oklahoma City to Al-Qaeda and Beyond* (2007).⁴⁷ For others, terrorism was not enough to make the link between Islamist and the American domestic terrorism within the post-9/11 al Qaeda-centered framework, but religion was. Two books on this subject, with similar titles, were published: the first was an updated edition of Mark Juergensmeyer's *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (2001), reissued after 9/11, which had sparked renewed interest in the original.⁴⁸ The second was Jessica Stern's *Terror in the Mind of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (2003) which focused mostly on international and Islamist terrorism, as the cover image of a bombed street in Kabul taken in 1996 clearly indicates.⁴⁹

Since 9/11, there have been books published specifically on the American extreme right and terrorism, but the majority were written in and/or focus on the period prior to 9/11, although a select few address these attacks in their conclusions and epilogues. Still, they did not penetrate the popular consciousness in the way those on Islamism did, nor were they able to disrupt the belief that terror was foreign and synonymous with Islam.. This work included: Daniel Levitas' *The Terrorist Next Door: The Militia Movement and the Radical Right* (2002), Mark Hamm's *In Bad Company: America's Terrorist Underground* (2002), Lane Crothers' *Rage on the Right: The American Militia Movement from Ruby Ridge to Homeland Security* (2003), George Michael's *Confronting Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism in the USA* (2003), Darren Mulloy's *American Extremism: History, Politics and the Militia Movement* (2004) and Evelyn Schlatter's *Aryan Cowboys: White Supremacists and the Search for a New Frontier 1970-2000* (2006).⁵⁰ It was only in 2006-7 that work started coming out examining the US extreme right in the post-9/11 context, including George Michael's *The Enemy of My Enemy: The Alarming Convergence of Militant Islam and the Extreme Right* (2006), which examined the US extreme right in the post-9/11 period in terms of its relationship to

Islamism and global terrorism.⁵¹ The other notable example was Martin Durham's *White Rage: The Extreme Right and American Politics* (2007) which re-examined the post-war history of the US racist extreme right up until 2006.⁵²

While it was not exclusively on the extreme right, Christopher Hewitt's *Understanding Terrorism in America: From the Klan to Al Qaeda* was the only book that focused specifically on America's history of and responses to all types of terrorism. Published in 2003, Hewitt's book focuses terrorism from 1950-2001, yet 9/11 shapes the context in which it was published and would be read. The editors acknowledge this in the preface by saying that this book was started prior to 9/11, concerns terrorism that preceded that event and hence is not an attempt to capitalize on or profit from the 'increased interest in terrorism in general, and in the United States in particular'.⁵³ Considering the boom industry in terrorism studies, they are right to want to distinguish the book from the pack, but considering that this was the only book on the history of terrorism in America up until that point and one of a very select few that addressed the extreme right in relation to Islamist and other forms of terrorism, there was no pack to speak of. This was true at least until 2006-7, when Michael's second book and Durham's book were published.⁵⁴

In addition to providing an analytical survey and analysis of terrorism in post-war America, Hewitt also addresses the issue of America's response to terrorism within its borders. Describing the shock and surprise the media expressed following 9/11, as if it were without precedent, he turns to the first World Trade Center attack and *Newsweek's* claim that it 'rattled the country's confidence, dispelling the snug illusion that Americans were immune, somehow, to the plague of terrorism ...'.⁵⁵ He then turns to *Newsweek's* response to the Oklahoma City bombing: 'This doesn't happen here ... It looked like Beirut. But the devastated building was deep in America's heartland, ending forever the illusion that here at home we are safe.'⁵⁶ For Hewitt, this illusion that American terrorism is relatively new, continues in the face of historical evidence, which includes 3,000 terrorist incidents since 1954.⁵⁷ Hewitt argues that this is a product of an ignorance of history, the ideological diversity of the terrorists, and their fragmented organizational forms.⁵⁸ Yet the shock and surprise at the Oklahoma City bombing only two years after the first Trade Center attack is not ignorance of history but a form of selective amnesia. If these were cases of historical ignorance, the public and media would not be able to immediately reference previous attacks, such as Pearl Harbor and the first World Trade Center attack, on 9/11. What is significant about this is that they managed to skip over white domestic American terrorism and reference attacks by foreign Japanese bombers and Muslim terrorists separated by half a century. Gore Vidal once referred to America as the 'United States of Amnesia',⁵⁹ but it is not losing one's memory that is the problem, it is using it selectively, to remember and evoke some events when they are useful and forget them when they are inconvenient or uncomfortable.

