

Terrorists, Extremists, and Populists

How Terrorism in America is Creating a Social Divide

By, Chad Pierson

Abstract:

The U.S is experiencing an increasing trend in political polarization that has seemingly left no middle ground between left and right. The ramifications of which have led to the increasing growth of radical, populist politicians who have amplified the voices of people on the fringe, to give the appearance that they represent the majority. As a byproduct of tribalism, more formally known as social identity theory, there has been a marked increase in the belief that there are irreconcilable differences between Democrat and Republican. This thesis takes the position that this polarization stems from individual actors committing acts of terror, and the fear that it produces. This fear entrenches individuals into their self-categorization of left and right. Through politicians, media, and social influencers these fears are enhanced and directed towards opposing parties, creating a false existential crisis. These false existential crises allow for extremist ideologies to appear more legitimate, in that their first premise-an in-group is being threatened by an out-group- is being articulated by mainstream sources. To assert this premise this paper analyzes the rhetoric that surrounds a terrorist attack from both the left, and the right. This thesis argues that the increasingly inflammatory rhetoric of politicians, and media sources, is reactionary to terrorism, rather than the mainstream assertion of the converse.

Introduction:

This study hypothesizes that there is a direct correlation in terrorist attacks advancing the political agenda of opposing extremist groups. Additionally, it may be the case that there is causation, but further study would be required to elucidate that point. Proving this is important to understanding the impact media reporting has on extremist sentiments and on the political divide within the United States. Through analysis of Social Identity Theory, Extremism, Truth Decay, and Protracted Social Conflict the underlying issues become evident and solutions to combat this growing polarization can perhaps be found. Understanding this issue more intimately should affect policy makers' decisions in response to political violence in the future, specifically in how they choose to respond to a terrorist incident.

The largest terrorist attack of our lifetime occurred on September 11th, 2001. The fear and hate that was created from this attack extended past the perpetrators, Al-Qaeda,

and onto the Muslim community as a whole. The Muslim community, locally and abroad, condemned the September 11th attacks. However, this did not quell the fear and hate that was felt by non-Muslim Americans after the attack. The precipitous rise of hate crimes towards Muslims after 9/11 shows the immediate social reaction and how Al-Qaeda's attack negatively affected its perceived constituency. This reaction to a terrorist attack is not an outlier. Similar reactions have occurred after almost all terrorist attacks, regardless of the terrorists' affiliation. For American extremists, an out-group's terrorist attack gives credence to existing messages that their in-group is under attack, and that this in-group will be destroyed unless action is taken. In his book *Extremism*, Berger discusses the topic and terrorist motivations, "Terrorism serves multiple purposes for an extremist group, including the mobilization of supporters and sympathizers, as well as creating friction between an eligible in-group and an out-group, contributing to the radicalization of both groups."¹ The advocacy for this does not typically come in the outright recitation of their explicit goals, rather it comes through various subverted sources, including written works like *The Turner Diaries*, *Knights Under the Prophets Banner* and, *Rules of Radicals*, as well as mediums more palatable to a younger generation. Some of these subversions have manifested themselves as the Punch a Nazi meme, the litany of Alt-Right memes, or the trending Che Guevara T-shirts. These propaganda techniques, which at face value hold little merit, are given importance by opposing ideological terrorist attacks. These extremist groups use terrorist attacks to justify their radical claims by pointing towards their source material and attempting to confuse correlation with

¹ Berger, J. M. *Extremism*. The MIT Press, 2018. (104)

causation. This propaganda may not bring everyone to their level of thinking, but implicitly has furthered a divide between groups creating an artificial us vs. them scenario. In which people have been pushed away from democratic thoughts of cooperation between people of different political beliefs, and moved them towards the fringe. Populist politicians have heard the loud voices coming from the edges of the political spectrum and amplified these radical beliefs, giving them a substantial platform. As more politicians give credence to fringe beliefs, it isn't hard to understand how hate has filtered itself into mainstream society and brought more people to extremist thought camps. The social divide in the U.S has been directly impacted by the protracted social response to terrorism and how this response is furthering extremist ideologies.

Social Identity Theory:

Within the context of Social Identity Theory, which was conceived by Henri Tajfel in 1982, people perceive themselves through social perception, and then categorize themselves as belonging to a multitude of different social groups.² In practice, this can be as benign as the following example: "I am from Sacramento. People from Sacramento are Sacramento King's fans. I am a Sacramento King's Fan." Social comparison follows this analysis in that through one's own social categorization other people will not fall within this in-group. Using the same example: "I am a Sacramento Kings fan. The Sacramento Kings have a rivalry with the Los Angeles Lakers. I don't like the Lakers." Although, for most people athletic competitions are typically no more than friendly rivalries, for some it is significantly more. Tajfel begins to touch on how social behavior is affected by these

² Tajfel, Henri. "Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations." *Annual Review of Psychology*, 1 Feb. 1982

group dynamics; “the functions served by group affiliations...stress[ing] the conditions in which the behavior of individuals is closely related to their group membership rather than to their personal relations with other individuals.”³ The intensity of dislike and disassociation within the field of sports competitions frequently becomes verbally hostile, and in some instances physically. The stakes of a sports game are not nearly as potent as that of political advocates. As we have seen in recent years, the two leading political parties in America have drifted away from the center and deeper into their own end of the political spectrum.

This form of categorization with one group and not with another can also be described through in-group and out-group dynamics. Once again using the context of the Sacramento Kings: being a Sacramento Kings fan, my in-group would be with the Sacramento Kings Fans. The people who are members of other teams’ fan groups would be considered as part of the out-group.

A person’s unique social categorization is made up of inferences that place them in multiple different categories, with the importance of each varying according to the individual. These categories can be constituted by race, sex, ethnicity, nationality, sports team, or any other factor used to group people. It follows then that political party and orientation fall into this spectrum of categorization. In the context of this research, political orientation supersedes party affiliation; being devoutly conservative would constitute being on the right of the spectrum, and being a staunch liberal would put you on the left. Within this apparatus is a contingent on both sides of the spectrum which could be considered extremists. Their in-group is significantly more exclusive and is subsequently

³ Ibid., 24

actively trying to recruit people into their in-group from an eligible-in-group. Extremists view themselves as being explicitly involved in conflict, whereas those closer to the middle of the spectrum do not. However, as Henri Tajfel posits “even when there is no explicit or institutionalized conflict or competition between the groups, there is a tendency toward in-group favoring behavior.”⁴ This kind of favoring of behavior in part leads to the notion that extremists on an opposing political side may be worse or more dangerous than the ones on their own.

The eligible in-group is comprised of people who are not currently a part of their constituency, but have the potential to join. In the context of white nationalism, their in-group is explicitly limited to the people that believe in their ideology. However, all white Anglo-Saxons have the potential to join their organization and are thus included in their potential in-group. Minority peoples would be considered permanent members of their out-group. For political extremists, their eligible in-group is comprised of those with similar political views, extremists on the Far-Right recruit from the Political Right and extremists on the Far-Left recruit from the Political Left. The social categorization of groups and their alignment is important to the success and survival of extremist groups. The closer the political party is to the extremists the easier it is for the filtration of ideas to be passed from the extremist to the mainstream political party. Because of this, the growing polarization in the United States has been invaluable to extremists who wish to bring new members into their in-group.

Extremism:

⁴ Tajfel, “Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations.” (18)

J.M Berger defines extremism as “Extremism refers to the belief that an in-group’s success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group.”⁵ In the United States, there are multiple groups that are encompassed by this definition, and they fall on both sides of the political spectrum of Left and Right. In some instances, extremism manifests as more than just beliefs and turns into action or terrorism.⁶ Bruce Hoffman defines terrorism as “violence—or equally important, the threat of violence—used and directed in pursuit of, or in service of, a political aim.”⁷ Terrorism in the United States can be encompassed by the things we typically think of: political assassination, bombings, and armed action. It can also be more abstract: rallies or protests that turn violent (Like that of Antifa or The Proud Boys), or in illegal occupation by force/ threat of force (Like the occupation of the Oregon Wildlife Refuge).⁸ As we have discussed, these actions through the lens of Social Identity Theory and a fear of an out-group have created an atmosphere where the collective identity of these political groups each feel attacked by the opposing group, when in reality a small contingent of extremists are responsible. This failure in correctly associating terrorist actions with the responsible group has, somewhat ironically, but not completely unpredictably, caused a precipitous rise in extremist sentiments.

