

American Extremism

Robert Bruce Adolph

The far right of the US Republican Party

I suspect that ever since early hominids began to organize themselves into tribal groups, extremism in word, thought and deed has existed among our kind. In fact, it may have been our original emotional default setting. However, in the modern era - let us hope that we have evolved a bit - there are still those who cannot abide the restrictions of reason, the demands of logic, and the self-restraint needed to compromise. There are still those who have a great need for simple answers to explain away extraordinarily complex human problems. There are still those who have such a strong need to belong to a social group, they will sacrifice the rights and prerequisites of individuality to achieve it - leaving all personal responsibility behind. These are often the cannon fodder of various radical movements in the last two centuries across multiple political and religious spectrums. Regrettably, extremism, also called fanaticism, is part and parcel of the human condition.

Extremists of all political stripes claim to wish to right great wrongs; to represent that which is self-sacrificing and noble; to lead the uninformed masses either back to a grand and glorious past or into a bright and promising future. They are utterly convinced of the rectitude of their cause. They are therefore self-righteous. They are also extravagant in their claims. In the case of the US, the ultra-conservatives are misogynistic and have generally tied their wagons to a single religion and ethnicity, while thoroughly demonizing their perceived enemies. Tragically, as a group, they are easily misled by the self-interested and unscrupulous. The most dangerous and numerous extremists in America are found within the far right of the Republican Party. Despite multiple claims to historical exceptionalism, the United States of America is not immune to the siren's call of fanaticism. There is a confluence of influences at work here that exacerbate this pre-existing human condition.

RACISM: STILL THRIVING

It has been often repeated that slavery is America's original sin. That stain was not completely washed clean by the US Civil War: far from it. Racism subsequently went

underground. *Separate but equal* really meant Jim Crow Laws, poll taxes, and midnight lynching - all designed to control Blacks and suppress their right to vote. Black Americans remain today far behind whites in nearly every metric used to judge the health of a society with the notable exception of the rates of incarceration.

The *Washington Post* reports, "Since 2015 right-wing extremists have been involved in 267 plots or attacks and 91 fatalities." Their targets are synagogues, mosques, abortion clinics, Black churches, and government structures. Notice the religious and racist elements at work. While it may not be clear at first blush, all these elements, including the attacks on government, women, and Blacks can be tied to an incomprehensibly dark version of Christianity, which is almost wholly alabaster in pigmentation. It is worthwhile noting that white supremacists are all-too-often anti-Semites as well.

Per Seth Jones of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, "More than a quarter of right-wing incidents and just under half of the deaths in those incidents were caused by people who showed support for white su-



Racism still thrives in America. Black Americans remain far behind in nearly every metric used to judge the health of a society and a half the deaths in right-wing extremist incidents were caused by people who showed support for white supremacy. Depicted are members of the Ku Klux Klan protesting the removal of a statue of Confederate General Lee in Charlottesville in 2017 (photo: 72westy / Shutterstock.com)

premacy." Racism still thrives on American soil. Those that deny it are lying to themselves and everyone else. Tragically, self-delusion is an all-too-common failing.

THE POLITICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS

Political extremism, without question, is a threat to the American form of democracy – the Republic. The insurrection that took place at the US Capitol Building earlier this year is emblematic of the problem. US citizens, claiming to be patriots, were manipulated into horrendous acts of violence by a corrupt sitting president – pathologically unable to admit defeat - who had no interest other than protecting his fragile ego. Moreover, a significant proportion of the electorate - without evidence - continues to believe THE BIG LIE that the election was stolen by Joe Biden and the Democratic Party. The rest of the civilized world has looked on in horror as the globe's oldest constitutional republic has turned on itself - inward and ugly.

Clearly, American fanatics of the political far right feel that they are already at war. As a result, they have or-

ganized via social media. They have innocuous and patriotic-sounding names for their organizations, such as Proud Boys and Oath Keepers. But, make no mistake, these acolytes are almost universally Caucasians - many of them claim to be Evangelical Christians too. Their clarion call is often perceived grievance. Despite repetitive assertions to the contrary, the results of their beliefs and politics are racist: anti-immigration; anti-Black; anti-Hispanic; anti-Asian; anti-Semitic; and anti-Muslim. In addition, they are anti-abortion, anti-elite, anti-government, anti-tax, anti-vax, and anti-mask.

