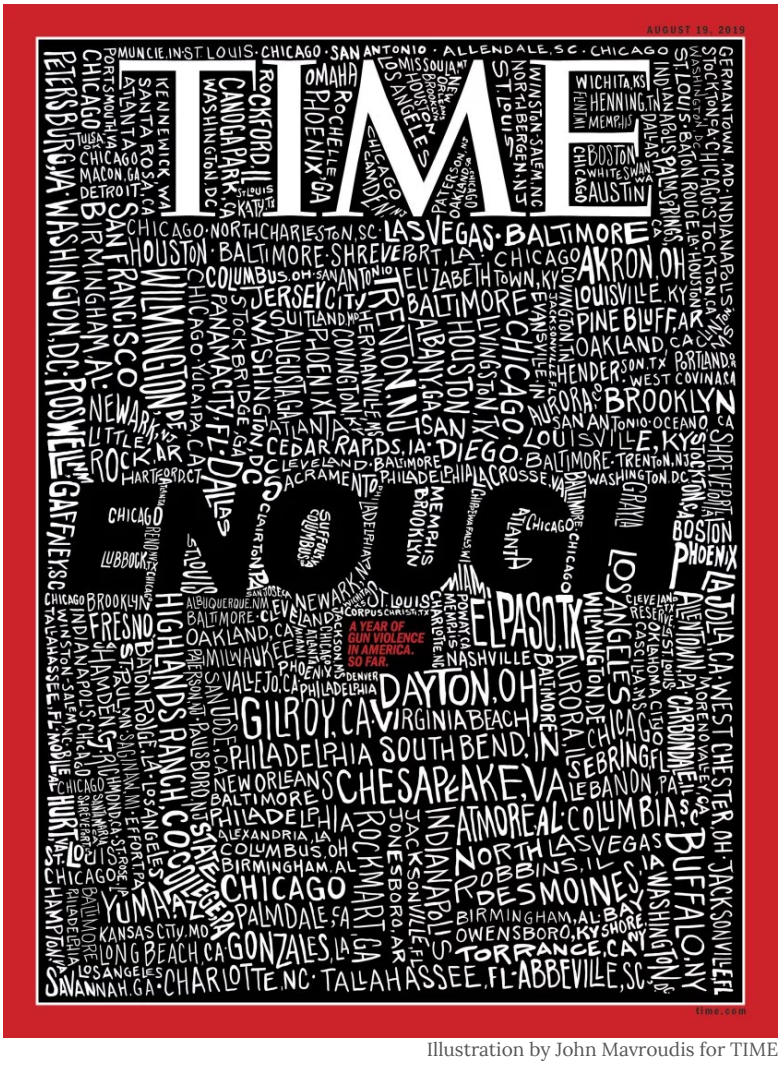

Illustration by John Mavroudis for TIME

U.S. GUNS

‘We Are Being Eaten From Within.’ Why America Is Losing the Battle Against White Nationalist Terrorism

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For decades, U.S. officials ignored the growing threat of domestic extremism. That may finally be changing

Mark Lambie—Sipa USA

When you think of a terrorist, what do you see? For more than a generation, the image lurking in Americans’ nightmares has resembled the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks: an Islamic jihadist. Not a 21-

year-old white supremacist from a prosperous Dallas suburb.

Danielle Novoa, right, with her twin sister Jessica Torres at an interfaith vigil in El Paso's Ponder Park on Aug. 4.

But long before that young man drove to El Paso, Texas, on Aug. 3 and allegedly murdered at least 22 people at a Walmart crammed with back-to-school shoppers, it was clear that white nationalists have become the face of terrorism in America. Since 9/11, white supremacists and other far-right extremists have been responsible for almost three times as many attacks on U.S. soil as Islamic terrorists, the government reported. From 2009 through 2018, the far right has been responsible for 73% of domestic extremist-related fatalities, according to a 2019 study by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). And the toll is growing. More people—49—were murdered by far-right extremists in the U.S. last year than in any other year since the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. FBI Director Christopher Wray told Congress in July that a majority of the bureau's domestic-terrorism investigations since October were linked to white supremacy.

Yet the nation's leaders have failed to meet this menace. In more than a dozen interviews with TIME, current and former federal law-enforcement and national-security officials described a sense of bewilderment and frustration as they watched warnings go ignored and the white-supremacist terror threat grow. Over the past decade, multiple attempts to refocus federal resources on the issue have been thwarted. Entire offices meant to coordinate an interagency response to right-wing extremism were funded, staffed and then defunded in the face of legal, constitutional and political concerns.