Extremists on the Far-Right are typically comprised of White Supremacists, extreme nationalism, and anti-immigrant factions. The Far-Left extremist groups are

⁵ Berger, J. M. *Extremism*. The MIT Press, 2018. (44)

⁶ This study uses Hoffman’s definition of terrorism.

⁷ Hoffman, Bruce. *Inside Terrorism*. REV - Revised, 2 ed., Columbia University Press, 2006. (3)

⁸ Associated Press in Portland, Oregon. “Two Convicted of Conspiracy in Armed Standoff at Oregon Wildlife Refuge.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 10 Mar. 2017

frequently based in communism and radical environmentalism. The unique ideologies of each group are less important in the need for understanding the growing political shift in the USA. What is significantly more important is to establish and understand where and how these ideas are being subverted into mainstream political beliefs. Additionally, the association made by each political body as to the origin of a terrorist attack, and where blame lies within the spectrum is more important than the individual or group who commits an attack. For instance; in the mind of someone of the Alt- Right, the blame of an Antifa attack will most certainly fall on the Political Left, even though Left-Wing politicians condemn such attacks.⁹ Similarly, in the mind of the Political Left the string of attacks by Incels, which can strictly be considered terrorism by Bruce Hoffman's definition, may be attributed as the fault of Conservatives and their positions on gun rights, despite there being no clear correlation with political ideology.¹⁰

In the United States the competition between Conservatives and Liberals has allowed extremists in both corners to spread their individual rhetoric to an audience who has become increasingly wary of the "other" or out-group. In extreme scenarios, like that of a terrorist attack from a perceived out-group member, opposing groups place blame with the entire opposing political spectrum, rather than the entity at fault, the terrorist actor and their organization. We can see this with the dramatic rise of hate crimes against Muslims following the 9/11 terrorist attack, where a large social group, namely Muslims,

⁹ Perticone, Joe. "Top Democrats Shift Blame to Trump after Armed Man Is Killed Attacking ICE Detention Center." *Business Insider*, Business Insider, 16 July 2019,

¹⁰ Mackintosh, Eliza. "How the Extreme-Right Gamified Terror." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 10 Oct. 2019

was blamed or hated for the actions of a small loosely related, but denounced, organization.¹¹

In Dina Al Raffie's work *Social Identity Theory for Investigating Islamic Extremism in the Diaspora*, he concisely correlates the importance of identity to individual radicalization. "The *new* radical successfully joins an imaginary elite social group, and the second task in recruiting... is the slow and steady demonization of the society that exists outside the group."¹² Although this paper focuses on Islamist organizations, we can view The Far-Right and Far-Left's radicalization process through the same lens. In a macro sense, this analysis shows the importance of having a social group that is perceived as being elite, and how the demonization of the out-group is a "slow and steady" process rather than something that happens overnight. Through trends in political polarization it can be inferred that this process is happening to the Political Right and Political Left.

Truth Decay:

The phenomenon of political discourse and alienation can be summarized through Kavanaugh & Rich's analysis of *Truth Decay*. The importance of recognizing the presence of Truth Decay in the growth of political polarization is integral to understanding the draw of Extremist ideologies. The Rand study that identified truth decay described it as "... a set of four related trends: 1. increasing disagreement about facts and analytical interpretations of facts and data 2. a blurring of the line between opinion and fact 3. the increasing relative volume, and resulting influence, of opinion and personal experience

¹¹ Kishi, Katayoun. "Assaults against Muslims in U.S. Surpass 2001 Level." *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, 15 Nov. 2017

¹² Al Raffie, Dina. "Social Identity Theory for Investigating Islamic Extremism in the Diaspora." *Journal of Strategic Security*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2013, (68)

over fact 4. declining trust in formerly respected sources of factual information.”¹³ Truth Decay shows the overarching trend of people beginning to rely on feelings and anecdotal evidence over fact. For Extremist ideologues there can be nothing more convenient. Extremist narratives require that the listener believes there is an overarching threat against their in-group, and within the United States that existential threat is completely fabricated. “If people were readily willing to update prior beliefs when presented with contradictory facts or relied more heavily on objective facts and analysis in [sic] decision making than on social cues, emotions, and heuristics, it would be easier to correct misinformation and disinformation, prevent or break up the formation of echo chambers, and train people to evaluate news media objectively.”¹⁴ These echo chambers of misinformation have emboldened and entrenched Extremists in their beliefs and have been either a cause or a symptom of the political polarization within the United States. This breakdown of the value and importance of truth surpasses the notions of “Fake News” spreading intellectual dishonesties, and has more to do with individuals’ decision to not care or believe evidence due to its content. Presumably, individuals choose not to believe facts that challenge their beliefs because the hard truth is more difficult to accept than the easy, already accepted lie.

Protracted Social Conflict:

In Edward Azar’s landmark book on Protracted Social Conflict, he discusses the importance of social factors in creating conflict. Contextually most of this work focuses on

¹³ Kavanagh, Jennifer and Michael D. Rich, Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018. (3)

¹⁴ Ibid., (82)

Post-Colonial states and third world countries, however through analysis of this text through the lens of a westernized country in the 21st century, and accepting the differences in social organizations, this work is invaluable to the understanding of the growing conflict we have seen within the United States. “When organizational and communication systems break down within an environment of mutual distrust between groups, protracted social conflict can begin to escalate. Initially a trigger may, but need not be, a trivial event...turning point at which individual victimization is collectively recognized.”¹⁵ The polarization and conflict within the United States political parties cannot easily be pointed to a specific “trivial event.” There have been far too many events, some trivial many much more severe, to point to a specific instance.

One such example of this is the shooting death of Michael Brown, an 18-year-old black man, by a white Police Officer in Ferguson, Missouri. The initial backlash of this incident were large protests against Police, and conservative policies, across the nation and the slogan “Hands up, Don’t Shoot.” Physical evidence and eye-witness testimony would eventually conclude that the shooting was justified¹⁶, however this did not quell the feelings and sentiments by the Black community that they were under attack by an existential threat. Statistically however, in a comprehensive study by the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America (PNAS) it was determined that “FOIS during 2015, officer race, sex, or experience did not predict the

¹⁵ Azar, Edward E., et al. “Protracted Social Conflict; Theory and Practice in the Middle East.” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1978, (12)

¹⁶ Peralta, Eyder, and Bill Chappell. “Ferguson Jury: No Charges For Officer In Michael Brown's Death.” *NPR*, NPR, 24 Nov. 2014, www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/11/24/366370100/grand-jury-reaches-decision-in-michael-brown-case.

race of a person fatally shot beyond relationships explained by county demographics.”¹⁷

That is not to say that other studies have not contradicted this report and suggested that African-American-Youth are in fact targeted by Police, like the study done by Roland Fryer in 2016. This study however fails to consider; violent crime rates in the neighborhoods of the shootings, or the ethnicity of the police officer involved in the shooting, leaving an incomplete analysis.¹⁸ Such studies imply that the overwhelming fear of an existential threat to Black civilians by White Police officers is unfounded, and that the anecdotal evidence of race based shootings does not follow. This specific incident manifested the murder of two NYPD Police Officers in 2014 by Ismaaiyl Abdullah Brinsley, who claimed the death of Michael Brown as motivation.¹⁹ Another example of this would be the effect of Ruby Ridge and Waco on the Oklahoma City Bomber. He (and many others) perceived these events as attacks on his perceived social group and validated his Extremist views. This kind of individual victimization being collectively recognized seems to be confirmed by our analysis of Social Identity Theory, and furthermore validates Extremist groups’ declarations of assault by an outside group.

