The Pot of Race War and the Kettle of Holy War

MARWAN M. KRAIDY

As the American reckoning with race unfolded during the Trump presidency, a motley crew of white supremacists, white nationalists, and miscellaneous far-right groups rose to prominence in the United States and elsewhere. This alarming development has led analysts to identify similarities between these groups and violent Islamist organizations like Islamic State. Growing recognition of parallels between "foreign" and "domestic" perpetrators of terror is a welcome development, not least because it undermines the notion that Islamic State is "exceptional."

Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America
Kathleen Belew
Harvard University Press, 2018

The Caravan: Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad
Thomas Hegghammer
Cambridge University Press, 2020

Nonetheless, comparative commentary so far has focused to a large extent on the two formations' deft deployment of social media, particularly Twitter, for recruitment, organization, and propaganda. It is time we move beyond the focus on technology alone and begin paying attention to deeper equivalences between white power and radical Islamist groups at the levels of identity, history, and ideology in order to be able to tease out the implications of this mirroring.

As we set out to achieve a greater understanding of violent extremism, Thomas Hegghammer's *The Caravan* and Kathleen Belew's *Bring the War Home* are useful companions. Each meticulously researched book, based on a wealth of primary sources and accessible to the general educated public as much as to the specialist, offers a sweeping view of the respective movement under study. Belew retraces the historical evolution of the white power movement in the United States with intricate detail, just as Hegghammer does with the mujahideen movement in Afghanistan and Pakistan. But the value of both volumes resides in large measure in the authors' accounts of the crucial transnational traffic of people, ideas, and weapons that make the white power and violent Islamist movements fascinating to study and difficult to comprehend. Even more importantly, these two books emphasize that white power and violent Islamism are global movements.

Each volume on its own makes for a riveting and informative read, but it is when you study them in tandem (as I did because I am completing a comparative project on the topic) that you realize the degree to which the two movements converge. I find it helpful to think of this resonance musically, following the late Edward Said's adaptation of musical language to understand literature, society, and culture by means of what he called "contrapuntal reading." Counterpoint refers to links between multiple musical voices that are interdependent in harmony but autonomous in melody or rhythm, creating a dialogue of contrasts and oppositions. It is useful to consider white power and violent Islamist movements as ideological counterpoints.

SEEDED BY AMERICAN MILITARISM

Looked at in this way, the parallels between radical Islamists and the white power movement in the United States are uncanny. Belew and Hegghammer each make the compelling point that these are geographically widespread movements with deep histories, and not distinct groups, or, for that matter, loose affiliations of "lone wolves"—a notion Belew demolishes by highlighting connections between individual members and the broader white power movement. Even seemingly individual actions are enmeshed in ideological tissue and communities of resentment and violence. Hence Belew's apt insistence that "white power movement" is an appropriate umbrella

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designation for the many race-focused far-right groups in the United States.

The 1967 Six-Day War in the Middle East and the Vietnam War were watershed events that reverberated in the emergence of the violent Islamist and white power movements and shaped their outlooks. Just as the 1967 defeat of Arab armies planted the idea of armed resistance under the aegis of Islam in the mind of the young Palestinian teacher Abdullah al-Azzam (the anchor of Hegghammer's study, who would go on to become a pivotal figure in the anti-Soviet mujahideen movement in Afghanistan), so, too, would defeat in Vietnam seed Louis Beam (a movement pioneer in Belew's account) with the idea of militarizing the Ku Klux Klan under the umbrella of a white power revolution. An important lesson we learn from both volumes is that extremist movements thrive in the crucible of war, from Vietnam and Egypt to Afghanistan and Iraq. They also fester in the aftermath of war: the resentment of occupation, the bitterness of defeat, the fury at "betrayal."

If the Vietnam War catalyzed the white power movement and the second invasion of Iraq incubated Islamic State, what these movements have in common is that they were shaped by US military interventions around the world in the three decades between the two wars. Increasingly, as occurred during the Iraqi insurgency, the two movements glimpse each other in theaters of combat waged as much by militants and mercenaries as by regular soldiers. US global militarism is a common denominator.

Extremist movements thrive in the crucible of war.

Both the white power and violent Islamist movements are transnational, drawing like-minded militants from multiple nations and capitalizing on the global traffic of soldiers, weapons, and images. They are both rapidly changing war machines that witness constant internal strife and transformation, with groups emerging, merging, consolidating, and disappearing before irrupting again in a different guise. Both have designated the state a target of violent action: white power since the July 1983 declaration of war at the Aryan Nations World Congress in Idaho; violent Islamism since defeat in the 1967 war.

Extremism in the name of a more (in the case of violent Islamists) or less (white power extremists) declared religious affiliation pervades both movements and endows a mix of sociopathy and criminality with a higher purpose. No wonder both recruit heavily in prisons. Since they prize weapons and explosives expertise, military personnel—including a disturbing number of active-duty personnel in the United States associated with white power groups—swell the ranks of these extremist movements.

A more explicitly comparative study would plumb parallels between Louis Beam and Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi as pioneering ideologues and organizers, or between foundational books like William Luther Pierce's *The Turner Diaries* and Abi Bakr Naji's *The Administration of Anarchy*, or even between the two movements' respective applications of the notion of "leaderless resistance." The conspiratorial tone, the embattled identity, the vengeful plots against the state, the schemes of takeover in multiple stages, the apocalyptic fervor—all these are uncanny resonances between two movements that grew thousands of miles apart, but were connected to each other and were both shaped by a history of US militarism.