Today, FBI officials say just 20% of the bureau's counterterrorism field agents are focused on domestic probes. This year alone, those agents' caseload has included an investigation into an Ohio militia allegedly stockpiling explosives to build pipe bombs; a self-professed white-supremacist Coast Guard officer who amassed an arsenal in his apartment in the greater Washington, D.C., area; an attack in April at a synagogue outside San Diego that killed one; and the July 28 assault at a garlic festival in Gilroy, Calif., that killed three. Cesar Sayoc, a 57-year-old man from Florida, was sentenced to 20 years in prison on Aug. 5 after pleading guilty to mailing 16 pipe bombs to Democrats and critics of President Donald Trump.

The FBI has warned about the rising domestic threat for years, but has not had a receptive audience in the White House. As a result, agency leadership hasn't historically prioritized white-supremacist violence even among homegrown threats, for years listing "eco-terrorism" as the top risk, former special agent Michael German told the House Committee on Oversight and Reform in May.

Noah Berger—AP

Police carry evidence bags from the home of the Gilroy shooting suspect.

Law-enforcement officials say the cancer of white nationalism has metastasized across social media and the dark corners of the Internet, creating a copycat effect in which aspiring killers draw inspiration and seek to outdo one another. The suspect in El Paso was at least the third this year to post a manifesto on the online message forum 8chan before logging off to commit mass murder. More people were killed that day in El Paso

than all 14 service members killed this year on the battlefields in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.

“Even if there was a crackdown right now, it’s going to take years for the momentum of these groups to fade,” says Daryl Johnson, a former senior analyst at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), whose 2009 report on right-wing extremism was lambasted by conservatives even before its release. “I’m afraid we’ve reached a tipping point where we’re in for this kind of violence for a long time.”

Right-wing terrorism is a global problem, resulting in devastating attacks from New Zealand to Norway. But it is particularly dangerous in the U.S., which has more guns per capita than anywhere else in the world, an epidemic of mass shootings, a bedrock tradition of free speech that protects the expression of hateful ideologies and laws that make it challenging to confront a disaggregated movement that exists largely in the shadows of cyberspace.

Law enforcement lacks many of the weapons it uses against foreign enemies like al-Qaeda. To defend America from the danger posed by Islamist terror groups, the federal government built a globe-spanning surveillance and intelligence network capable of stopping attacks before they occurred. Federal agents were granted sweeping authorities by Congress to shadow foreign terrorist suspects. No comparable system exists in domestic-terror cases. Domestic terrorism is not even a federal crime, forcing prosecutors to charge suspects under hate-crime laws.

“White supremacy is a greater threat than international terrorism right now,” says David Hickton, a former U.S. Attorney who directs the University of Pittsburgh Institute for Cyber Law, Policy and Security. “We are being eaten from within.” Yet Hickton says federal prosecutors are limited in how they try domestic cases. “I’d have to pursue a white supremacist with hate crimes, unless he interfaced with al-Qaeda. Does that make any sense?”

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Then there is the problem of a Commander in Chief whose rhetoric appears to mirror, validate and potentially inspire that of far-right extremists. The screed posted by the suspected terrorist in El Paso said he was motivated by a perceived “Hispanic invasion of Texas.” President Trump’s campaign has run some 2,200 Facebook ads warning of an “invasion” at the border, according to a CNN analysis. It’s a term he regularly uses in tweets and interviews. “People hate the word invasion, but that’s what it is,” he said in the Oval Office in March. “It’s an invasion of drugs and criminals and people.” (The El Paso shooter said his actions were unconnected to Trump. A senior Administration official told TIME that the criticism linking the President’s rhetoric to violence was “unfortunate, unreasonable and obviously politically motivated.”)

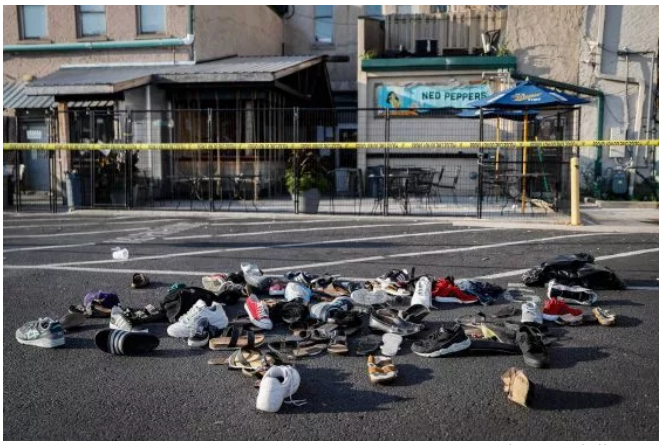
In the wake of the El Paso attack, which was followed by a second mass shooting in Dayton, Ohio, roughly 13 hours later, Trump promised to give federal authorities “whatever they need” to combat domestic terrorism. He said law enforcement “must do a better job of identifying and acting on early warning signs” and said he was directing the Justice Department to “work in partnership with local, state and federal agencies, as well as social-media companies, to develop tools that can detect mass shooters before they strike.”