In terms of Hewitt's argument regarding the diverse and fragmented nature of terrorism in America, he responds by surveying terrorist groups and events in post-war American history, including activists from the anti-war, left, black power, native and Puerto Rican independence movements, as well as the Klan, neo-Nazis and Patriot groups, filling in the gaps in historical memory. What becomes evident is not only the diversity of groups but their radically different relationships to power. While anti-war, black power and native activists have been protesting against the state, dominant ideology, hegemonic structure, forms of exclusion, oppression and violence, the Klan, neo-Nazis, Patriots and wider extreme right have been the exponents and defenders of such structures, beliefs and practices. Moreover, they have not only positioned their white, Christian, racial, religious and national constituency as the targets and victims of terrorism post-9/11, but as the statistics show, they have also been its greatest perpetrators. This is important to remember in the context of the war on terror when the hegemonic order and an idealized image of America are being reasserted in the face of the terrorist other. This is particularly the case when such terrorism has acted on behalf of the hegemonic order and has at times shared an ideology, interests and objectives with the state, such as white supremacy and segregation during pre-civil rights period.

While the Klan and other white supremacists have a deservedly negative reputation today, throughout its history and most notably during the 1950s and 1960s or 'Third Era', the Klan shared the dominant and hegemonic ideology of white supremacy and the state policy of segregation. Moreover, it defended this ideology and legislation through both legitimate democratic means, such as running for elected office or campaigning on behalf of segregationist Alabama Governor George Wallace and others, as well as through violence and terror, including intimidation, assaults, lynching, assassinations and bombings. The most notorious violent incidents were two attacks in 1963 and 1964 that framed the tabling of the Civil Rights Act on June 20th 1964: the bombing of the 16th St. Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama which killed four young black girls on September 15th, 1963 and the 'Mississippi Burning' murders of voter registration workers Michael Schwerner, James Clancy and Andrew Goodman in Mississippi on June 21st, 1964.⁶⁰

With the passing of the Civil Rights Act and this violence, the federal government could not tolerate such organizations anymore. They were also an inconvenient reminder of the white supremacy that the state and mainstream society represented and sanctioned. At the same time, as violent 'extremists' they provided a convenient face for white supremacy that could be attacked by the state as a form of symbolic exorcism. In 1964, the FBI's COINTELPRO targeted the Klan and in between 1965 and 1967, the United States House of Representatives Subcommittee of the Committee on Un-American Activities conducted hearings into the *Activities Of Ku Klux Klan Organizations In The United States*, most notably terrorism, and produced the report *The Present Day Ku Klux Klan Movement*.⁶¹ In spite of this attempted political exorcism, the 'Ghosts of Mississippi' have returned post-9/11, with the drive to convict former Klansmen involved in lynching,

bombings and murders during the civil rights era, including the 2005 conviction of former Klansman Edger Killen for the ‘Mississippi Burning’ killings.⁶² Such cases represent another attempt to achieve closure on this period of American terror at a time when America is supposed to be unified at home and fighting terror elsewhere.

Where are they now? Transformations in patriotism, paramilitarism and political violence in the post-9/11 era

Historical developments, particularly when there is a corresponding reassertion or reordering of the hegemonic order, such as Civil Rights, Voting Rights and the Klan hearings or the Oklahoma City bombing and Senate Subcommittee hearings, can transform the meaning of political interests, ideologies and movements, raising or diminishing their profile, awarding or denying them a platform and rationale and placing them in a different relation to power. In spite of the response to the Oklahoma City bombing, which finally brought the extreme right the attention they desired and political platform they demanded, by bringing them from the Pacific Northwestern margins of the country to the floor of the Senate and center of political power, they were pushed back to the margins in the intermediary years and were replaced on 9/11. By this time, most organizations were affected by arrests, leadership battles, lawsuits, financial difficulties, falling recruitment, the illness and deaths of their leaders such as Aryan Nations’ Richard Butler and National Alliance’s William Pierce, and no clear-cut cause or rationale such as that provided by the farm crisis, Ruby Ridge and Waco.

