

# In the Shadow of Weimar: Understanding America's Blossoming Domestic Terrorism Problem

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August 18,  
2017

E-Notes

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This short analysis is very definitely about what happened in Charlottesville this past weekend. I will take you there, rest assured; but the path requires a few brief yet necessary detours lest you arrive to Cville with scales still stuck to your eyes.



How dare I suggest such an indirect excursion? I have credentials. Nearly eighteen months ago, I wrote—and [please note the italicized prediction](#):

*Trump is . . . a political*



Protests in Charlottesville, VA on August 12, 2017 (Source: Evan Nesterak/Flickr)

*shaman. He is adroit at social magic, stirring emotion and changing anything he likes into anything else he likes. And his followers, hypnotized by the dramatic world of colliding forces that he enchants in simple schematic form, nod in agreement, not with his logic but with his demonic magic.*

*Donald Trump is therefore not just about the Republican Party's nomination for President, and he is not even just about the presidential election. He is a harbinger, a warning, of a very deep strain of*

*irrationality rising within the American body politic. He is, too, an incubator of potentially significant political violence. He has organized no para-military organization of course, but every time he threatens to punch someone in the nose he is, in effect, giving permission for his followers to be transgressive, not to exclude being violently so.*

Of course things have changed a fair bit since March 2016. Trump won the GOP nomination and then the election. The strain of irrationality has not abated but grown, sparking a dialectic of Right-Left valence that is tending ineluctably to push modest, humble, centrist, thoughtful social peacemaking energies to the margins. This is what always happens in a civil war, and America's latest rendition seems clearly to be moving rapidly from a "cold" civil war, which we have witnessed worsening for years under the label "culture wars," toward a "hot" civil war. This time, unless real leadership can avert it, civil war will come with no obvious spatial borders.

Meanwhile, political organization on the extremes—especially the neo-fascist extreme—is turning cultic, and I mean that in a specific social science sense. The leaders of these groups grasp the meaning of "the propaganda of the deed." The aim of people like David Duke is to generate telegenic polarization, to force choices in the belief that, deep down, more Americans really, privately, think like him than think like elite politicians of either major party. Steve Bannon agrees. On Wednesday he raised a wager from the inner sanctum of the White Houser as clear as it is portentous: "Just give me more. Tear down the statues. Say the revolution is coming. I can't get enough of it."

The so-called antifa types are indeed helping in this staged polarization, because that is how these fringe groups attract recruits and raise money—all thanks to our whorish commercial media that has not thought twice over the past week, in their collective lunge for market share, about sticking microphones in the faces of David Duke, Richard Spencer, and other polarization entrepreneurs. That is what radical leftwing groups have always done in their organizational shape-changing forms from Vietnam antiwar movement days through the nuclear freeze fraud, the anti-apartheid, sanctuary, and other movements, and via any route they could imagine that would allow them to find useful idiots to help build them up, making them look more important and more mainstream than they really are. Nothing they've done since the early 1970s has worked very well to move them from the fringe—until, possibly, now.

Ah, you say, but all these groups, Right and Left, involve very small numbers of people. They constitute fringe phenomena; nothing to worry about.

Perhaps. But events in the past suggest that when times become unstuck for ordinary people, for whatever reasons economic and otherwise, and democratic norms and institutions simultaneously decline or break down for all practical purposes, extra-parliamentary activity rises—and with it the prospect of political violence. My first impression upon viewing the video footage from Charlottesville was a single word: Weimar. I castigated myself, because I knew immediately that the analogy was wildly stretched. But that is where my emotional side took me, aided no doubt by the specter of a red-and-black swastika flag.

It is indeed a stretched analogy. But as a heuristic it does not break entirely into pieces as easily as all that. Listen to what Lord Vansittart wrote (in the middle 1950s) in *The Mist Procession* about events in Germany in the early to mid-1930s:

*Parliamentary democracy broke down. Germans could not practise the incomprehensible. . . . At the end of July [1932] came a general election accompanied by customary street-fighting between Nazis and Communists. A good many of them killed each other. Both extremes increased their votes. . . . [t]he Socialists and centre lost ground. . . .*

Sound a little too familiar? American politics these days often feels like an invitation to practice the incomprehensible, when a single party controls both Houses of Congress and the White House and still cannot

manage to get the least constructive thing done. So the extremes prosper.