But White House officials did not specify which new authorities are needed. Nor does the Administration’s record offer much hope. In the early days of his presidency, the Trump Administration gutted the DHS office that focused on violent extremism in the U.S. and pulled funding for grants that were meant to go to organizations countering neo-Nazis, white supremacists, antigovernment militants and other like-minded groups.

The El Paso suspect was born in 1998, three years after the worst homegrown terrorist attack in American history. The bombing of Oklahoma City’s Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building was carried out by Timothy McVeigh, a Gulf War veteran who wanted to exact revenge against the federal government for the deadly sieges in Waco, Texas, and Ruby Ridge, Idaho. The sprawling investigation that followed McVeigh’s attack, which killed 168 people, foreshadowed some of the challenges facing law enforcement today.

The bombing helped call attention to the threat of domestic terrorism. But that focus dissipated in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, which drove the full force of the U.S. national-security system into fighting Islamic terrorism. From 2005 to 2009, according to a Justice Department audit, the number of FBI agents assigned to domestic-terrorism probes averaged less than 330 out of a total of almost 2,000 FBI agents assigned to counterterrorism cases.

By the end of George W. Bush's presidency, however, it had become apparent to U.S. officials monitoring such threats that something serious was brewing at home. The prospect of the first black President sparked a sharp rise in far-right groups, from so-called Patriot movement adherents to antigovernment militias, according to analysts at DHS. The Secret Service took the unprecedented step of assigning Barack Obama a protective detail in May 2007, mere months into his campaign and long before candidates typically receive protection.



John Minchillo—AP

The site of the Dayton attacks on Aug. 4.

Johnson, who led a six-person group at DHS' Office of Intelligence and Analysis, began working on a report about the rise of right-wing extremism. It warned that white nationalists, antigovernment extremists and members of other far-right groups were seizing on the economic crisis and Obama's ascension to recruit new members. Johnson was preparing to release his report when a similar study by the Missouri Information Analysis Center, meant for law-enforcement officers, was leaked to the public in February 2009. The paper, titled "The Modern Militia Movement," linked members of these militias to fundamentalist Christian, anti-abortion or anti-immigration movements.

The report was pilloried by GOP groups and politicians for singling out conservatives as possible criminals. Missouri officials warned Johnson about the blowback he could expect for publishing a similar analysis. But Johnson, who describes himself as a conservative Republican, says he thought the DHS lawyers and editors who worked on the report would provide a layer of protection from GOP criticism. "I didn't think the whole Republican Party would basically throw a hissy fit," he recalls.

Read More: ***David French: My Fellow Republicans Must Stand Against the Alt-Right Virus Infecting America***

But when the DHS report was leaked to conservative bloggers in April 2009, it provoked an outcry from Republicans and conservative media, who painted it as a political hit job by the Obama Administration. DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano, who originally issued a broad defense of the report, apologized to the American Legion for one of its most controversial components–a section that raised concerns about military veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan and subsequently being susceptible targets for recruitment by right-wing groups. Johnson's team was slowly disbanded; the number of analysts devoted to non-Islamic domestic terrorism dwindled from six to zero in 2010, he said.

The Missouri and DHS reports were early examples of how the fight against right-wing terrorism would be hamstrung by politics. For years, "there's been a visceral response

from politicians that if these groups are being labeled as 'right wing,' then it's Republicans who are responsible for those groups' activities," says Jason Blazakis, former director of the Counterterrorism Finance and Designations Office at the U.S. State Department, who is now a professor at the Middlebury Institute in Monterey, Calif. "It's unfortunate, but I think in many ways this has resulted and served this reluctance in the Republican side to take as strong of action as they could."

In interviews, veterans of the FBI, DHS and other national-security agencies recalled moments during the Obama Administration when they realized the domestic-terror threat was expanding unchecked. In January 2011, local police in Spokane, Wash., narrowly averted a tragedy when they redirected a Martin Luther King Day parade away from a roadside bomb planted on the route, loaded with shrapnel coated with a substance meant to keep blood from clotting in wounds. At the time, it was one of the most sophisticated improvised explosive devices to appear in the U.S. Two months later, the FBI arrested Kevin William Harpham, 36, a former U.S. Army member linked to the neo-Nazi National Alliance. "I remember being like, 'Wow, we have a problem,'" recalls former FBI agent Clint Watts, a fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. "The belief was always that this would be al-Qaeda, not a former soldier who is a white supremacist."

