

BRUCE HOFFMAN, JACOB WARE, *God, Guns, and Sedition: Far-Right Terrorism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024)

For the United States of America, the past decade has been a time of radical political upheavals and tumultuous cultural shifts, marked by a surging national-populist current that amplified ideological partisanship and deepened societal divide. The meteoric rise of Donald J. Trump galvanised far-right extremism, abruptly dragging it from the fringes of American politics and turning it into a decisive force in the ‘culture wars’ which accompanied the 45th and now 47th president’s mandates, as well as his interstice as an opposition figure. Rendering the defining characteristics and historical foundations of the rejuvenated American far-right, Bruce Hoffman, a leading academic figure in terrorist studies, and Jacob Ware, a counterterrorism specialist at the Council on Foreign Relations, provide a fresh understanding of this perpetual threat to the democratic order. *God, Guns, and Sedition: Far-Right Terrorism in America* employs the methodology of terrorism studies, reinforced by a solid diachronic perspective, in order to explain the phenomenon’s new found place in a climate of unprecedented social media pervasiveness and widespread conspiracy thinking.

The narrative opens amidst the turmoil in which the United States found itself in the early 2020s, with American society gravely perturbed by the Covid pandemic. The destabilising effects of the lockdowns overlapped with the wave of social justice protests in the aftermath of George Floyd’s killing, inspiring radical counterreactions on the right, which later degenerated into the mob violence of January 6th 2021. Conceptually, Hoffman and Ware describe the cumulative intensification of far-right manifestations through a term referencing the leftist revolutionary tradition of the 19th century: “accelerationism,” a notion tweaked in radical milieus and “embraced by a spectrum of white supremacists, white nationalists, antisemites, xenophobes and antigovernment militants as a clarion call to revolution” (4), involving the overthrow of the Western liberal democratic order through the intentional accentuation of its presumed decay. By this logic, the collapse of the existent governing model is to be hastened programmatically through the intensification of social divisions, creating a polarised climate conducive to civil war. Various layers of the archetypal accelerationist model are vividly illustrated through primary sources ranging from online forums to manifestos elaborated by perpetrators of mass shootings. In the context of accelerationism, junctures such as January 6th are regarded as historical “milestones,” avatars of far-right terrorism set in the fast-paced digital environment, which are not the novel emanations of 21st century America, but the most recent stages in an evolution spanning at least half of a century, presently “almost hypersonically empowered by social media” (9-10). Hence, the indispensable historical focus of the first half of the book, with the second part advancing towards current events and paving the way for a set of valuable counterterrorism outlines in its conclusion.

The departure point of the critical retrospective is William Luther Pierce's *Turner Diaries*, the canonical oeuvre of American white supremacy and its most resilient cultural influence to date. Pierce's worldview is examined with a focus on the organizational network he coordinated, as the founder of the National Alliance in the mid-1970s, and on the underlying significance of his dystopian narrative. The latter imagined a confrontation between a patriotic revolutionary resistance movement and the dark tyranny of an oppressive government, conjuring a panoply of terrorist acts, framed as moral imperatives, perpetrated by an underground "Order" intent on liberating the nation from the chains of the establishment. Through his fictional scenario, Pierce provided a blueprint for racial terror and a continuous source of inspiration for far-right radicals for decades to come. Subsequently, the narrative approaches the influential figures of American ultranationalism in the late 20th century as emulators of the belligerent spirit of *The Turner Diaries*, their biographical sketches intertwining in descriptive expositions: Robert Matthews is perhaps the most representative incarnation of the "core tenets of racism, antisemitism, xenophobia and sedition" (16), formulating the vision of a new racial order to be attained through guerilla warfare tactics and outright genocide; reverend Richard Butler is portrayed as the rabid anti-Communist and antisemite whose heterodox, millenarian dogma laid the foundation of the Aryan Nations, an "umbrella organization for the entire white supremacist movement" (20); James Ellison, the cleric and leader of the Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord, appears as the initiator of a fundamentalist far-right group disguised as organised religion, sharing similar apocalyptic visions of societal collapse; Louis Beam, the forefront proponent of the "leaderless resistance" strategy, is shown to have channelled the frustrations of Vietnam War veterans in paramilitary structures hostile to the American state; William Porter Gale is rendered as the quintessential antigovernmental militant, whose instigating rhetoric revolved around "tax resistance militancy," subverting local and federal administrative authority.

