COMMENTARY CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Why Are We Blind to Right-Wing Terrorism?

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On June 16, 2015, the *New York Times* ran an op-ed by University of North Carolina sociologist Charles Kurzman and Duke counterterrorism expert David Schanzer under the headline "The Other Terror Threat."

The article opened with a startling statistic: while attacks by American Muslims have killed 50 people in the United States since 9/11, attacks by right-wing extremists—including racists, anti-federalists, and Christian fundamentalists—have killed more than 250.

Other data sets, some with more conservative definitions of what qualifies as right-wing extremism, tell a similar story: right-wing terror attacks account for twice as many fatalities in America as Islamic extremism.

"The main terrorist threat in the United States," the professors wrote, "is not from violent Muslim extremists but from right-wing extremists."

The following evening, Dylann Roof walked into Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC and—after participating in the assembled bible study for an hour—proceeded to prove their point with bloody concision.

In a matter of minutes, Roof shot and killed Rev. Clementa Pinckney, Cynthia Hurd, Rev. Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, Tywanza Sanders, Ethel Lance, Susie Jackson, Depayne Middleton Doctor, Rev. Daniel Simmons, and Myra Thompson.

Roof, the Other Terror Threat, is a 21-year-old white supremacist, radicalized by a potent mix of online neo-Nazi propaganda, ultra-nationalism via the Council of Conservative Citizens (CCC), and the flourishing ideology of white racial grievance propagated by extremist forums, talk radio, and Republican elected officials alike.

He was also—to put it mildly—*not dissuaded* from embracing the cause of white supremacy by the Confederate battle flag blowing over his state's capitol. Roof, who flew his own Confederate banner and adorned his jacket with the flags of white-ruled Rhodesia and apartheid South Africa, told a friend he intended to "start a civil war."

What We Call Evil

The question of whether Dylann Roof acted out of racial hatred is settled. It was settled as soon as a survivor heard him say, "You rape our women and you're taking over our country. And you have to go." Since, it's only become more settled.

The question of whether Roof's crime is "terrorism" is less so.

Despite unambiguously meeting the FBI's formal definition of terrorism, the bureau has hesitated to use the word. "Terrorism is an act of violence done or threatened in order to try to influence a public body or citizenry," said FBI Director Jim Comey in the days after the attack, "so it's more of a political act, and again, based on what I know so far, I don't see it as a political act."

The Justice Department, meanwhile, has said they are investigating the crime "from all angles," including as a hate crime and as an act of domestic terrorism. The distinction has legal stakes. If charged with terrorism, Roof's prosecution could be moved from Charleston to a federal court.

For many, the government and some media outlets' hesitation to call the shooting terrorism demonstrates, as opponents of the War on Terror have long maintained, that "terrorism" is no more than a propaganda term used to designate crimes committed by Muslims.

Demanding that we call Roof a terrorist is an act of protest—a worthy one, I think—against a national security state that treats all Muslims as potential terrorists and white mass killers as "troubled loners."

But even more than this, the instinct to reach for the term "terror" derives, I think, from an urge to name this act with the most evil word we have.

To say, "this too is terrorism," is to assert that the murder of nine black churchgoers by a white supremacist —an event with all too many historical precedents—is indeed a catastrophic event, deserving of the universal mourning, communitarian sentiment, and heaving sighs of nationalism that accompany those atrocities we call "terrorism."

In this light, the reluctance to call Roof a "terrorist" is all the more evidence that America still hasn't decided for sure, that black lives matter.

Leaving Lone Wolves Alone

Journalists and activists are right, then, to question why Dylann Roof wasn't declared a terrorist after his murder spree. But perhaps a more challenging question—one with more consequential implications for what we ought to do now—is this one: Why wasn't he considered a terror suspect before it?

As Kurzman and Schanzer warned, the threat of right-wing extremism has risen precipitously in recent years, partially eclipsing the domestic threat of Islamic terror.

And they're not alone. John G. Horgan, a terrorism expert at the UMass Lowell, says that among scholars "there's an acceptance now of the idea that the threat from jihadi terrorism in the United States has been overblown…[and] that the threat of right-wing, anti-government violence has been underestimated."

Local and state law enforcement seem to agree.

In a survey of 382 police and sheriff's departments nationwide, 74 percent listed right-wing anti-government violence as the biggest extremist threat in their jurisdiction. Only 39 percent listed "al Qaeda-inspired" violence.

But this evolution of thinking among police and academics hasn't translated into a change in public opinion—Americans remain extremely fearful of Islamic terrorism. And efforts to refocus federal counterterrorism efforts toward the radical right have met political resistance.

In 2009, a Department of Homeland Security (DHS) intelligence report named "white supremacists lone wolves" the "most significant domestic terrorist threat." The report was so loudly condemned by GOP lawmakers that Secretary Janet Napolitano was forced to withdraw it. The report's author later accused the department of "gutting" staffing for research on right-wing terror.

A similar report was released by the DHS this February. At the time, Mark Potok of the Southern Poverty Law Center urged federal agencies to take the threat seriously and to marshal resources to combat it.

"Anything less," Potok said, "would be an invitation to disaster."

Dylann Roof is our disaster. And now it's our responsibility to interrogate whether our government—in its lapsed vigilance—invited him in.

The Known Unknown

Dylann Roof broadcasted what he planned to do.

He did the sorts of things that trigger terrorism investigations as if checking them off a list: he frequented extremist forums; he published his intent to "take drastic action" on his own website; he made his radical hatred known to friends and family; and he told at least one friend that he planned to "do something crazy."

In the months before his attack, Roof appeared at a shopping mall dressed in all black, asking employees how many people were working and when they closed. This behavior—known as "casing"—is so by-the-books suspicious it's listed second on the FBI's list of behaviors you should report to help prevent terrorism.

DHS has spent years drilling "if you see something, say something" into the minds of Americans. But it's useless so long as "terrorist" remains synonymous with "Muslim," and so long as suspicion sticks to white men like water to Teflon.

Consider, by contrast, the New York Police Department's (NYPD) surveillance of Muslim communities in New York after 9/11. For years, members of the NYPD's secret "Demographics Unit" spied on mosques, infiltrated religious student groups, and eavesdropped on private conversations—all without suspicion of wrongdoing. In August 2012, the chief of the NYPD's Intelligence Division admitted in sworn testimony that the program had not yielded a single criminal lead in his six-year tenure.

By no means do I want to live in a world where FBI agents infiltrate college Republican clubs or subject every confederate flag owner to warrantless surveillance. Achieving an equitable tyranny is no kind of victory. (And, as the NYPD case demonstrates, mass surveillance isn't only unconstitutional—it's ineffective.)

But the comparison reveals a tragic truth: that as it stands, our national security priorities are fatally skewed. We invade the private lives of American Muslims without reason and arrest black teens for posting anti-cop emojis, but a white South Carolinian who all but bullhorns his intentions to kill minorities slips easily under the radar.

The fact is: we've built our counterterrorism apparatus on the foundation of a false premise, on an irrational fear of 'the other.' The system is flawed from the ground up, designed to protect some victims and not others, to punish some wrongdoers and not others.

Meanwhile, it's become increasingly clear that the greatest threat to our safety comes not from 'the other'— on whom we've focused our resources, attention, and time—but from that most American, most familiar of archetypes: the angry white man.

Racism, in other words, has made for very bad national security policy.

Photo Credit: Flickr, Stephen Melkisethian,DC Vigil For Charleston Murders 26http://bit.ly/1BHVQ5W.