After a period in decline, the events of 9/11 could have provided an opportunity for relevance and re-emergence for domestic terrorists calling for the overthrow of the American Government and Israel. Yet, they were ignored. The question is, were they ignored because they were a spent force before and overshadowed by 9/11, or because they were an inconvenient presence for the patriotic and unified America that emerged from 9/11, one in which you were either with us or against us, American patriot or Muslim terrorist?

They did try to get attention and gain relevance by placing themselves in this conflict and attempting to identify and form political alliances, albeit on the wrong side, as Michael examines in *The Enemy of My Enemy*. Almost immediately following the events of 9/11, leaders from across the extreme right issued inflammatory and in some cases threatening statements. Examples included:

[T]he current events in Jew York city have caused me to activate my unit. We are preparing a strike here in Minnesota and other surrounding areas. Please be advised that

the time for ALL ARYANS TO ATTACK IS NOW NOT LATER. Our opportunity may never be the same.⁶³

The enemy of our enemy is, for now at least, our friend. We may not want them marrying our daughters, just as they would not want us marrying theirs. We may not want them in our societies, just as they would not want us in theirs ... But anyone who is willing to drive a plane into a building to kill jews is alright by me. I wish our members had half as much testicular fortitude.⁶⁴

Yet they were still ignored, even at airport security, with one notable exception. In 2003 Aryan Nations' Richard Butler was at the Spokane, Washington airport with Bianca Trump, a porn actress who starred in numerous inter-racial films and had been staying at the Aryan Nations compound in Idaho. While at the airport, Trump was arrested on an outstanding warrant.⁶⁵ The incident left Butler humiliated, a common complaint at airport security in the United States, but one usually experienced by Muslim and Arab travelers.

To laugh them off would be a mistake since there were, as Michael and Durham point out, explicit calls to arms, and according to the SPLC approximately sixty terror plots by the extreme right in the United States in the ten years following Oklahoma, including the four years since 9/11. In addition to plots by members of the Klan, National Alliance, World Church of the Creator during this post-9/11 period, in 2004 former National Guardsman Ivan Duane Braden plotted to blow up a synagogue and a National Guard armory in Tennessee.⁶⁶ In spite of such incidents, a 2005 draft internal document from Homeland Security listed only animal rights and environmentalist groups such as the Animal Liberation Front and Earth Liberation Front as serious domestic threats.⁶⁷ Yet, as Andrew Blejwas, Anthony Griggs and Mark Potok point out, these groups had not at this point killed anyone, unlike the extreme right which had, and was also experiencing a thirty-three percent growth in 2000-2005.⁶⁸

At this point in the public imagination and on the political radar, the militias and wider extreme right had been replaced by Islamists in terms of terrorism, but on a more symbolic level they were replaced in their claim to a place in American tradition and historical function. The militia and vigilante defense traditions which the Patriot and Militia movements claimed, were also redefined post-9/11 as contract positions handed out to Blackwater, the private military contractor, and volunteer positions taken up by the Minutemen, the self-appointed border patrol and immigration control organization. In his book *Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary*

Army, Jeremy Scahill points to this transition when referring to earlier concerns about the establishment of the Blackwater training camp in North Carolina:

In the pre-9/11 days of Bill Clinton's America, the planning commissioners weren't worried about International terrorism and couldn't have even comprehended the company Blackwater would become. Instead, what concerned them was property values, noise ordinances, and the possibility that the types of militia groups that Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh had been linked to would come to their community for training.⁶⁹

This concern was no longer relevant post-9/11 and the need for contract soldiers overrode any residual concern that such characters would get in (or be kept out, as demand increased). The link between far right paramilitaries, mercenaries and American foreign policy was not unfounded. In *Warrior Dreams: Paramilitary Culture in Post-Vietnam America*, James William Gibson examines the ways in which defeat in Vietnam and the end of American military supremacy manifested in paramilitary culture.⁷⁰ Such manifestations included films like *First Blood* (1982),⁷¹ the popularity of *Soldier of Fortune* magazine, vigilantism, recreational war games, the paramilitarization of the Klan and the birth of the anti-government movement.