In fact, it is sometimes difficult to know precisely what the far-right wing of the Republican Party is for beyond pasty complexion and their in-your-face religious faith. These disciples of a perverted version of Christianity have also embraced irrationality – cleaving to absurd conspiracy theories, such as QAnon and the Deep State. They seem to prefer the simplicity of belief and a sense of tribal belonging over the complexities offered by fact-based logic, the conduct of peer-reviewed research, and

the willingness to stand alone to take a moral position. Despite all the noise they make, they are inherently reactionary, anti-democratic, and therefore can advance their cause only by amoral means such as voter-suppression laws, violence, or the threat of violence. Many seem to consider compromise a form of betrayal. Their appeal is primarily emotional. Therefore, arguing with them, while citing facts, logic, and reason is often pointless. I know. I have tried.

THE DANGER OF RELIGION IN POLITICS

Many of the far right express their displeasure with current government policies in terms of values that are joined-at-the-hip with religion. The problem with religiously based values is that the US Constitution, while protecting such freedoms, also guards against religious tyrannies. Hindus, Zoroastrians, Muslims, Rastafarians, Jews, Animists, Wiccans, and the many fractured sects of Christianity are all guaranteed the same protection under the law.

Interestingly, two thirds of the justices currently on the US Supreme Court were raised as Catholics. Why Catholics? They are dogmatically anti-abortion, which appeals to the religious sensibilities of the Christian right. This was not what the Founders envisioned for the highest court of the land. Catholics make up only 20% of the US population. How is this representative?

Under the US Constitution, religion is supposed to be a protected and private matter, and rightly so. Clearly, anti-abortion activists hope to achieve by Supreme Court fiat what they have failed to accomplish through legislation. When religion goes public, as it has in Iran, belief comes to dominate all public discourse. Those who believe differently are marginalized, imprisoned, or killed. Am I being unnecessarily alarmist? I do not think so. Historically speaking, religious extremism has been responsible for more spilled blood than any other cause.

Extremists express themselves most fully in opposition. Based on the events of 6 January of this year, these true believers also appear quite willing to engage in violence. Interestingly, they are almost all avid supporters of the former outrageously corrupt, mendacious, and incompetent Trump administration, which exhibited clearly Fascist tendencies, and by all accounts, incited the Capitol mob to violence. These adherents to ultra-conservative causes also tend towards the worst excesses of tribalism that is cloaked in a virulent form of patriotism and contorted divinity. Finally, and once again, they all appear to occupy the darkest recesses of the far-right wing of the Republican Party.

THE AVARICIOUS FAR-RIGHT MEDIA

The consumers of ultra-conservative misinformation feel fully legitimized by the monetized political propaganda emanating from Fox News, Newsmax, OAN, and Breitbart. Such rapacious programming is designed to tell their viewers exactly what they want to hear - never allowing facts to get in the way of making a fast buck or supporting a corrupt right-wing politician, who "claims" to represent conservative values and interests. Tragically, the First Amendment to the US Constitution, which was designed to protect free speech, has been hijacked by right-wing-sounding media companies that have no interest in America beyond enriching themselves. Many of the citizens who assaulted the US Capitol were consumers of those lies. The promulgation of misinformation in America has become a burgeoning money-making business, and business is good.

There are, of course, other groups of people who define themselves in opposition - those who embrace lies so long as those untruths make them feel good about themselves - those who permit themselves to be predominantly defined by their religious convictions - those who have come to believe that they are engaged in a titanic struggle between good and evil - those who reject logic and rationality - those who are quite willing to engage in violence to further their beliefs - and those who are convinced that there can be no compromise or accommodation with their "enemies." Of course, their "enemies" are those that do not believe as they do. These other groups are terrorist organizations such as ISIS and al Qaeda.

I am aware that this may appear to many as an outrageous comparison. However, my appreciation for facts and the truth compels me to offer such for consideration. I have worked in support of counterterrorism (offensive measures) in the US military; conducted antiterrorism (defensive measures) in the United Nations; and lastly, been a victim and survivor of terrorism in Baghdad, Iraq in 2003. Terrorism is the repeatedly preferred tactic of fanatics, regardless of their political or religious beliefs. Whatever knowledge and perspectives I may hold on this subject are hard won and experientially based.