Charlottesville did not come out of nowhere, of course. My colleague Jason Willick at *The American Interest* has provided [a summary of the ooze of events that I cannot improve upon](#):

*Stretching back at least to Dylann Roof's mass murder of black congregationalists in 2015, the country has been getting pushed closer and closer to the edge. The summer of 2016 saw the assassination of five police officers in Dallas by a black activist. . . . A Montana congressional candidate physically attacked a reporter. There have been campus riots against rightwing speakers, and clashes between Leftists and neo-Nazis on the streets of Sacramento and elsewhere. It was less than two months ago that an anti-Trump activist opened fire on a group of Republican Congressmen playing baseball in Alexandria.*

What is different about Charlottesville from all of this (save the fairly minor Sacramento episode) is the difference between a sport and a game. Golf is a sport but it is not a game because a game involves active defense. It takes only one person to stick a 9-iron or to throw a javelin into near-earth orbit, but it takes two organized sides to play baseball, basketball, and other real games. Before we had a series of one-off sports. Now we have a true game, one broadcast far and wide on social media and other prime-time venues, whose electric-shock focus is racial hatred.

In this game Donald Trump has visibly striven to appear non-partisan, but by so doing he has set himself apart from nearly every other member of the American political class. Everyone except the President seems to understand that no “very fine people” would come to a rally, see a Nazi flag in their midst, and stay. So it makes you wonder. But the alt-right thinks it knows what it means, and they may prove correct.

Trump still lacks a Weimar-style private party militia, as he did in March 2016. But even here things have changed. Thanks to insane open-carry laws in places like Virginia and North Carolina, and the rest of America's relatively recently honed gun-nut culture, Donald Trump can have a private militia if he wants one, just for the asking. Remember how during the campaign he lied about not knowing who David Duke was when Duke endorsed him? You do. Remember how at one rally he asked supporters to pledge their total loyalty, and many responded with a straight-armed salute—in response to which Trump smiled broadly? You do. He refuses to disavow the alt-right supporters he has, despite many opportunities over many months and a torrent of opportunities in just the past week—and this despite the fact that even someone usually as odious on these kinds of topics as Jeff Sessions has done so. So how do we know he'll not ask for that militia?

## **Finding the Cause**

Quite consistently with the President's equivocation about who deserves blame for what happened on Saturday, he refuses to describe a white supremacist driving a car into a crowd of protestors as domestic terrorism. H.R. McMaster was quick to do so, and virtually everyone of both parties has since followed. How could they not? This particular tactic is stock terror tradecraft from Israel to France to Great Britain to now Spain and back again. But not Donald Trump. Why?

I cannot answer that question for you. But I can tell you that beyond Charlottesville serious trouble is coming, and some of it is coming this very weekend in Boston and other cities. Now that the “t” word is out there, we will soon hear it plenty of times if violence breaks out again at anywhere near the level it did in Charlottesville. My premonition is that this is all too likely.

And if we do, it is only a matter of time before someone calls for a “war of ideas” against domestic terrorism. Maybe someone has called for such a war already; it's impossible to read everything these days. But whenever it happens

—and it is inevitable—it will be deeply misleading.

For reasons too distracting to rehearse right now, Americans tend to have an abstract, rational-narrative based way of thinking about these kinds of problems. It's an Enlightenment-lite bias, if you will. We mistakenly thought, back when, that the problem we had with the Soviet Union was mainly Communist ideology, not Russian imperial strategic culture, and that kind of thinking led us to miss the reality of polycentric communism and helped push us into the Vietnam War. Now we're making the same mistake with respect to Islamist terrorism. The unstated premise in the terrorism context is that people—Muslims or white supremacist bigots—who engage in violence do so because they have been rationally persuaded by some tract or speech. The conclusion leaps out: We must disabuse of them of their error, and teach them how to think correctly. In short, we must convert them in a war—or more accurately given the real source of the premise—a crusade, of ideas.

It is true that small numbers of twisted intellectual entrepreneurs spew hatred and calls to violence, both in the Muslim world and in fetid pockets of the United States. But the conclusion that the vast majority of rank-and-file violence foddermakers behave as they do for what amounts to intellectual reasons is very close to madness. The ideology, so-called, very much comes after the fact, providing a vocabulary for group intersubjectivity. It is not the cause of the behavior.