Perhaps the most interesting example of a link between these diverse manifestations was the former Green Beret Bo Gritz, who was the model for John Rambo in the novel and film *First Blood*.⁷² They tell the (fictional) story of former Green Beret Rambo, who returns from Vietnam and, while traveling across the country in search of a fellow veteran, is arrested by the police in a small Pacific Northwestern town. Experiencing flashbacks to his treatment by the North Vietnamese, Rambo fights back and escapes, only to be pursued into the forest where his training and experience enable him to evade, kill or maim those in pursuit before eventually surrendering and emerging in handcuffs as the (anti-) hero to teenage boys and the emergent anti-government movement. Although Gritz was not involved in such events, his service in Vietnam and anti-government activism, as well as the success of the film helped him to create an iconic image, influence a movement and serve as a mediator during the Ruby Ridge siege.⁷³

While *First Blood* symbolically represented the anger and alienation of Vietnam veterans, its sequel *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) allowed them and America, through Rambo, to return to Vietnam, rescue abandoned POWs and actually win the war.⁷⁴ In *Rambo III* (1988), the protagonist travels to Afghanistan to rescue his former colonel and aid the Mujahideen against the Soviets, although this was when the former were US allies and there was no Taliban or al Qaeda.⁷⁵ There were rumors that Rambo

would re-emerge in the 1990s to fight the militias, as opposed to inspire them as Gritz did. There were also rumors that he would re-emerge post-9/11 to fight al Qaeda, but this didn't happen either, possibly because it would either look exploitative or hypocritical considering *Rambo III*. In the fourth film in the series, *Rambo* (2008), Rambo comes to the aid of Christian missionaries in Burma,⁷⁶ a cause of the U.S. State Department following the 2007 crackdown on pro-democracy protesters just before the film's release. The question is how did Stallone know that it would become a foreign policy hot spot? The answer is *Soldier of Fortune*.⁷⁷

While Rambo was missing in action between films, another veteran was returning disillusioned and angry at the American Government and its foreign policy, Timothy McVeigh, who claimed that experiences during the Gulf War, as well as Ruby Ridge and Waco, led him to take action.⁷⁸ Like McVeigh, Eric Rudolph and Ivan Duane Braden were also former soldiers who had turned against the government and towards terrorism. These figures would bear a resemblance to the terrorist in Denzel Washington's follow-up to *The Siege* (which was viewed by many as stereotyping Muslims as terrorists and/or predicting 9/11), Tony Scott's *Déjà Vu* (2006).⁷⁹ In this film, Washington's character, ATF officer Doug Carlin, is not searching for a Muslim terrorist but a white anti-government patriot who bombed a ferry hosting a Navy event at Algiers Dock in post-Katrina New Orleans. The bomber Carroll Oerstadt is an unaffiliated anti-government patriot who, like Rudolph and Braden in real life, had been judged psychologically unfit for military service (although both Rudolph and Braden served briefly). It is interesting in both the film and the real world that the Muslim terrorist is viewed as product of culture, religion and ideology, but the American patriot of individual psychological illness. The link to the history of the extreme right is made explicit during the first meeting between Carlin's ATF officer and his FBI counterpart when reference is made to their shared experience in Oklahoma City. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the film also requires the greatest suspension of disbelief. Carlin is recruited to the government's time travel surveillance project, which allows him to observe the past or travel back in time in order to prevent a terrorist attack and/or capture the terrorist. The fact that the fight against domestic terrorism in the United States requires one to go back in time, not only highlights the contextual specificity of the war on terror and limits of its discourses, but mirrors America's inability to acknowledge domestic terrorism without looking backwards.

While Blackwater was in Iraq and Afghanistan fighting the war on terror (with a short stopover in New Orleans during Katrina), the Minutemen picked up the mantle of American vigilantism from the extreme right. Named after the Revolution-era militias and billing themselves as 'Americans doing the jobs that our Government won't do',⁸⁰ the Minutemen patrolled the US-Mexican border to defend the nation against unarmed migrant Mexican laborers. This was a job that Blackwater also applied to do under the expanded definition of national security that conflates terrorism and immigration at the border.⁸¹ In

response to the Minutemen and others, the SPLC turned its attention to anti-immigrant vigilantes with its *Nativist News*, as they not only became more prevalent than the racist anti-government extreme right, but share their anti-immigrant xenophobia with (and gain legitimacy from) mainstream media and politicians, who were using the issue to distract from the war and fight the 2006 mid-term elections. What this shows is that in the United States, the state may not have the monopoly on violence, but it has the power to determine who is a terrorist, who is a soldier, who is a freedom fighter, who is a patriot and who is merely a vigilant citizen.⁸²

