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The resurgence of the US paramilitary right

Right-wing paramilitary groups have a long tradition in the US. But never has the movement been so visible — and so violent

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The United States of America has a long history of anti-government paramilitary groups. Ideologically, these are predominantly right-wing extremists. But never before has this movement been so confusing, heterogeneous and so widely visible as it is today.

It also never been so violent: In June, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) analysed a data set of terrorist attacks in the United States between January 1994 and May 2020. The CSIS concluded that right-wing terrorism, compared to other types of political violence such as radical-left or Islamist-motivated, has increased at a significantly higher rate. Right-wing extremists are responsible for two-thirds of the attacks planned and actually carried out in 2019 and for around 90 per cent of those from January to May 2020. The violence perpetrated by these paramilitary groups is by no means regional in nature or origin. In the past six years, a total of 42 states have been affected by right-wing extremist violence.

American security agencies agree with the CSIS analysis. In August 2019, the National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC) added so-called 'white supremacist violence' – that is, racially motivated violence by whites – to its scope of operations, doing so almost unnoticed. In September 2019, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) named the danger of right-wing extremist violence as serious as that of jihadist groups such as ISIS or Al Qaeda. In February 2020, the FBI also expressed its concern.

The conspiracy theories

Despite the heterogeneity of the people and groups active within the

right-wing extremist paramilitary milieu, they essentially have three things in common: the ideological element of the 'Great Replacement' (based on the theory of a government policy seeking a large-scale replacment of the white majority population by immigrants), the strategy of Accelerationism and a very active presence on the internet. Accelerationists believe that modern society is already on the brink and that its impending collapse must be actively accelerated so that a fascist, ethno-nationalist society can take its place.

Time and time again, militias have been involved in armed conflicts with US federal authorities.

The current pandemic and protests surrounding the murder of George Floyd have fuelled the growth of this movement. In the past few months, Accelerationists have deliberately disseminated misinformation and conspiracy theories linking the pandemic to Jews and immigrants, whom they claim are responsible for Covid-19. In May, the FBI's New York office warned that right-wing extremist militants were encouraging supporters infected with Covid-19 to deliberately infect police officers and Jews.

Colin P. Clarke, Senior Fellow of the Soufan Center, recently stated: 'Accelerationists believe that the social upheaval they promote, which is viewed as a necessary prelude that will usher in the rebuilding of society on the basis of white power, has been made plausible by the scenes of illness and death dominating mainstream news coverage.'

Just three per cent

Another central actor of the paramilitary movement in the US are the Oath Keepers. They were once a vibrant organisation with tens of thousands of active supporters, but now hold a smaller base. Their activities range from armed support for small businesses that violate Covid-19 regulations, to the organisation of armed neighbourhood guards to protect against 'left wing violence'. In the past, the Oath Keepers participated in armed clashes against federal officials in Nevada, Oregon and Montana. Today the group is extremely active in propagating the image of Antifa as a domestic terrorist group, especially with their still very strong Facebook presence that has attracted around 551,000 followers.

The Three Percenters group, on the other hand, believe that only three per cent of the population fought and won against the British in the War of Independence. In their view, today it would take only three percent of

Americans to unite to overthrow the current US government. To become a member, all a person needs to do is wear an appropriate patch or a 'III' tattoo. The group's social media presence is crucial for them, particularly on Facebook. Since the subgroups are independent of each other, there is no central leadership or structure.

The Three Percenters have taken part in several clashes against the government, such as 2017 at the violent 'Unite the Right' demonstrations in Charlottesville, Virginia. Three Percenters recently attracted attention for their armed protection of Confederate monuments. There is significant overlap with the Oath Keepers and other groups, such as the militia movement and the 'boogaloo boys'.

The Boojahideen

For decades the militia movement, called Militias, has been made up of private paramilitary groups scattered across the country; they continually practice armed struggle and are very tightly organised within their respective militia. Although many states prohibit their activities, they largely act with impunity. Time and time again, militias have been involved in armed conflicts with US federal authorities. They do so by, for example, detaining and rejecting immigrants on the border with Mexico.

The 'boogaloo', an anti-government, extremist movement, have been dreaming of a second American revolution for decades, where armed patriots would gather, rise up and overthrow the tyrannical government. Most have called it the Second American Revolution, with others referring to 'Revolution 2.0', but the users of the weapons forums on 4chan and reddit renamed it to 'Civil War 2: Electric Boogaloo'.

As some commentators point out, President Trump's rhetoric empowers these paramilitary milieus.

Years ago, there were jokes on social media about making a sequel to the 1980s movie 'Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo'. The topic of a second civil war, which does not even appear in the film, was spread with sometimes absurd memes that were then transferred to other social media platforms. When the boogaloo topic came up on Facebook and Instagram, it was picked up by other extremists. By early 2020, through a play on words in order to avoid detection, 'boogaloo' had been transformed into 'Big Luau' and its followers wore Hawaiian shirts under their bulletproof vests – another insider reference from social media that is

showing up in violent form on the streets today. Currently the armed groups are referring to themselves with names such as Boogaloo Bois, Boog Bois and Boojahideen.

When several militants in Hawaiian shirts and boogaloo badges were seen at a gun rally on 20 January 2020 in Richmond, Virginia, the news quickly spread on the paramilitary groups' social media pages. Activists began to copy the looks, patches and lingo of these militants.

As the majority of the boogaloo have been radicalised elsewhere – either in anti-government militant groups such as the Three Percenters or the militia – boogaloo can currently be viewed as an independent movement only to a limited extent, but with considerable potential for further organised violence.

The figurehead Donald Trump

All in all, at a time of bitter gun control dispute, civil unrest, the stresses of a pandemic, conspiracy theories, uninterrupted online and offline propaganda and a relentless election campaign, paramilitary extremist groups in new and old formations in the US are experiencing a significant boom.

In the 1990s, bloody conflicts like those in Ruby Ridge and Waco were the catalysts that drove extremists like Timothy McVeigh to a terrorist attack like the infamous one in Oklahoma City in 1995. These catalysts appear in the form of not only armed confrontations with security authorities or political opponents, but also virtual battles on social media with a real or imagined enemy. Extremists are aware that their plans for a revolution or 'Civil War 2' require this catalyst. Most are waiting for this big event, but some are about to do everything possible to bring it on by force.

As some commentators point out, President Trump's rhetoric empowers these paramilitary milieus. There is actually a paradox here: many of the anti-government, violent extremists see Trump as an anti-establishment figure who, like them, opposes the 'great replacement' (with their keyword being 'the Mexican Wall'), in favour of a 'white nationalism' ('America First') and who advocates the almost unlimited right to bear arms.



Thomas Grumke

Germany

Thomas Grumke is professor of sociology and political science at the University of Police and Public Administration in North Rhine-Westphalia. He earned his doctorate with his work on right-wing extremism in the US and regularly publishes articles on right-wing radicalism.

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