So what is the cause? As social animals, all people need three things in order to function acceptably in society: identity, community, and purpose. A person needs to know who he or she is, needs to be able to identify others with a similar identity so as to form a community, and it is out of that community context that purposeful behaviors can be identified and pursued. All ideologies, all ideas about the public realm, are embedded in a social context, the ideology itself being at most, for most, a superficial embossing.<sup>[1]</sup>

So consider just little of what we know about James Alex Fields, Jr., the 20-year old who drove the car into the crowd on Saturday. He grew up fatherless, still lived with his mother until a few months ago, was a quiet loner who had trouble making friends, and even washed early out of the Army. Sound like a well-adjusted person to you, someone with a confident personal identity, a community, and a socially sanctioned purpose? Not really, huh?

Alienation from the identity/community/purpose trilogy does not express itself in precisely the same way in all cultures. That is because, to cite just one reason, some cultures raise individual agency above communal agency more than do others. Terrorist groups in the Muslim world thus tend to group brothers and cousins in ways they usually do not in the United States. But the overall pattern is strikingly similar and persistent. People who engage in mob political violence ostensibly for ideological reasons have particular psychological profiles shared by relatively small numbers of people.

This is both good news and bad news. It's good news in that cultic homicidal terrorist organizations are very unlikely ever to have a mass following, meaning that their political salience can only be measured against the extent of the deterioration or health of political norms in the society in which they live. When the bottom falls out of normality, as it did in Weimar, then a fairly small group can insinuate itself into power, gather and use instruments of coercion to cow the majority, and go onto to do truly horrible things en route to its inevitable self-destruction—for almost by definition, delusional organizations led by mad or delusional people cannot institutionalize themselves for a long haul.

It's bad news, however, in that there is no simple, rational fix for the problem. No amount of clever counter-messaging coming out of the fifth floor of the State Department could ever fix our Islamist terrorism problem—though it probably does no harm. By the same token, no war of ideas on domestic terrorism is going to help much either. We are faced with a problem whose basic sources are social-psychological, not ideological, and so are very hard to get at from a public policy angle.

## **Are Social Media and Free Speech on a Collision Course?**

Finally a note about social media's role in what has been happening and what is to come. It used to be that the front page of the printed *New York Times* sized and shaped electronic new media priorities. Then, at some point, things flipped. The business models changed to the point where the mainstream electronic media began driving what ended up in the front section of the *New York Times* and other major newspapers. Now we stand at the cusp of another shift, wherein the social media buzz is ahead of and is starting to shape mainstream electronic media editorial choices. We have gone from a serious professional filter era to a looser filter era, and are now entering a zero-filter era in which people are clustered in niche news zones that overlap hardly at all with each other.

The specter of virtual mobs is therefore within sight, a virtual mob capable of sending people into the streets to constitute real mobs the same way, pretty much, as friends can use social media channels to coordinate showing up at a given restaurant, bar, or chic shopping mall. Organizing alt-right demonstrations and antifa protests is now easier than ever.

And what does free speech mean in such a context? The legal tradition inherited from the days of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. tells us that people should have a right to say whatever they want to say so long as it is not a direct instigation to violence. So if servers or sponsors want to take down alt-right sites that incite to violence they are within the guardrails of the American legal tradition. But what about hateful speech that does not obviously incite to violence? Where is that line, and who gets to draw it?

"Freedom of expression" as the Founders and earlier generations of Americans understood the concept meant that governmental authority should not be able to muzzle principled, even radical, dissent. What does it mean now, at a time when government has become all but powerless even to monitor what is expressed on social media, less alone to moderate or control it? Does "free speech" now really mean the right to say all sorts of crazy things, mostly *anonymously* over the internet, that are not only deliberately false but hateful? Should it? I'm not sure anyone knows yet. But we're going to need to find out.

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[1] Want to know more? Read Marc Sageman's new book, *Turning to Political Violence: The Emergence of Terrorism*. Sageman is writing about Islamist terrorism, but the analysis applies nearly as well to domestic rightwing American terrorism.