The dynamic interaction of these actors and entities, engaging in reciprocal contaminations and hybridisations, created a fertile soil for radical action. In the 1980s, accelerationism found its most notorious expression in Robert Matthews' real life creation of the "Order," enacting the precepts of *The Turner Diaries* in a rampage of armed robberies and assassinations, the chaotic spell ending with the death of Matthews in a stand-off with law enforcement. In the meantime, the Aryan Nations and other white supremacist groups grew into sizeable communities, consolidated a substantial base of adhesion, particularly in the Pacific Northwest, and kept pursuing their often whimsical, but ever ominous insurrectionist schemes. From a judicial angle, Hoffman and Ware explain how the legal and jurisprudential constraints imposed upon authorities made these clear threats to national security difficult to prosecute effectively, allowing figures such as Richard Butler to activate insidiously, by infiltrating marginal subcultures to gain recruits, by permeating into the prison system, by extending the reach of their propaganda etc.

Advancing towards the mayhem of the 1990s, the narrative insists upon the far-right's protean adaptation, expressed through ideological tropes like the "unorganized militia" (80), a militaristic project to subvert the government through asymmetrical campaigns of violence, gaining new wind following several major incidents. In 1992, federal authorities botched an

operation in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, targeting Vietnam war veteran and anti-government survivalist Randy Weaver, who saw his retreat destroyed and several of his family members killed in a violent escalation of force, becoming a hero of the white supremacist cause and the archetypal civilian target of the government's purported criminal conduct. In 1993, an even larger debacle jolted the militia movement, following the failed federal siege on the compound in Waco, Texas, where the Branch Davidian religious sect, led by charismatic prophet David Koresh, illegally amassed an arsenal in preparation for its chiliastic fantasies and engaged in a catastrophic shoot-out with authorities, providing another claim to martyrdom for the far-right. Two years later, the spiral of violence reached its zenith with the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Building in Oklahoma City, the fateful climax of "leaderless resistance." In a social context insufficiently aware of lone actors as lethal agents of violence, Timothy McVeigh emerged as a "real-life Earl Turner" (99), with *The Turner Diaries* again singled out as a formative document for American homegrown terrorism. McVeigh's biography is outlined through a forensic reconstruction of his path to terror, encompassing his army background and combat experience, his Second Amendment fixation and racist obsessions, his fascination with the American Revolution and severe anxiety towards government encroachment into individual life.

In the aftermath of 9/11, with counterterrorism now focusing on the more immediate danger of international Salafi jihadism, it appeared that far-right concerns would fade into the background. However, the electoral triumph of Obama renewed racist sentiment across the country, the activity of militia networks expanded ceaselessly and internal tensions were complicated by the economic meltdown of '08 and the political splinter of the Republican Party, from the ranks of which a fiscally conservative and government hostile "Tea Party" brandished a new style of populism. A synchronic excursus into the 2011 terrorist plot of Anders Behring Breivik in Norway is meant to indicate the international dimension of far-right terror in the early 2010s, highlighting its ripple effects in American radical milieus, as mass shootings with similar ideological underpinnings would occur for years to come. Hoffman and Ware argue that the impetus of technological development made the communication of violence quicker and easier, connecting endemic ideological and political realities to extra-American developments (the rise of ISIS, the '15 refugee crisis, the terror wave in Europe), which further fostered conspiracy echo-chambers online. As far as the revitalization of internal terrorism is concerned, particular interest is shown to the Charleston, South Carolina shooting of 2015, with the motivations of Dylan Roof (white supremacy, hatred towards the African-American community, a sense of ongoing racial warfare, an emphatic internalisation of accelerationism) coming under sharp examination.