If *Protracted Social Conflict* has not already begun in the United States, then the analysis of Azar’s work on mediating factors suggests that it is impending. Azar suggests that “mutually incompatible goals among parties amidst a lack of coordinating or mediating mechanisms give birth to conflict.”²⁰ For instance, polling data by Pew

¹⁷ Johnson, David, et al. “Officer Characteristics and Racial Disparities in Fatal Officer-Involved Shootings.” *PNAS*, July 2019

¹⁸ Fryer, Roland. “An Empirical Analysis of Racial Differences in Police Use of Force.” *NBER Working Paper Series*, July 2016

¹⁹ Zoroya, Gregg, and Trevor Hughes. “Social Media Posts Threatened 'Pigs'.” *USA Today*, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 22 Dec. 2014,

²⁰ Azar, “Protracted Social Conflict; Theory and Practice in the Middle East.” (5)

Research indicated that 45% of Republicans and 41% of Democrats feel that the other party is a “threat to the nation’s well-being.”²¹ Extremists ideology is rooted in the foundational premise that an out-group is attacking an in-group. Through this polling data we can see that the sentiments of a large swath of the population feels threatened. The perceived incompatibility of beliefs between the Political Left and Political Right is exacerbated by the polarization of media. This media polarization can be seen every weeknight by flipping back and forth between MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow and Fox News’s Sean Hannity, who interpret the same news story from diametrically opposed stances. Take for instance the conclusion of the Mueller Investigation. The same event that was viewed by Hannity as “totally vindicat(ing)”²² was viewed by Maddow as “damning.”²³ The influence of mainstream media could be used to coordinate and mediate these polarizing sentiments, by providing non-partisan analysis of events. However, as we see on a near daily basis, the media furthers the divide and associations that have created the sentiments that the other party is a “threat to the nations well-being.” The weaponization and lack of bi-partisanship of social institutions, that are meant to portray facts with some analysis, may be due to benign efforts to support their political party. But, what is clear is

²¹ Gramlich, John. “1. Feelings about Partisans and the Parties.” *Pew Research Center for the People and the Press*, 18 Sept. 2018,

²² Hemmer, Nicole, et al. “Nixon Didn't Have Fox News. Will That Make All the Difference to Trump Post-Mueller?” *NBCNews.com*, NBCUniversal News Group, 29 May 2019, 761.

²³ Moran, Lee. “Rachel Maddow Serves Up Delicious Analogy About The Mueller Report.” *HuffPost*, HuffPost, 20 Apr. 2019,

that with continued divisive rhetoric in concurrent media reunification of the Political Right and Political Left seems doubtful.

Research Design

This research paper uses a content analysis of multiple sources, namely: mainstream media outlets, Instagram Influencers, Twitter accounts, and the manifestos of a Right-Wing and Left-Wing extremist. A content analysis allows for the examination of a variety of source material and to search for patterns, similarities, and differences. The usefulness of this approach while dissecting a currently occurring phenomenon, is that it allows for the analysis of widely distributed material that is still widely in print. The social media pages, and media publications that are analyzed contain important information and inferences that have yet to be analyzed by a relatively objective participant. The qualitative aspect of a content analysis portrays a detailed, dynamic image of what is occurring, but fails to provide the quantitative aspects that include factual, statistical data.

Findings

To prove that extremist rhetoric has filtered itself into mainstream political thought, through the actions of individual terrorists, this paper analyzes large political social media pages, social media of politicians, and the social media of political pundits, immediately after an attack is committed. The important assertions that would prove this phenomenon would be the implication, or outright recitation that; their in-group is under attack, the fault lies with political adversaries or groups, and that violent action is warranted to combat this threat. In conjunction with this analysis of extremist sentiment, this paper aims to point to the signs and symptoms of Protracted Social Conflict, Truth Decay, and how Social Identity Theory and Identity Politics have created a Us vs Them scenario.

To show that this extremist rhetoric is mainstream on both sides of the spectrum, we first use the examples of two terrorist attacks that occurred within a month of each other in July and August 2019. The first attack occurred by Willem Van Spronsen on July 13th, and was intended to destroy the ICE detention facility in Tacoma Washington. Spronsen's attack was interceded by Police forces before any undue harm was caused by Spronsen. Democrats were quick to denounce and shift blame for the attack. Rep Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez said ""Any act of violence is of course terrible."²⁴ Rep Pramila Jayapal tried to push the blame towards her political adversaries on the right by pointing to Trump's rhetoric "I think the question is what role is the president's rhetoric playing?"²⁵ In the second attack on August 3rd, Patrick Crusius directly attacked Hispanic people and was motivated by far-right conspiracy theories. Crusius's attack claimed the lives of 22 people, and was nearly immediately condemned by Right-Wing politicians such as President Donald Trump in a statement on twitter saying "Today's shooting in El Paso, Texas, was not only tragic, it was an act of cowardice. I know that I stand with everyone in this Country to condemn today's hateful act. There are no reasons or excuses that will ever justify killing innocent people...."²⁶ This renunciation of terrorist attacks is a common thread amongst politicians after an attack that is associated with their in-group, but the converse reaction to when an attack occurs against their in-group is more important. Weeks after Crusius's attack on an ICE facility, President Trump Tweeted out during a

²⁴ Perticone, Joe. "Top Democrats Shift Blame to Trump after Armed Man Is Killed Attacking ICE Detention Center." *Business Insider*, Business Insider, 16 July 2019

²⁵ Ibid.,

²⁶ Trump, Donald J. "Today's Shooting in El Paso, Texas, Was Not Only Tragic, It Was an Act of Cowardice. I Know That I Stand with Everyone in This Country to Condemn Today's Hateful Act. There Are No Reasons or Excuses That Will Ever Justify Killing Innocent People...." *Twitter*, Twitter, 4 Aug. 2019,

protest that he is considering naming the organization that Spronsen claimed, Antifa, an "ORGANIZATION OF TERROR."²⁷ There is a stark contrast in the associations made by the President between the individual and the larger group when it comes to his in-group, but not the converse. The implicit bias of association in the face of a terrorist incident is repeated by large swaths of politicians, each favoring their perceived in-group.

Response to Left Wing Terrorism:

Willem Von Spronsen attack on Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention center in Tacoma Washington, July 13, 2019.

The failure of Willem Van Spronsen to inflict any casualties or cause a substantial amount of damage to the ICE facility he targeted is something that should be accounted for in the response by Right Wing social media pages. There were, however, multiple posts to Instagram by the Conservative page dc_draino, run by Rogan O'Handley, who claims to be; "#1 for Exposing Socialist Lies, Anti-White Nationalism, Citizen Journalist, and a Lawyer." Dc_draino has 695K followers on Instagram including Right Wing figures such as Rep Dan Crenshaw and Donald Trump Jr.²⁸

The first post following the attack was a repost of a Twitter post by Ryan Saavedra (313.1K Followers) from The Daily Wire.²⁹ The tweet outright places responsibility for this

²⁷ Trump, Donald J. "Major Consideration Is Being given to Naming ANTIFA an 'ORGANIZATION OF TERROR.'" *Portland Is Being Watched Very Closely. Hopefully the Mayor Will Be Able to Properly Do His Job!* *Twitter*, Twitter, 17 Aug. 2019,

²⁸ "O'Handley Rogan (@dc_draino) • Instagram Photos and Videos." *Instagram*, www.instagram.com/dc_draino/. Sourced (11/19/2019)

²⁹ Saavedra Ryan Verified. "Ryan Saavedra (@RealSaavedra)." *Twitter*, Twitter, 1 Sept. 2019, twitter.com/RealSaavedra.

terrorist attack with representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) and her “inflammatory lies.” Dc_draino adds that the representative is a “lying PSYCHO,” and that “[Spronsen] he was inspired by her reckless lies and radicalism.” Dc_draino goes farther by stating that “The dead felon is legally responsible for his actions, but AOC is now literally inciting domestic terrorism.” This post fails to make the deliberate implication that the political right in-group is under attack. However, it does place the blame of the attack with political adversaries, namely Rep Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, places the death of the attacker at the behest of Rep AOC, and erroneously claims she is inciting terrorism. Protracted Social Conflict requires a breakdown of communication and an environment of mutual distrust. This mutual distrust and breakdown can be seen here through dc_draino’s statements indicating that “AOC is now literally inciting domestic terrorism,” when in fact there is no explicit encouragement for terrorist action that can be considered “literal” by an objective observer. Dc_draino’s distrust of Liberal politicians perfectly fits into the context of Truth Decay where instead of facts and “literal” objective analysis, feelings and pre-conceived notions play a larger role in assessment and analysis. The blurring of lines of fact and opinion in social media has exacerbated this mistrust.