In 2011, the Obama White House released a strategy to "empower local partners" to counter violent extremism. As part of that plan, DHS official George Selim was put in charge of leading these efforts as director of an interagency task force in 2016. Selim's office of community partnerships, which had been set up a year earlier, grew to 16 full-time employees and 25 contractors, with a total budget of $21 million. As part of its work, it had $10 million in grants for local programs to counter propaganda, recognize the signs of radicalization in local communities and intervene to stop attacks before they happen.

But the Obama Administration was wary of the political blowback, according to a senior government official familiar with the efforts of the FBI and DHS, and mindful of the government's lack of legal authority to monitor domestic hate speech, obtain search or surveillance warrants, or recruit sources. Meanwhile, the threat continued to grow, fueled in online forums. In June 2015, Dylann Roof, a 21-year-old who posted on the neo-Nazi site Stormfront under the screen name "Lil Aryan," opened fire in a black church in Charleston, S.C., killing nine parishioners.

Then Trump won the White House. In the new Administration, efforts to confront domestic extremism "came to a grinding halt," says Selim. The new Administration redirected federal resources on Islamist terrorism. Barely a week into his presidency, Reuters reported that Trump had tried to change the name of the Countering Violent Extremism program to Countering Radical Islamic Extremism.

The Administration's reconstituted Office for Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention saw its mission expand while its staffing and budget were slashed to a fraction of what it had been, according to a former DHS official. "The infrastructure we had labored over for years started to get torn down," says Selim, who also led counterterrorism efforts under George W. Bush. "It has been decimated in the past two years under this Administration."

The Justice Department has also recently reorganized its domestic-terrorism categories in a way that masks the scope of white-supremacist violence, according to former FBI officials who say the change makes it harder to track or measure the scale of these attacks, which are often haphazardly classified as hate crimes or deferred to state and local authorities. The lack of clear data impacts the resources the FBI can devote to investigating them.

A second senior government official, granted anonymity to discuss the Trump Administration's efforts, says that while FBI analysts continued to issue warnings about the alarming patterns of white-nationalist radicalization online, mid-level officials and political appointees quickly recognized that assessments that ran counter to what Trump was saying publicly would fall on deaf ears. "That could cost you a seat at the table," the official says, "although there have been fewer and fewer tables to sit at and discuss intelligence and policy."

As President, Trump has repeatedly downplayed the threat posed by white supremacists. He famously blamed "both sides" for violence at a white-nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Va., in 2017. Asked if he saw white nationalism as a rising threat in the wake of a March attack on two New Zealand mosques by an avowed racist who killed 51 people, he countered, "I don't really. It's a small group of people."

In a nation where a mass shooting occurs on average about once a day, it is easy to be cynical about the prospect of change. But following the El Paso and Dayton attacks, there are glimmers of hope, however slight.

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The crowded field of Democratic presidential candidates has jumped on the issue, ensuring that the national spotlight of the 2020 campaign will keep the debate over guns and domestic terrorism from fading away. In Congress, Democrats have rallied behind legislation that would require DHS, the FBI and the Justice Department to address white supremacism and right-wing extremism, including training and information sharing.

Among law enforcement there has been a new push for domestic terrorism to be codified as a federal crime. "Acts of violence intended to intimidate civilian populations or to influence or affect government policy should be prosecuted as domestic terrorism regardless of the ideology behind them," Brian O'Hare, president of the FBI Agents Association, wrote in a statement. Such a change would give prosecutors new tools to confront the threat of domestic radicalization.

There has also been a noticeable shift in how law-enforcement and government officials talk about these attacks. FBI agents, politicians and federal attorneys have become quicker to label extremist violence committed by Americans as "terrorism." On Aug. 6, the FBI announced it was opening a domestic-terrorism investigation into the suspect in Gilroy, noting that the gunman had a "target list" of religious institutions, political organizations and federal buildings. The day after the El Paso attack, the top federal prosecutor in western Texas declared that the incident would be treated as terrorism. "We're going to do what we do to terrorists in this country, which is deliver swift and certain justice," said U.S. Attorney John Bash.

This language matters, experts say. If we cannot call an evil by its name, how can we hope to defeat it? "You can't really deal with the problem unless you acknowledge it exists," says Mark Pitcavage, senior research fellow at the ADL's Center on Extremism, who has studied far-right extremism since the mid-1990s. "We need a consensus that this is a problem, and we need to get together, irrespective of people's partisan beliefs or anything else, to confront this problem for the good of everybody."

–With reporting by ALANA ABRAMSON, TESSA BERENSON and JOHN WALCOTT/WASHINGTON