POLARIZED IDENTITIES, MEDIA FLAIR

A binary, Manichean worldview, fueled by a conspiratorial sensibility, characterizes both race war and holy war. Writings and speeches pit a putatively righteous white nation or global Sunni *umma* against myriad enemies, chief among them the prevailing state authorities and visibly different groups: racial, religious, linguistic, and sexual minorities. In its starkest manifestations of polarizing either-or, with-me-or-against-me talk, this rhetoric associates the self with life and the other with death.

This worldview may appear to have irrupted into public view recently, in Islamic State's magazines or in the 2019 online white power diatribe by the mass murderer who attacked two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. Yet the ideas of eternal victimhood, natural superiority of the in-group, and abiding antagonism that undergird the extremist imagination have been congealing since at least the 1970s in their contemporary iterations, and all the way back to the nineteenth century with the first wave of the Ku Klux Klan.

Another commonality is that adherents of both movements espouse reactionary gender roles that confine women to reproduction and domestic service. Although Hegghammer's book does not

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explicitly focus on gender, Belew devotes a chapter to women in the white power movement, and what she describes resonates vividly with my own reading of Islamic State's primary texts as much as it echoes the tenor of the Christchurch massacre perpetrator's "manifesto," which depicts women as both the weakest link and the most potent symbol of the white race, requiring protection from "hordes" of Black, Brown, and Muslim men cast as "invaders" of the white race's exclusive civilization. Overall, the gender worldview of these groups is enfolded in their binary, polarized, and besieged identities.

This mindset is nurtured by active spheres of cultural production, including enterprising uses of technology and vibrant propaganda apparatuses. Hollywood films, with their simplistic "good guy versus bad guy" setups and spectacular visual effects of violence and explosions, have inspired and been used by both movements as sources of emulation and tools of community building. Islamic State video productions have used direct footage and mimicked entire scenes from US action adventure movies by directors ranging from Quentin Tarantino to Kathryn Bigelow. Meanwhile, Tinseltown producers have echoed the stories of Louis Beam and other white supremacists and separatists in blockbusters like *The Deer Hunter* and *Red Dawn*. Islamic State organized collective viewings of *Flames of War*, a September 2014 hour-long documentary glorifying the group's early conquests, in its Media Spots—official locations for reading and viewing caliphal propaganda—much as David Duke and the Federated Knights of the Ku Klux Klan held screenings of D. W. Griffith's 1915 film *Birth of a Nation* in the 1970s. Hollywood is in symbiosis with both movements, as chronicler or inspiration.

Together, the books by Belew and Hegghammer demonstrate how extremist groups have consistently been pioneers in the use of the media characteristic of the era in which they emerge, qualifying contemporary hyperbolic laments about Islamic State's "sophisticated" media operation and strategic communication "savvy." Some of the most significant trends in the development of extremist media, whether of white power or Islamist groups, hark back to the 1980s.

Louis Beam organized newspapers, pamphlets, and, most notably, computers, which in the mid-1970s had reached a size small enough to fit in a home—"minicomputers"—and by the early 1980s had achieved mass penetration in the United States. (*Time* magazine's 1983 Man of the Year, Belew reminds us, was the computer.) Beam harnessed emerging computer-to-computer networks, which would eventually form the Internet, to connect geographically far-flung white power groups through Liberty Net. Its trove of propaganda and how-to tips was a forerunner of today's jihadi accounts on encrypted messaging platforms like Telegram, inviting recruits to connect "online with the Aryan national brain trust."

Beam was not the only propagandist to use media to construct an exclusive identity pitted against the outside world. Also in the 1970s, as Hegghammer documents, publications like the Muslim Brotherhood's *al-Mujtama'* shaped a sense of a Muslim community besieged by foes, giving rise to the language of enemy-as-Crusader that would feature in the pages of Islamic State's publication *Dabiq*. By the late 1970s, production quality improved and distribution expanded, partly because of developments in technology.

Faces of hatred

In the rising visibility of assorted militias and white identity organizations, the proliferation of eccentric but lethal groups like the Boogaloo Bois and the Proud Boys, and the threat of an insurgency to follow defeat in the ballot box—all egged on from the highest pulpit in the land—the specter of widespread violence and the toppling of social order has come to the United States. We cannot be lulled into the false comfort of believing that the white power movement could never wreak havoc in ways similar to al-Qaeda and Islamic State.

An argument can be made that what stands between US society and generalized violence by armed extremists (which some citizens, particularly in Black and Brown communities, have already experienced) are functioning state institutions. But one would have to be blind not to notice the steady weakening of these institutions and the rising violence in American society. Ideological hardening and tribal political retrenchment are pulling this society apart, and hatred's many faces—xenophobia, anti-Blackness, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and more—scowl in broad daylight. The militia plot to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer in October 2020 should be understood as the red flag that it is. In the counterpoint between Whitmer's would-be kidnappers and the Islamic State militants who have targeted Iraqi municipal, provincial, and tribal leaders, the rhythm is heavy as lead, and the melody is morbid. ■

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