Figure 2. dc_draino post, 13 July 2019.



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The second post by dc_draino on the topic of Willem Van Spronsen's failed attack did not deliberately include any reference to the attack itself. However, as it was posted the day after the attack, the inference can be made that it is directly correlated. This post included a video of protesters replacing an American flag with a Mexican flag at an ICE facility in Aurora, Colorado. The top text refers to the protesters as "leftist radicals," and Democrats as "literally anti-American." Dc_draino's caption is "If you don't vote for Trump and Patriotic Republicans in 2020, these are the people that will be ruling over you and

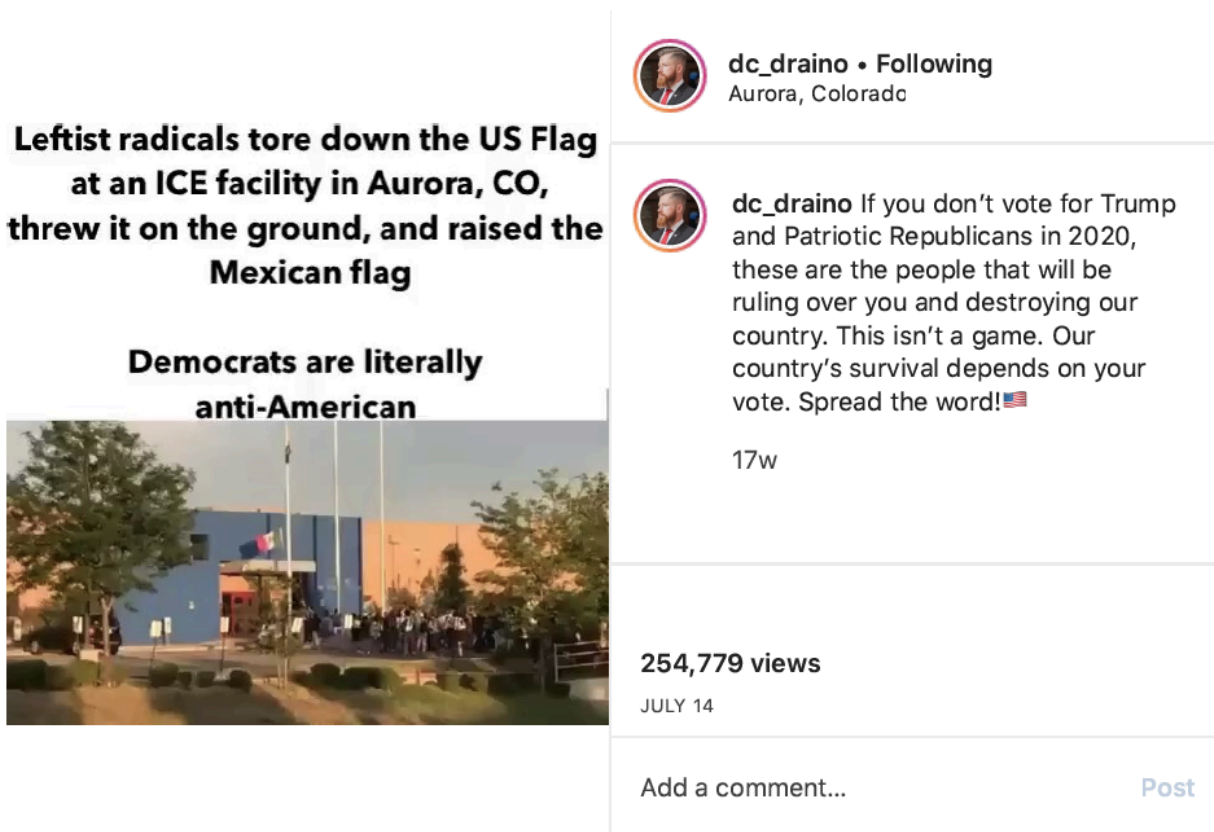
³⁰ "O'Handley Rogan (@dc_draino) • Instagram Photos and Videos." *Instagram*, www.instagram.com/dc_draino/. Sourced (11/19/2019)

destroying our country. This isn't a game. Our country's survival depends on your vote. Spread the word!"³¹ (See Figure 3.) In this post, we hear the outright recitation that the Political Right's In-Group is under attack by "leftist radicals," and "anti-American" Democrats.

There is an explicit call for an action, albeit peaceful, which suggests that failure to comply will be the destruction of the United States of America. The synopsis of this post is captured in a single line "Our country's survival depends on your vote." It is explicit that there is an overarching threat, that if not addressed will destroy the in-group's country. The same issues of Protracted Social Conflict are underlined in this post as in the second. The issue of Truth Decay has more perceived lethality here. The insinuation that the survival of the United States of America is contingent on the 2020 election is a fabricated disillusionment that has no basis in fact or objective reasoning. Rather it has its origins in the baseless feelings of conservative sentiments and attempts to pass extremist opinion as fact-based, rather than anecdotal evidence. The Us vs Them scenario, created by the implications of Social Identity Theory, is explicitly described here in dc_draino's statement that "Democrats are literally anti-American." The insinuation that Liberal protesters are inherently hostile to America, because their agenda is counter to Conservative ideology, is intellectually dishonest. The rhetoric found in this post hits almost all of the required points to be considered extremist, with the important exception that there is no explicit call for violent action.

³¹ "O'Handley Rogan (@dc_draino) • Instagram Photos and Videos." *Instagram*, www.instagram.com/dc_draino/. Sourced (11/19/2019)

Figure 3. dc_draino post, 14 July 2019.



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The Left-Wing social media page beingliberal is one of the more popular Left-Wing media pages which claims 1,690,000 fans on Facebook and has an additional following of 55k fans on Instagram.³³ After the 13 July 2019 attack on the Tacoma ICE facility by

³² “Rogan O’Handley (@dc_draino) • Instagram Photos and Videos.” *Instagram*, www.instagram.com/dc_draino/. Sourced (11/19/2019)

³³ “Being Liberal (@Beingliberal) • Instagram Photos and Videos.” *Instagram*, www.instagram.com/beingliberal/. Sourced (11/19/2019)

Willem Van Spronsen, there were no explicit posts that addressed, supported, denounced, or condemned the attack. However, six days after the terrorist attack beingliberal posted a World War 2 era propaganda piece that has to do with defeating the Nazis. The quote then initially said “We beat ‘em before, We’ll beat ‘em again!” with a picture of the World War 1 German soldier and below a Nazi German soldier, added a Trump supporter wearing a distinctive *Make America Great Again* hat, and removed the WW1 soldier.³⁴ The imagery clearly alludes to the position that Trump supporters are the reincarnation of Nazis. The caption is just two hashtags; “#fight #fascists.” (See Figure 4.)

The association of the Political Right with Nazis suggests the idea that there is a war between the social in-groups of the political right and political left, and that the Right’s rhetoric is as wrong as the Nazi party’s. Claiming that one’s political opponent is a Nazi gives legitimacy to actions taken to combat them. The weapon being thrust towards the MAGA hat wearer suggests that violence is needed. The hashtag “#fight” supports the idea that violence is necessary to combat this “Nazi” threat. Through the lens of Protracted Social Conflict, this post creates the idea that there are *mutually incompatible goals* between the political Right and Left. The presence of Truth Decay can be seen here in the insinuation that the supporters of President Donald Trump are comparable to the Nazi party. Rhetoric from President Trump may be alarmist when it comes to the threat of illegal immigrants in the United States, but the suggestions by the Political Left that his actions mirror those of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party’s concentration camps are tenuous

³⁴ National Archives. “Research and Learning: Exhibitions: The Art of War: Propaganda: Home Front.” *The National Archives*, The National Archives, 6 May 2005,

at best, and have more to do with how the Political Left feels than reality. This post explicitly shows that there is a direct fight between in-groups, or Us vs Them. Although it is not explicitly stated as a response to the terrorist attack by Spronsen, the fact that it is posted just a few days later, and the refusal to acknowledge the attack in any way, leads viewers to draw these conclusions themselves.