THE ANTI-ELITES

There also appears to be a strong current of distaste for those who are well educated - the so-called elites. This predilection seems extraordinarily powerful within the right wing of the Republican Party. Some among those who lack higher education tend to embrace extravagant religious or occasionally secular ideologies, which provide them with a powerful alternate identity divorced from any actual reality. Anti-intellectualism in America has a long history. There are those who insist that their religion



Political extremism is a threat to the American democracy. The insurrection of the US Capitol Building is emblematic of this problem. Depicted is the insurrection of the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 (photo: Thomas Hengge / Shutterstock.com)

tells them all they need to know in the world - answering all questions. They condemn “the arrogance of the intellect.” Surrendering one’s intellectual capacities to a belief - secular or religious - of course, leads inevitably to autocracy and resultant policies that are utterly Fascist in character.

In religiously dominated societies, for example, elites, are always targeted. The reason: their civility, fact-based logic, empiricism, empathy, and willingness to compromise cannot be tolerated. In fact, the exercise of reason is the very antithesis of extremism globally. Intolerance is yet another hallmark of fanaticism.

ANTI-GOVERNMENT TO THE BONE

The far right of the Republican Party is relentlessly anti-government. They appear to believe in the absolute right of the individual to pretty much do as they please. Recent examples during the pandemic are telling. These disciples of hardcore conservatism have in many cases refused to wear masks and repudiated vaccinations based on the absurd notion that both are somehow an

invasion of their right to choose. They take no notice that their exercise of rights endangers others through the spread of COVID and resulting deaths. They seem to be all about individual rights but wish to bear no responsibility for their actions or lack thereof. Their issues with government do not end there.

The far right of the Republican Party would dismantle much of the US Government that has been built over the last century. They would do away with most entitlement programs, scale back gun laws, decimate poverty-reduction programs, obliterate voting rights, wipe out minority legal protections, and more. They have embraced the false idea that government is the real enemy of the people and must be fought tooth-and-nail, even to the point of supporting a violent overthrow of the nation’s democratically elected leadership.

CONCLUSION

Are there American extremist groups of the political left? Yes, of course, there are. However, the numbers of incidents credited to them are far smaller than of those from

the right, although you would not know that if you listened only to Fox News. I have, therefore, concentrated my limited space in this op-ed on the statistically verifiable and therefore significantly greater proven threat of the US political ultra-conservatives.

The far-right wing of the Republican Party is dragging the center into the muck of rabid superstition and outrageous individual self-interest. Free speech has been twisted so that it includes the freedom to lie and foment violence. Cancel-culture claims from the right state that their values are under assault. But this is a preposterous canard. What is really under assault is the massive body of lies that have been erected to protect the denizens of whiteness combined with what pretends to be conservative Christian values.

Why is a significantly greater degree of animus coming from the political right? The contemporary Republican Party has staked out political positions that are on the wrong side of history. Their leaders have become willing slaves to the monied 1%. Self-interest rules their actions. They merely pretend to adhere to religious values. Therefore, and of necessity, deceit is the sea in which they swim. THE BIG LIE is an extension of this penchant for mendacity.

In a sense, ultra-conservative fanatics are at war with the secular nature of the US Constitution. A secular government - intended by the Founders - requires reason and compromise above all. Religion requires belief and compliance. These two positions have co-existed in the past, albeit never entirely comfortably. Today, however, they have become oppositional - sparking conflict and violence - aided, abetted, and amplified by far-right-leaning media companies chasing profits. Essentially, their business model is found in feeding conservative Americans exactly what they want to hear - reinforcing their worst impulses - no matter that bloodletting may be the all-too-predictable outcome. Their speech is protected: therefore, their profits are assured.

It is worth pointing out that Europe has its own problems with ultra-conservative fanatics. Hard-over beliefs of the political right are resurgent in multiple countries of

the European Union. Once again, extremism is part and parcel of the human condition and not unique to North America.

It is the confluence of multiple influences: racism, the negative aspects of belief, human psychology, a conservative distaste for intellectuals, self-interested and mendacious right-wing politicians, anti-government conservatism, and an amoral avaricious right-wing media that have all helped to create, support, and expand the ranks of today's dangerous ultra-conservatives. As a life-long political conservative, I am saddened beyond words by the perfidy of the current leadership of the US Republican Party, and the resultant extremism that has subsequently flourished under their watch. Whether or not America can withstand these negative influences remains an open question. I fear that there may be worse yet to come.

With special thanks to Professor Ben Lawton.

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Many of the far-right express their displeasure with current government policies in terms of values that are joined-at-the-hip with religion. Depicted is a Trump supporter holding a sign at a rally in his support (photo: Aaron of L.A. Photography / Shutterstock.com)