

Lone-Wolf Terrorism: A Symptom of the Deepening Social Crisis

November 19, 2017



On November 5, 2017, 26-year-old Devin Kelley killed 26 people and injured 20 others attending Sunday church services at the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, TX. This small, unincorporated community is 30 miles southeast of San Antonio and, in 2000, its population was but 362 people. Sadly, Kelley is the latest, but not the last lone-wolf terrorist to engage in the mass killing of Americans.

Kelley seems to have been a very troubled man. He grew up in New Braunfels, TX, located about 35 miles from where the killings took place. After graduating high school, he joined the Air Force. While serving, he violently assaulted his wife and step-child, and was court-martialed for domestic violence, served a one-year detention sentence, was demoted and received a bad conduct discharge. He subsequently remarried and was the father of another child, but was living a hard-scrabble existence. Due to an Air Force screw-up, Kelley was able to purchase a Ruger AR assault-type rifle and an anti-ballistic vest which he used in his murderous rampage.

Five days earlier, on October 31st, Sayfullo Saipov, a 29-year-old legal immigrant from Uzbekistan, undertook another terrorist act. At around 3:00 pm on Halloween afternoon, Saipov drove a rented pickup truck on a bicycle path abutting the West Side Highway along the Hudson River in New York's downtown Tribeca district, attacking pedestrians and bicyclists, killing 8 people and injuring 12 others. After crashing his truck into a school bus and attempting to flee, Saipov was shot by a police officer and shouted in Arabic "Allahu akbar," "*God is great.*"

Earlier that month, on October 3rd, in Las Vegas, NV, Stephen Paddock, a 64-year-old retired real-estate speculator and gambler, shot re-tooled assault rifles from a room on the 32nd floor of the Mandalay Bay at attendees of the Route 91 Harvest music festival, killing 59 people and leading to over 500 people being injured. After the shooting, police found 23 guns in his room at on Mandalay Bay hotel as well as 20-plus more in his two Nevada homes, along with an enormous amount of ammunition. He seems to have been as normal as the proverbial "guy next door," although some reports claim his father was reportedly mentally ill with "psychopathic with suicidal tendencies."

In August, at the bloody anti-racist showdown in Charlottesville, VA, a 20-year-old white nationalist, James Alex Fields, Jr., from Maumee, OH, drove his car into a crowd of demonstrators, killing Heather Heyer, a 32-year old local resident, and injured 19 others.

Killings by lone-wolf perpetrators are reaching an epidemic proportion. Over the last few years, there have been dozens of such incidents. Six that gained significant media attention over just the last five years are: **(i)** Omar Mateen killed 49 (50 including himself) people and injured 58 at an Orlando, FL gay nightclub in 2016; **(ii)** Micah Johnson shot and killed four Dallas police officers and one Dallas Area Rapid Transit officer in what authorities called a "sniper ambush" in 2016; **(iii)** Ahmad Khan Raimi, a 28-year-old, Afghan-born U.S. citizen, detonated a pressure cooker bomb in

Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood and exploded a pipe bomb along a Marine Corps charity race in Seaside Park, NJ, in 2016; **(iv)** Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik shot and killed 14 people and wounding 22 others at an office 2015 Christmas party in San Bernardino, CA; **(v)** the white racist Dylann Roof killed nine African-American parishioners at the Emanuel AME Church in downtown Charleston in 2015; and **(vi)** the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing by Tamerlan Tsarnaev and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev left three spectators dead and wounded 264 others.

Government and media reporting on these and similar incidents attempt to distinguish between "mass shootings" and "terrorist" acts. Mass shootings, like those committed by Kelley and Paddock, involve lone-wolves driven by psycho-personal factors; terrorist acts, like those committed by Saipov and Fields, involve lone-wolves driven by ideological-political factors. The distinction, while analytically useful, fails to grasp the underlying commonality binding the growing phenomenon of lone-wolf terrorism. Most troubling, lone-wolf terrorism is a symptom of the deepening social crisis.

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"The United States (US) is the primary target among western states for lone wolf terrorist (LWT) attacks, and the frequency of attacks continues to increase." These words open a June 2015 Georgetown National Security Critical Issue Task Force (NSCITF) report, "Lone Wolf Terrorism." It points out that while such terrorist acts constitute a very small portion of all terrorist attacks (1.8 percent), it notes that such attacks more than doubled from 30 attacks in the 1970s to 73 attacks in the 2000s.

Since 1900, according to Wikipedia, more than 100 acts of political terrorism have taken place in the U.S., many committed by lone-wolves. They include the assassinations of two presidents - William McKinley (1901) and John Kennedy (1963) - as well as the attempted assassinations in the continental U.S. of seven presidents - Theodore Roosevelt (1912), Franklin Roosevelt (1933), Harry Truman (1950), Kennedy (1960), Richard Nixon (1972, George Wallace paralyzed), Gerald Ford (1975) and Ronald Reagan (1981, James Brady wounded). These are attacks on presidents; no one knows the true scale of terrorist violence in the America.

A 1999 FBI report, "Terrorism in the United States," found that in the two decades between 1980 and 1999 there were 327 domestic terrorist acts that left 205 people dead and 2,037 injured. A 2010 report from the University of Maryland's START (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism) project found that between 1970 and 2007 the U.S. faced 1,347 "terrorist attacks." It reports that New York was the most targeted city (21% or 284 attacks), followed by Miami (70), San Francisco (66), Washington, DC (59) and Los Angeles (54). (For a list of terrorist acts dating from 1865, see Wm. Robert Johnston, "Terrorist attacks and related incidents in the United States.")