Figure 4. beingliberal post, 19 July 2019



beingliberal • Following



beingliberal #fight #fascists

17w



cst2999 Damn right

17w Reply



timothv hernandez We fight bv



Liked by davidoyler and 1,307 others

JULY 19

Add a comment...

Post

35

³⁵ “Being Liberal (@Beingliberal) • Instagram Photos and Videos.” *Instagram*, www.instagram.com/beingliberal/. Sourced (11/19/2019)

Response to Right Wing Terrorism:

Patrick Crusius attack on a Walmart in El Paso Texas, August 3, 2019

The attack by Patrick Crusius was the single deadliest terrorist attack of 2019 so far (as of 17 November 2019). The response to this from both left wing and right wing political media pages, and politicians, was much larger than that of Willem Van Spronson. The political social media page beingliberal posted multiple political cartoons within the first few days after the attack, and the example that was selected for this analysis is meant to portray the typical sentiment of the multitude of posts. It is important to note that there were more than a dozen posts that supported the ideas construed in this one.³⁶ Beingliberal's Instagram page, the day after Crusius's terrorist attack, posted a cartoon of a man wearing a MAGA hat and holding an assault rifle watching President Donald Trump on TV say, "These are horrible, horrible people...." The caption claims that "[sic]The blood is on the hands of tRump and his GOP enablers. #VoteThemOut #VoteBlueNoMatterWhoIn2020 –Up and Down the Ballot." (See Figure 5).

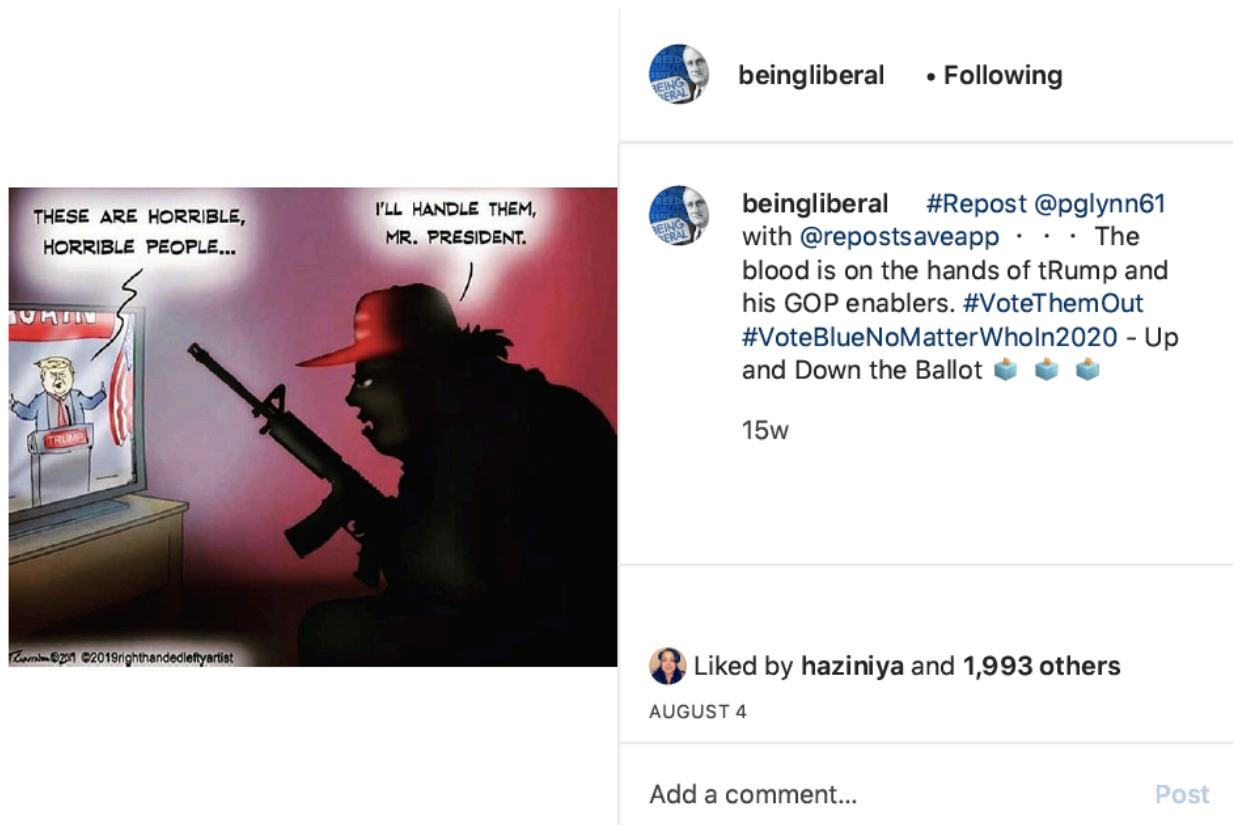
This post by beingliberal suggests that President Trump is the prime motivating factor behind Crusius's attack and presumably any other attack made in the same vein. There is no suggestion that violent action is necessary to combat this threat, nor does the blame extend past President Trump and onto the Political Right. There is not an easy connection from this post to Protracted Social Conflict. Truth Decay may be evident here however. In a manifesto posted before the shooting, Crusius cited his motivations having to do with right wing extremist theories, specifically the Great Replacement Theory, and

³⁶ "Being Liberal (@Beingliberal) • Instagram Photos and Videos." *Instagram*,

claimed his motivations outdate Donald Trump's.³⁷ The causation that this cartoon suggests cannot, and certainly wasn't proven by any factual basis. Rather this causation stems from feelings and anecdotal evidence. Aspects of Social Identity Theory come into play here through identity politics, through the recognition by the political left that the Hispanic people who were attacked in this tragedy belonged to their in-group. This identification as a whole group creates the idea that the entire Political Left was attacked, by a President Trump supporter, instead of just the Hispanic people who were targeted that day. The suggestion that blood is on Donald Trump's hands was recurring in many of the memes that were posted by beingliberal in the days following, despite of the denouncement of the act made by President Trump.

³⁷ Crusius, Patrick, et al. "The Inconvenient Truth: The Manifesto of El Paso Walmart Shooter Patrick Crusius." *European Freedom Publications*, 5 Aug. 2019

Figure 5. beingliberal post, 4 August 2019.



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Less than a week after the terrorist attack by Patrick Crusius, beingliberal had another post correlated with the attack. This political cartoon shows two men walking past the bodies of multiple dead people, including women, a child, and a police officer. One man is labeled *NRA* and holds an assault rifle, the other is labeled *GOP* and is holding the hand of the other man and saying, “We’ve accomplished so much together.” Behind them is a trail of blood and their bloody footprints. The caption tags the *NRA* and the *GOP* Instagram pages, and the hashtags; #guns #gunviolence #America.

