On Domestic Terrorism

Draft By Hal Fairchild, Sept. 9, 2015

Terrorism is typically thought of as something that happens over-seas, but it has a long tradition in the U.S. From the country’s founding in slavery and genocide against the indigenous populations—to decades of lynching, policing and incarcerating—terrorism has taken many forms. This chapter is concerned with “modern” forms of domestic terrorism: the ideologically inspired bombings in Oklahoma City and Boston, religion inspired arson and homicide, and attacks on symbols of authority (e.g., law enforcement, military). These forms of violence share political motives: to destabilize the existing order or to challenge morals and values.

Sources of Domestic Terrorism

Modern forms of Domestic Terrorism in the U.S. have taken several forms (Vetter & Perlstein, 2003). In the 1960s and 1970s, African American activists rebelled against police intimidation by forming Black Power groups: The Black Panthers (reference), the Nation of Islam (reference), and the Black Liberation Army (Rosenau, 2013), among others. The latter group, in particular, was labeled a terrorist group as more than 20 fatalities were attributed to their activities (Rosenau, 2013).

Lone wolf attacks shocked the nation when Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols bombed the federal building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995, killing 168 people and injuring 680 others (Figley, 2003; Hollohan, 2008); and when Seung-Hui Cho, a student massacred 32 people (an wounded 17 others) at Virginia Tech University in April 2007, before taking his own life (Hollohan, 2008). McVeigh and Nichols decried the role of government in people’s lives, whereas Cho’s rage was more intrapsychic. The rise in such extreme crimes led to the creation of database for their tabulation and study (Frelich, Chermak, Belli, Gruenewald & Parkin, 2014).

Political extremism has been tied to domestic terrorism on both sides of the political spectrum. On the right, religious conservatives and White supremacists (“Skinheads”) have carried out numerous...
attacks against Black churches and symbols of government authority (Hamm, 1993; Vohryzek-Bolden, 2002). One of the groups, known as the Christian Identity, has expressed genocidal motives and hatred of the U.S. government (Hough, 2006; Woolf, 2004). Another form of right-wing domestic terrorism has been termed “sexual terrorism” and “bio-terrorism” as “pro-life” forces once sent anthrax laden letters to abortion clinics (Kane & Greenhill, 2007). Environmental and animal rights activists, similarly, have engaged in highly disruptive activities, many of which may be worthy of the “terrorism” label (Gonzalez, Freilich & Chermak, 2014; Webb, 2011). Webb (2011) detailed the geography of animal rights activism, their strategies and methods.

Lastly, terrorism in the U.S. may come from overseas, as Jihadist groups have used social media to recruit potential partners to engage in terrorist plots in the U.S. Often, this recruiting takes place on the campuses of American colleges and universities (Wright, 2011). Wright (2011) outlined the stages of college student recruitment, and detailed those students’ unique vulnerabilities to such recruitment.

**Solutions to Domestic Terrorism in the U.S.**

Researchers and commentators have suggested several strategies to reduce acts of domestic terrorism. Hamm (1993) urged that individuals boycott White power music and publications, and suggested some censureship of both forms of media. Hamm (1993) went further and suggested, not gun control, but the banning of all gun ownership!

Others have developed programs to train people to respond to such tragedies. Such an effort was reported by Figley (2003) after the Oklahoma City bombings. [EXPAND].

An important point made by Woolf (2004), is that we MUST do something to combat these acts of interpersonal violence. Inaction is a form of tacit approval, or as others have said, “Silence is the voice of complicity.”