Earlier this year, the nonprofit advocacy group, *Everytown for Gun Safety*, released a revealing study, "Mass Shooting in the United States, 2009-2016," reporting that from 2009-2016, there were 156 "mass shootings" in the U.S. Such incidents are defined in terms of whether four or more people were shot and killed. Digging deeper, it found: "These incidents resulted in 1,187 victims shot: 848 people were shot and killed, and 339 people were shot and injured. In addition, 66 perpetrators killed themselves after a mass shooting, and another 17 perpetrators were shot and killed by responding law enforcement." Most disturbing, "the majority of mass shootings - 54 percent of cases - were related to domestic or family violence."

The Georgetown study warns, "While the majority of LWTs are single, white men with criminal records, these patterns are too broad to develop a clear profile for LEOs." Among the most notorious lone-wolves are: Andrew Philip Kehoe, who committed the 1927 bombing of the Bath, MI,

School; George Metsky, known as the New York “mad bomber” during the 1940-1956 period; Sam Melville and Jane Alpert, 1960s New Left radicals; and Ted Kaczynski, the “Unibomber” who operated between 1978-1995.

Today’s lone-wolf domestic terrorists are drawn from the same ideological cloth as those of yesteryear. They are driven by political-ideological, cultural-religious or psycho-pathologically forces. Sometimes, combinations of all three categories are realized in violent acts. The following examples illustrate each category.

Among lone-wolf political attackers are:

§ April 19, 1995: Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols bomb the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City, OK; the explosion left 169 people dead, including 19 children, and more than 675 people injured; it also damaged or destroyed more than 300 buildings in the immediate area.

§ April 15, 2013: Tamerlan Tsarnaev, a 26-year-old Chechen immigrant, and his 19-year-old brother, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, explode a self-made bomb near the finish line of the Boston Marathon, killing three spectators and wounding 264 others.

§ December 2, 2015: a married couple, Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik, kills 14 people and wounding 22 others, many of them Farook’s co-workers, a holiday party in the conference room at the Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino, CA.

Among lone-wolf cultural attackers are:

§ June 17, 2015: the white racist Dylann Roof kills nine African-American parishioners at the Emanuel AME Church in downtown Charleston, SC; his website was named the “Last Rhodesian” and his jacket sported flags of white-ruled Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and South Africa; his car license plate featuring the Confederate flag; and his racist manifesto.

§ June 11, 2016: Omar Mateen, a 29-year-old American-born Muslim son of Afghan immigrant, kills 50 people (including himself) and the wounding of 53 others in Orlando, FL, at the Pulse nightclub, a popular gay entertainment and community center, on Latin night.

Among lone-wolf psychopathic attackers are:

§ July 20, 2012: James Holmes kills 12 people and injured 70 others in a shootout at an Aurora, CO, movie theatre.

§ December 14, 2012: Adam Lanza, a 20-year-old resident of Newtown, CT, fatally shot and killed 20 children and seven staff members at the Sandy Hook Elementary School as well as his mother.

The recent long-wolf attacks – Kelley’s at a Texas church, Saipov’s targeting New York pedestrians and cyclists, Paddock’s Las Vegas shootings and Fields’ crashing into a demonstrator – reflect the complexity of the terrorist act.

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The Georgetown study identifies “four main trends” among domestic, lone-wolf terrorists:

§ Increasingly target law enforcement and military personnel;

§ Overwhelmingly use firearms to conduct attacks;

§ Increasingly become radicalized via the Internet, extremist media and the civilian workplace; and,

§ Proclaim an individual ideology instead of claiming affinity to specific, organized extremist groups.

In the next few years, domestic lone-wolf terrorist incidents are likely to increase.

Sadly, the *Everytown for Gun Safety study* warns that the “majority of mass shootings in the United States are related to domestic or family violence.” It notes that many share a set of common symptoms including the violation of a protective order, evidence of ongoing substance abuse, serious mental illnesses and the easy availability of high-powered assault firearms.

One factor that seems common to many (if not all) recent mass shooters or terrorists — but given little attention — is the deepening sense of disillusionment spreading through the country. It is like an undiagnosed cancer, a phenomenon that is often expressed in secondary symptoms until a major outbreak — like a terrorist act — occurs that is too late to treat. Disillusionment is expressed in the rising morbidity and mortality rates, including suicides and drug (e.g., heroine and oxy-contin) overdoses among white men 35 to 64 years. It is also expressed in the deepening dissatisfaction with the way income and wealth are distributed, notably ongoing wage stagnation and the rising poverty rate. And some are waging a war against U.S. war-making internationally.

Most troubling, depression and social or political cynicism is mounting, evident is a growing sense that the long-cherished belief in the “American Dream” is over. This is the shared ideology that shape American society for a half-century following WWII. It is the defining belief that hard work, debt and white skin privilege would guarantee the ordinary American — and, more importantly, their children — a better tomorrow. Those days are over.

American disillusionment was most bitterly expressed in the desperate effort to reverse history that elected Trump president. In such a festering social setting, one can only expect the worst — more lone-wolf terrorism.