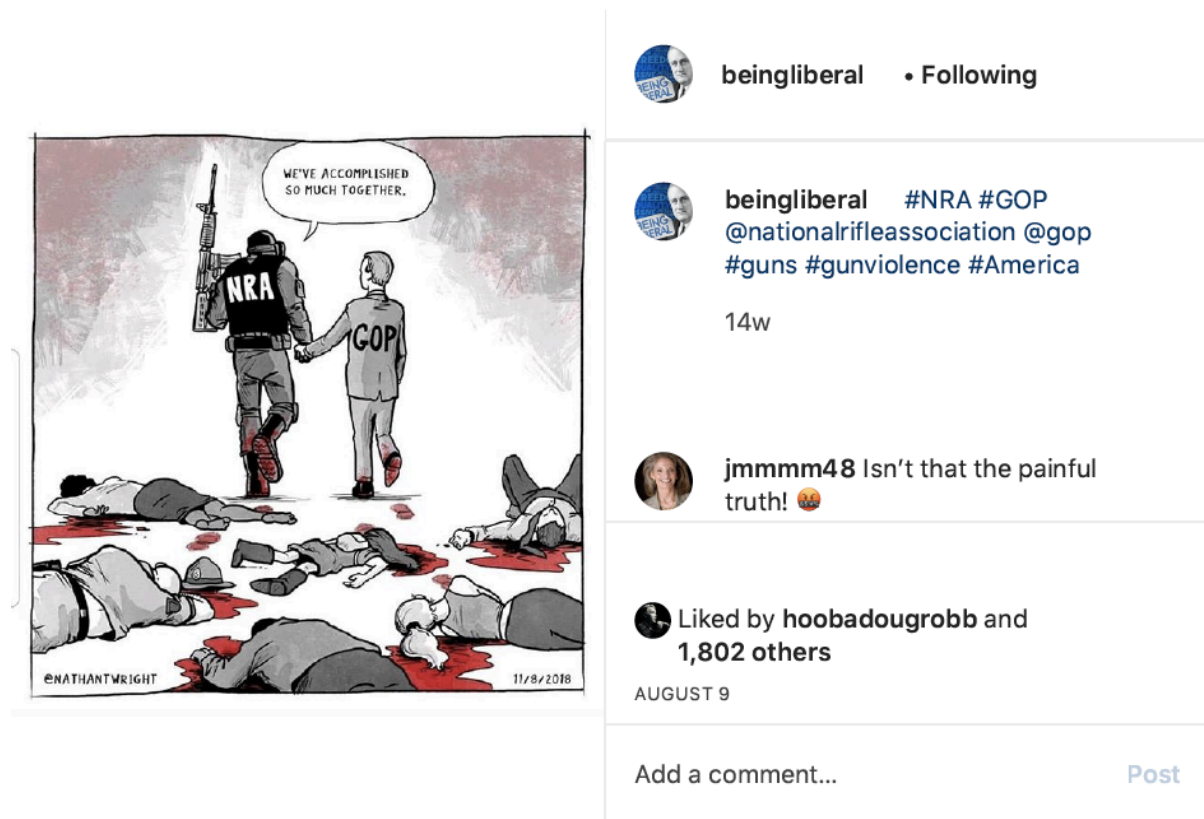
³⁸ “Being Liberal (@Beingliberal) • Instagram Photos and Videos.” *Instagram*, www.instagram.com/beingliberal/. Sourced (11/19/2019)

This post by beingliberal does not clearly delineate that the Political Left's in-group is under attack exclusively, but does place the blame for such attacks clearly on the Republican Party. There is no call for action, violent or otherwise. There is an element of Protracted Social Conflict and Extremism in the underlying message that the existence of the GOP is a threat to the American people. The inclusion of the National Rifle Association (NRA) in this post points to the ideas expressed by the San Francisco's Board of Supervisors that the NRA is a terrorist organization.³⁹ To date there has not been a single NRA member convicted of a terrorist attack, nor has the organization or its members threatened any violence towards anyone. Per Bruce Hoffman's definition we can conclude that this connection to terrorism is unfounded, and in fact, this analysis is the product of Truth Decay. This post affirms the Us vs Them fallacy found in extremist ideologies that there is an out-group that is attacking the in-group. The issue being that, as previously mentioned, leaders of the GOP immediately condemned the attack and claimed that this use of violence is never justified.⁴⁰

³⁹ Har, Janie. "NRA and San Francisco Mayor Spar over 'Terrorist' Resolution." *AP NEWS*, Associated Press, 1 Oct. 2019,

⁴⁰ Trump, Donald J. "Today's Shooting in El Paso, Texas, Was Not Only Tragic, It Was an Act of Cowardice. I Know That I Stand with Everyone in This Country to Condemn Today's Hateful Act. There Are No Reasons or Excuses That Will Ever Justify Killing Innocent People...." *Twitter*, Twitter, 4 Aug. 2019,

Figure 6. beingliberal post, 9 August 2019.



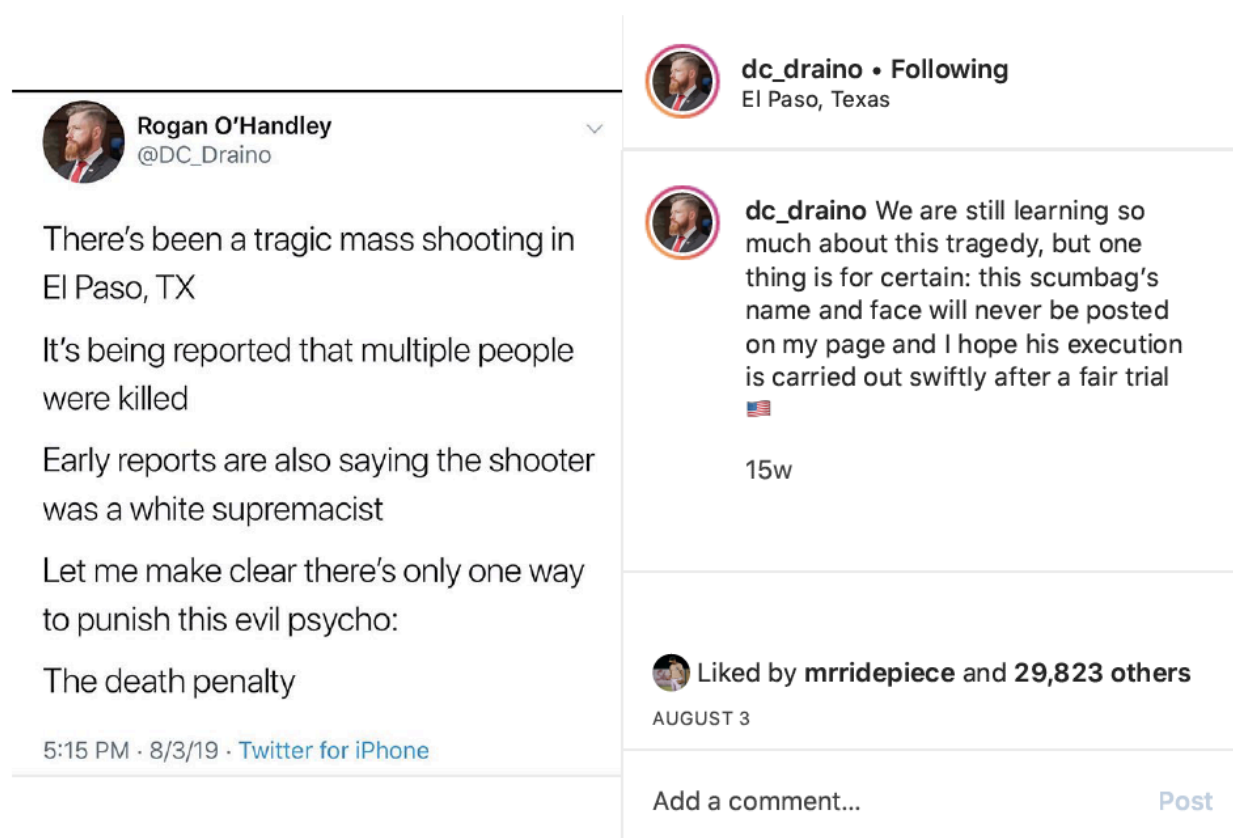
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In the wake of the August 3rd shooting by Patrick Crusius, Right Wing social media page *dc_draino* was quick to publish a response to this attack. The response acknowledges claims that the shooter is a white supremacist, refers to the event as a tragedy, and suggests that the shooter is an “evil psycho,” who deserved the death penalty. In the comment for this post, he goes on to refer to the terrorist as a scumbag and further allude to the need for trial and execution of Crusius, who he explicitly refuses

⁴¹ “Being Liberal (@Beingliberal) • Instagram Photos and Videos.” *Instagram*, www.instagram.com/beingliberal/. Sourced (11/19/19)

to name. In this response, we do not see any of the signs of political extremism that we have been searching for. After this attack which was directly associated with the political right, there is the direct condemnation of the attack by dc_draino. There is no implication that the blame should be shifted onto the political left, rather that the blame belongs with the individual who committed the attack. The elements of Protracted Social Conflict, Truth Decay, and application of Social Identity Theory, do not gain a strong amount of validity from this post.