Donald J. Trump's impetuous ascent, catalysed by a "blatant nativist rhetoric" (152), reinforced the national standing of the far-right through the public validation of its tenets. An examination of online culture details this metamorphosis, beginning with Trump's initial presidential campaign, whose social media reverberations fuelled discourse radicalisation and relativised truth claims. The real-life crux of this perilous trajectory, under the guise of the newly instated administration, came in 2017, with the rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, another fatal episode of far-right violence, which the president flagrantly refused to condemn. During these years of political convulsions, the authors distinguish the advent of a new type of extremism,

characterised by “youthfulness, viciousness, mobilization and free rein online” (159), but also by an express devotion towards Trump. Again, appalling international episodes are evoked as parallels for the global advancement of far-right terror, the 2019 killing spree of Brendon Tarrant in Christchurch, New Zealand – himself a product of the malignant online culture – illustrating the volatile dynamics of the virtual and the physical, as well as the frontier-transgressing aspects of accelerationism. “Archetypal twenty-first century terrorism” (178) posed daunting dilemmas to institutional counterterrorism strategies, which the authors discuss in rich detail, deploring how functional guardrails against violence were obliterated in the digital space.

When the pandemic struck the United States in 2020, one of its by-products was raising the conspiracist background noise to new heights, particularly with the national unrest erupting in the wake of George Floyd’s death. Far-right milieus perceived the spontaneous disorders as an anarchic plot orchestrated by the far-left and its nefarious occult backers. Illustratively, the analysis lingers on the expansion of the QAnon countercultural phenomenon, which coagulated at the juncture of disparate conspiracy threads and rapidly turned into an influential vector of the culture wars. To that end, a striking observation concerns the manner in which specific counternarratives now catered to particular individuals, providing a customised experience of far-right extremism. Real life consequences, however, remained as striking as ever, with no better illustration than January 6th, revisited in granular fashion through an examination of the ideological progression that made it possible. At its social and cultural core, the episode is comprehended as the perfect storm in which ordinary political manifestants and hardened paramilitaries reunited as collective recipients of the defeated incumbent’s message, displayed symbolic far-right paraphernalia (from Confederate flags to the gallows referencing *The Turner Diaries*) and were willing to escalate tensions from mere discourse to physical violence. Post factum, the assault on the Capitol building became a landmark of the far-right imaginary, framed as a judicious instance of punitive violence and, on account of the legal and judicial consequences it attracted, of virtuous martyrdom.

From a more pragmatic, policy-making standpoint, the final section of the book discusses prospective systemic solutions to the threats exposed above, the continuous growth, resilience and flexibility of the American far-right bringing it to a point where its ideological appeal is assessed as ‘both more prevalent and more pervasive’ than ever (226). Hoffman and Ware go so far as not excluding a potential civil war given the seriousness of the domestic threats. As far as short-term solutions are concerned, a first set of advanced propositions are grouped under the overarching imperative of restoring popular trust in institutions, including “remedial legislative steps” (229) such as social media regulation, more effective instruments granted for the prosecution and sentencing of terrorism offences, stricter gun legislation in response to the endemic proliferation of mass shootings, rooting out extremist elements within the military and law enforcement etc. In the medium range, designated courses of action are anticipated to include counterterrorism programs specifically addressing radicalisation vulnerabilities, such as community-based grassroots initiatives, institutional focus on the social world in which radicalism thrives, increasing media literacy and so on. Last but not least, long term developments are envisioned as aiming to “restore, reenergise and strengthen [American] democratic norms and institutions” (250), a moderately uplifting conclusion to an otherwise unsettling national diagnosis.

God, Guns, and Sedition: Far-Right Terrorism in America reads as an almost cartographical depiction of the complex landscape of contemporary extremism in the United States, charting out with precision the contours of one of the most relevant radical phenomena of our age. Certainly, the moral mission affirmed in the conclusion – to maintain “national cohesiveness when confronting individuals who seek to divide societies” (254) – is ultimately possible only through a nuanced understanding of the nature of the confronted threat.

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