Coda: Obama, race and the extreme right

Inevitably, terrorism reared its head during the 2008 presidential election campaign between John McCain and Barack Obama. The terrorist that was evoked was not only the foreign Muslim terrorist, but also the domestic American one. When foreign or international terrorism was evoked in the election, it was the Muslim terrorist in order to not only question Obama's foreign policy and domestic credentials, but accuse him of being a covert Muslim and hence a terrorist. This rumor was circulated widely in the right-wing media and email campaigns, and commented on in the now infamous cover image of the July 21, 2008 *New Yorker* titled 'The Politics of Fear'.⁸³ The image showed Barack Obama as a Muslim and his wife Michelle as a Black Power militant standing in the Oval Office of the White House by a fire over which hangs a portrait of Osama bin Laden and in which an American flag burns. When domestic terrorism was evoked, it was neither the white supremacist terrorists who would target African-Americans like Obama, nor the anti-abortion terrorists that share a cause and political-religious affiliations with McCain's Vice Presidential nominee Governor Sarah Palin, but the now defunct 1960s and 1970s left wing terrorism of the Weather Underground. This link is based on Obama's tenuous association with former Weatherman William Ayers, as the two met on an education committee early in the Senator's career. According to Palin, speaking about this link at a rally for donors in Englewood, Colorado on 4 October, 2008:

Our opponent...is someone who sees America, it seems, as being so imperfect, imperfect enough, that he's palling around with terrorists who would target their own country.⁸⁴

In addition to serving as a means to demonize Obama in a manner that is relevant to the war on terror context, the choice of the Weathermen as a reference point establishes Obama as the symbolic link between conservatives' greatest hate figures and nightmares, Muslim terrorists, Black militants and left-wing revolutionaries. By adding the Weather Underground to the mix, the demonization of Obama moved beyond race to a more fundamental anti-American radicalism and terrorism. Ironically, the African-American candidate was being targeted with the accusation of terrorism and anti-Americanism, in spite of a

history in which terror was the weapon of racists against African-Americans fighting to gain the rights accorded to those very Americans that the terrorists looked like and claimed to represent. It was perhaps fitting that, in response to the accusations levied against Obama by the McCain campaign, Democratic Congressman John Lewis, a veteran of both the civil rights struggle and segregationist violence, said that this ‘sowing of seeds of hatred and division’ reminded him of the terrorism of the 1960s as well; but for Lewis, it was the rhetoric of George Wallace and others, which he blamed for the bombing of the 16th St. Baptist Church.⁸⁵ McCain rejected this comparison and accusation, but made the link himself when, in an attempt to argue that the press should address Obama’s alleged links to anti-American radicals and terrorists such as Ayers and Rashid Khalidi, a Palestinian Professor at Columbia University, he claimed that ‘[i]f there was a tape of John McCain in a neo-Nazi outfit, I think the treatment of the issue would be slightly different’.⁸⁶ That same week, Barack Obama became the target of a failed assassination plot by Daniel Cowart and Paul Schlesselman, two skinheads who planned a wave of terror targeting African-Americans across the country.⁸⁷ This was not an isolated incident.

According to the SPLC, there have been hundreds of racist incidents, from cross burnings to violent attacks since Obama’s election as the first African-American President,⁸⁸ as well as increasing evidence of racist extremists in the military,⁸⁹ like McVeigh, Rudolph or Braden. Concerns reached official levels on April 15th, 2009 when Homeland Security issued the report *Rightwing Extremism: Current Economic and Political Climate Fueling Resurgence in Radicalization and Recruitment*.⁹⁰ While criticized by many on the right, such concerns were realized soon after with the murder of abortion provider Dr. George Tiller in Wichita, Kansas by Scott Roeder on May 31st, 2009 and the shooting attack and murder of a security guard at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC by white supremacist and anti-Semitic activist James von Brunn on June 10th.⁹¹ It is ironic then that Obama should be seen as posing a terrorist threat to white America. Perhaps in addition to celebrating Obama’s victory, this is also the moment that America should critically reassess racism and terrorism, and the relationship between them in its history, particularly as the war on terror is at a turning point.⁹²

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