Figure 6. dc_draino post, 3 August 2019.



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⁴² "Rogan O'Handley (@dc_draino) • Instagram Photos and Videos." *Instagram*, www.instagram.com/dc_draino/. Sourced (11/19/2019)

Spronsen and CNN

Two months prior to Willem Van Spronsen's terrorist attack in Tacoma Washington, CNN Host, Walter Kamau Bell of *United Shades of America* posted an endorsement of the Puget Sound John Brown Gun Club (PSJBGC), which Willem Van Spronsen belonged to.⁴³ In an episode of *United Shades of America*, Bell dives into the world of the PSJBGC, interviews members, attends a protest, and visits a gun range where a group of people are training.⁴⁴ Bell refers to PSJBGC as doing "good work" and that people should "Do what you can to support them." (See Figure 7). In a preview for the episode Spronsen can be seen standing in the background.⁴⁵ After Spronsen was killed by police a vigil was held by PSJBGC adjacent to the site that he attacked two weeks prior.⁴⁶ To the PSJBGC, Spronsen is viewed somewhat as a martyr who died heroically, rather than a domestic terrorist who was engaging in an attack that, if successful, could have killed hundreds.⁴⁷ The consensus among the political Left is to embrace illegal immigration, and thus to identify illegal immigrants as being a part of their

⁴³ Bell, W. Kamau. "As You Are Watching the #UnitedShades Episode about @PugetSoundJBGC & the Good Work They Are Doing to Actively End White Supremacy Just Understand That Being on My Show Is Bringing a Lot More Harassment Their Way. Do What You Can to Support Them. □□ <https://t.co/HJCEjTdXnh>." *Twitter*, Twitter, 13 May 2019.

⁴⁴ Bell, Walter Kamau. "United Shades of America : CNNW : May 25, 2019 8:00pm-9:00pm PDT : Free Borrow & Streaming." *Internet Archive*, 25 May 2019

⁴⁵ Flood, Brian. "This Is CNN? Network Apparently Recently Glorified ICE Detention Center Attacker." *Fox News*, FOX News Network, 15 July 2019.

⁴⁶ "Willem Van Spronsen Present!" - *Puget Sound John Brown Gun Club*, 28 July 2019

⁴⁷ ICE former Acting Director Tom Homan said on "[Fox & Friends](#)" on Thursday. "Their professionalism and quick response prevented the loss of hundreds and hundreds of lives, so hats off to them and their quick response." <https://www.foxnews.com/us/washington-ice-detention-center-attack-flames>

in-group. Through Social Identity Theory premises, the actions of ICE and others against illegal immigrants are actions against them. PSJBGC views that armed action is required to combat ICE. By the definitional framework we have established this means that the PSJBGC is an extremist organization. CNN's Host endorsing this extremist organization was problematic before Spronsen's terrorist attack. His failure to address or delete his endorsement can be seen as tacitly agreeing with Spronsen and the PSJBGC.

Figure 7. W. Kamau Bell Tweet, 12 May 2019.



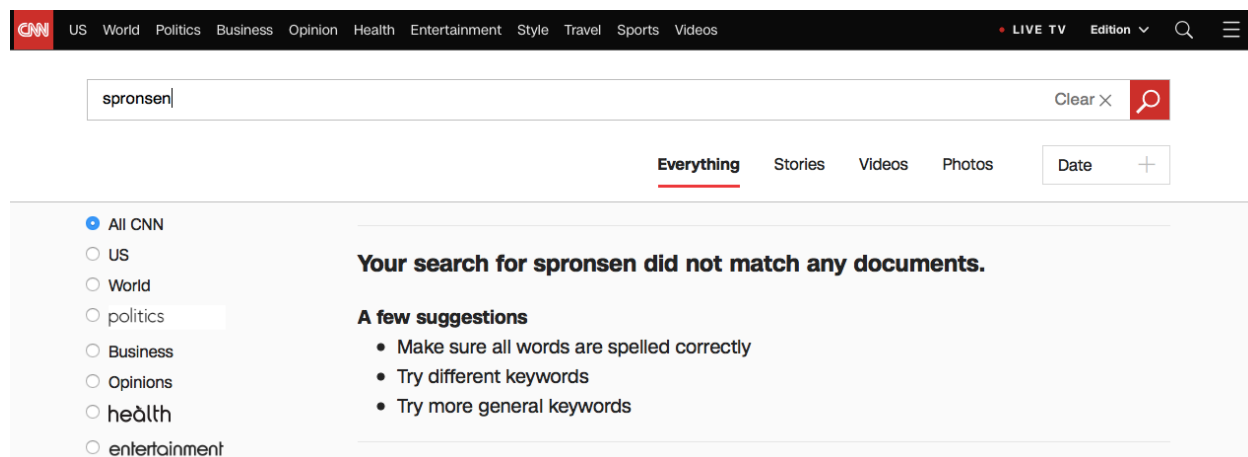
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⁴⁸ Bell, Walter Kamau. "United Shades of America: CNNW : May 25, 2019 8:00pm-9:00pm PDT : Free Borrow & Streaming." *Internet Archive*, 25 May 2019, archive.org/details/CNNW_20190526_030000_United_Shades_of_America/start/1860/end/1920.

CNN published one article on the 13 July attack in Tacoma Washington. On the 13th of July, Ray Sanchez published an article titled, “Man accused of hurling incendiary devices at Washington ICE facility fatally shot by police.”⁴⁹ The article spoke about the peaceful protests that had occurred at the ICE facilities on the day prior, the planned “ICE raids,” the number of detainees in the facility, and stated that there was no clear motivation for the attack, at the time of the report. In the days that followed, when additional information became available, CNN failed to publish any additional stories about the ICE attack, or about the attacker Willem Van Spronsen, nor did they update the initial story to reflect the new facts. A search on CNN’s website for “Spronsen” will illicit no documents or articles. (Figure 8). The failure of CNN to publish an accurate article of the events that occurred on 13 July 2019 shows the absolute partisanship of the organization. The denial to produce and update facts in the presence of new data can be associated with the organizational breakdown of communication systems discussed in Protracted Social Conflict. The fallout of this breakdown and failure to produce facts is seen in the aforementioned Truth Decay, specifically the reason as to why there is *declining trust in previously respected sources*.

⁴⁹ Sanchez, Ray. “Man Accused of Hurling Incendiary Devices at Washington ICE Facility Fatally Shot by Police.” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 13 July 2019

Figure 8. CNN search query: Spronsen, 19 November 2019.



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Fox News ran several articles that released the name and the facts behind Spronsen's attack, and included the endorsement of PSJBGC by Walter Kamau Bell. In a search of Fox News's website for stories related to "Spronsen," nine results were found (See Figure 9) all pertaining to the 13 July attack, and analysis of the events and linked organizations. This cross-reference of search queries shows the partisanship in coverage by CNN. The breakdown and failure of even-handed media reporting can be seen by this partisan comparison. This same anomaly was not found with the same search query, in the case of Patrick Crusius Fox News and CNN both had a similar quality, and quantity of stories about the Right-Wing extremist.

⁵⁰ "Breaking News, Latest News and Videos." *CNN*, Cable News Network, edition.cnn.com/search?q=Spronsen. Sourced (11/19/2019)

Figure 9. FOX News search query: Spronsen, 19 November 2019.



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There was sharp criticism of the rhetoric of media sites like Fox News and Right-Wing politicians like President Donald Trump, before the terrorist attack in El Paso by Patrick Crusius. However, after the attack occurred main news outlets documented similarities in the rhetoric between Crusius and President Trump and many criticized his rhetoric for impacting the shooter. Phrases from Crusius about “the Hispanic invasion of Texas,” mirrored ads and rhetoric from President Donald Trump on Twitter and Facebook.⁵² President Trump used the terminology on multiple occasions before the El Paso shooting to describe illegal immigration and the flow of illegal drugs across the southern border of the United States. A social media analysis by the Guardian of Trump’s ads suggests that he used the term *invasion* over 2,000 times.⁵³ Since the shooting

⁵¹ “Search.” *Fox News*, FOX News Network, www.foxnews.com/search-results/search?q=Crusius. Sourced (11/19/2019)

⁵² Crusius, Patrick, et al. “The Inconvenient Truth: The Manifesto of El Paso Walmart Shooter Patrick Crusius.” *European Freedom Publications*, 5 Aug. 2019,

⁵³ Wong, Julia Carrie. “Trump Referred to Immigrant 'Invasion' in 2,000 Facebook Ads, Analysis Reveals.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 5 Aug. 2019,

however, President Trump has seemingly softened his tone by no longer using such alarmist language. Fox News however, decided not to make a change in rhetoric following the release of Crusius's manifesto. Media Matters published a piece criticizing Fox News for its failure to move away from the phrase *invasion* after the El Paso shooting.

This change in terminology by the President tells us that using the word *invasion* to describe illegal immigration was incorrect. If President Trump firmly believed that an invasion was occurring, he would not stop affirming it because of an individual's attack. Proof of this can be seen by the steadfastness in support for the Second Amendment and gun rights after dozens of school shootings in the U.S.⁵⁴ The parallels between Crusius and President Trump's speech cannot in itself be considered extremist. The term, which is factually inaccurate, does not suggest the President condones or supports violent action to stem illegal immigration. It does assert that the President's in-group is under attack, and his change in rhetoric after the attack may be too little too late, but still shows his lack of desire for violent confrontation. The factual inaccuracy of an *invasion* can be viewed as symptomatic of Truth Decay, in that Crusius undoubtedly believes that there is an *invasion* of illegal immigrants, despite there being no supporting data, besides the anecdotal, unsupported rantings Crusius decries in his manifesto.

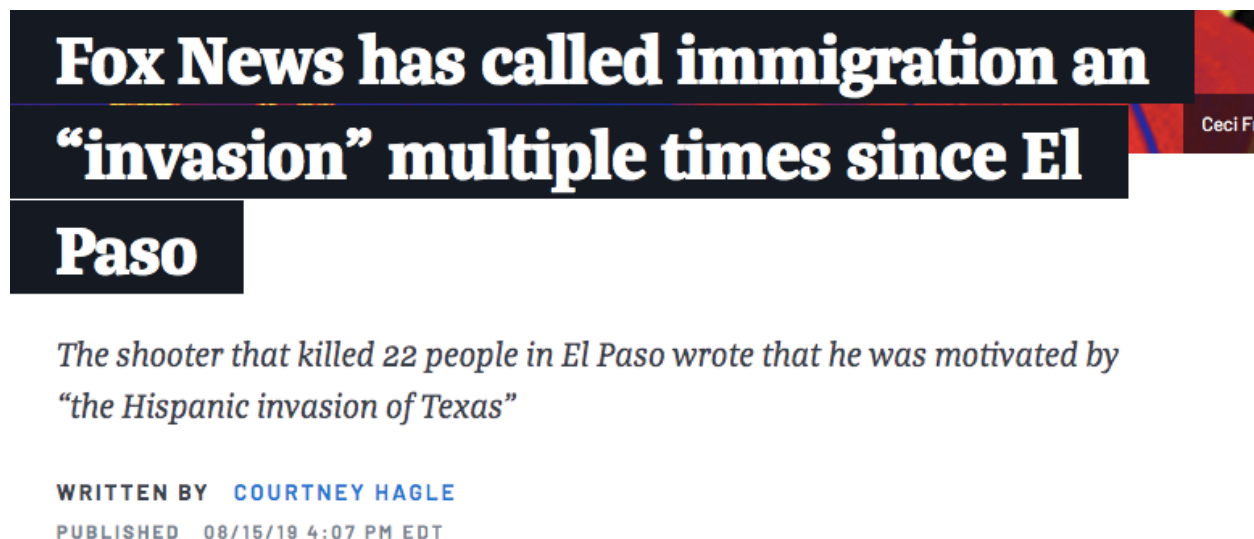
Paradoxically there was substantially less reproach by media outlets of Rep Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's statements about calling ICE detention facilities concentration camps, even though Spronsen echoed this line in his manifesto.⁵⁵ Similarly,

⁵⁴ Vittoria Elliott New York @telliott. "Trump Quietly Backs Away from Gun Reform." *The Independent*, Independent Digital News and Media, 1 Nov. 2019

⁵⁵ Spronsen, Willem Van. "Thread by @Oathkeepers: 'Manifesto & Farewell Letter of Antifa Terrorist Willem Van Spronsen, Who Attacked Tacoma ICE Detention Center."

Crusius's claims of a Hispanic invasion and Spronsen's of there being concentration camps are unfounded. The repeated rhetoric of politicians cannot be blamed for the actions of these individuals, both claim to have ideological links that extend far past the politicians' inflammatory language. However, what this does make clear is that the devolution of American politics to a state that mirrors extremists. The intellectual dishonesty of politicians, media sources, and social media influencers aids in the creation of Truth Decay, and the inclusion of extremist ideas in mainstream society.

Figure 10. Media Matters for America Headline, 15 August 2019.



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⁵⁶ Hagle, Courtney. “Fox News Has Called Immigration an ‘Invasion’ Multiple Times since El Paso.” *Media Matters for America*, 15 Aug. 2019, www.mediamatters.org/fox-news/fox-news-has-called-immigration-invasion-multiple-times-el-paso.

Conclusion:

The actions of terrorists have created alienation between the political parties in America that has allowed extremist ideology to filter into the mainstream. In the span of a month two terrorist attacks, from opposite sides of the political spectrum, occurred that challenged the integrity of America's foundation. Spronsen and Crusius both believed in separate, but intellectually fallible, extremist ideologies that caused them to commit heinous acts of terrorism. Through political polarization and Truth Decay these acts of aggression have been lauded as the fault of opposing political parties, who have each unequivocally personally condemned such attacks. In every instance of violence, a political group that does not condone or support in anyway the actions of the aggressor are blamed for an attack by opposing politicians, mainstream media, and political social media pages.

The Political Left and Political Right have seemingly become more obsessed with the condemnation of the opposite side, than with the individual responsible, and objective truth. The impact of *Social Identity Theory's* clouds how individuals interpret terrorist attacks. Instead of all terrorist violence being bad, out-group terrorism somehow seems worse. The repetition of fearful rhetoric of an existential threat causes individuals to believe in extremist ideologies that have been preaching of this fabricated threat for years. Bombastic language from populist politicians, if left unchecked, may be unintentionally affirming extremist political ideologies. The extremist rhetoric that these terrorists are using in their manifestos is something that politicians should be moving away from, rather than moving towards.

Willem Van Spronsen participated in an attack that had the potential to kill hundreds of people. The political right decried that “Democrats are literally anti-American.”⁵⁷ The political left disassociated and condemned. The same parable happened when Patrick Crusius murdered twenty-two people, but instead conservatives were called “#Fascists”⁵⁸ and correlated with being Nazis. The political right again disassociated and condemned the attack. Both sides seem to fail in recognize this pattern otherwise they would end the hypocrisy. This pattern follows Fromkin’s analysis of *The Strategy of Terrorism*, in that the overreaction by the bereaved group causes the self-defeating action. The social and political overreaction to an extremist event pushes its constituency towards polarization, where extremist sentiments can flourish. The reality of these terrorist attacks is that they are committed by individuals who have low thresholds for violence, rather than some overarching conspiracy that politicians like President Trump or Rep Ocasio-Cortez are purposefully inciting violence.

Protracted Social Conflict has not quite entered our society, but it has the potential to develop. The perceived incompatibility of goals between the Political left and Political Right cannot continue unabated for a prolonged period without continued escalation. The mitigating factors such as unifying leadership, bi-partisan cooperation, and responsible media can stem the growth of conflict within the United States and discontinue the polarization that has run rampant.

⁵⁷ “Rogan O’Handley (@dc_draino) • Instagram Photos and Videos.” *Instagram*, www.instagram.com/dc_draino/. Sourced (11/19/2019)

⁵⁸ “Being Liberal (@Beingliberal) • Instagram Photos and Videos.” *Instagram*, www.instagram.com/beingliberal/. Sourced (11/19/2019)

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