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Does US presidential rhetoric affect asymmetric political violence?

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ABSTRACT

Although political violence has proven to be difficult for governments to manage, predict or control, previous research on the impact of relevant federal government actions and US presidential rhetoric on terrorist attacks and hate crimes demonstrates that what the US government does matters in ways that are both expected and unexpected. In the US, government counterterrorism strategies changed rapidly in response to the September 11th, 2001 attacks on the US. The Bush administration formed a new executive department, centralised intelligence agencies, invested in tangible counterterrorism measures, implemented two invasions and occupations, and spoke publicly about terrorism on a near-daily basis. Yet much has changed since that research, as the US has since elected a president whose presidential campaign relied upon espousing antagonism towards Muslims, immigrants and other minority groups. Further, President Trump's administration has repeatedly demonstrated its commitment to isolate and suppress Muslims as a strategy to combat Islamist extremism in contrast to previous administrations' more cooperative approaches. This article considers what existing research tells us about whether and how the different actions of the Trump administration may fuel both Jihadi and far-right extremism.

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Introduction

Although political violence is difficult for governments to address, previous research on the impact of relevant federal government actions and US presidential rhetoric on terrorist attacks and hate crimes demonstrates that what the US government does matters in ways that are both expected and unexpected. Government counterterrorism strategies have rapidly changed and evolved around the world since the September 11th attacks on the US in 2001 (Chenoweth, Dugan, and Fisher 2015; Erjavec and Volčič 2006), and today's strategies might indicate a new steady-state approach to countering terrorism. Because terrorist attacks can influence domestic politics (Indridason 2008), and in turn, domestic politics can shape counterterrorism policy (Crenshaw 2001), it is unsurprising that much has changed after the deadliest terrorist attack in modern times. The popularisation of combating terrorism and other forms of political violence

fuels debate amongst the media, interest groups and the political elite (Crenshaw 2001), shifting political rhetoric in ways that could profoundly influence conflicts with terror groups.

Indeed, governments have an assortment of policy options at their disposal to counter and reduce political violence and extremism by sub-state antagonists. Their responses to terrorism range from stiffening legal penalties for such violence (Carson 2014; Epifanio 2011) to targeting and killing perpetrators (Jordan 2009; Price 2012), some of which have been shown to reduce terrorism in the empirical counterterrorism literature. These counterterrorism policies vary substantially in how punitive and fiscally taxing they are (Epifanio 2011). Their effectiveness also varies substantially, with some strategies mitigating and some exacerbating harm, rather than stopping it. Since many of these tactics have been implemented over a number of years, scholars have been able to evaluate their effectiveness at quelling terrorist violence. Such research has helped discern which among these actions effectively reduce terrorism, unintentionally increase it, or are futile.

As most countries rarely experience terrorism, it is also difficult to statistically evaluate counterterrorism actions and conclude that such efforts reduce the incidence of terrorism (Lynch 2011). Despite these impediments, evidence has shown that many government actions have influenced terrorism risk across different conflicts. But the evidence reveals that sometimes the effects are opposite of those predicted by prominent deterrence theories (Argomaniz and Vidal-Diez 2015; Dugan and Chenoweth 2012; LaFree, Dugan, and Korte 2009), as many politically popular counterterrorism strategies can inadvertently induce a violent backlash. Moreover, in isolation, physical counterterrorism actions that fortify vulnerable targets are unlikely to change the overall incidence of terrorism because targets are easily substitutable. Müller (2010) suggests that this makes target hardening or passive defence strategies “highly questionable”, despite their popularity (see also Bueno de Mesquita 2007; Morris 2015).

Extending these insights, it is becoming increasingly clear that what governments say also seems to impact terrorism. Political communication is at the forefront of physical and legislative counterterrorism actions, as national leaders are able to frame terrorist actions and counterterrorism policies (Shapiro 2002), sometimes influencing the success of counterterrorism operations. As with foreign policy, executives tend to use the full scope of their constitutional powers to exercise considerable autonomy over terrorism and counterterrorism activities. Political communication about terrorism helps to define how prominent terrorist attacks are perceived, declare and emphasise political and policy goals (Hahn 2003), and redefine political situations to minimise conflict (Hall and Hewitt 1970).

Political capital can be preserved, even when governments unexpectedly remain silent on the topic of terrorism (Dalisay 2012). However, as governments are expected to comment on all political issues, a non-reaction signals more than the absence of a response (Schweiger 2015). By not commenting on terrorist violence, governments may be strategically concealing covert actions at the risk of being perceived as “turning a blind eye”, and providing what some may interpret as tacit consent for that violence (Schweiger 2015, 272). Consequently, regardless of whether a president makes a statement about terrorist threats, either the statement or lack thereof can influence terrorist violence (Fisher 2017).

A growing body of literature notes that the terrorism communications by President Trump are a sharp departure from those expressed by the previous US President, Barack Obama, as they are “striking in both [their] simplicity and bluntness” (Holland and Fermor 2017, 182). Further, many of President Trump’s messages are used to construct threatening others and manipulate listeners’ emotions to evoke feelings of nostalgia, hope and fear (Holland and Fermor 2017). In this article, we document some of the key changes in the political approach to terrorism under the Trump administration, consider how these changes might impact a range of terrorist threats and assess whether these departures in responses to terrorism might present the beginning of an After After 9/11 period.

The many methods of counterterrorism

Physical or material counterterrorism activities have received the overwhelming share of attention by researchers. For instance, scholars have studied the effects of targeted killings of suspected terrorists (Jordan 2009; Price 2012), the use of indiscriminate shelling on villages from which terror groups emerge (Lyll 2009) and the effects of target hardening – such as the placement of metal detectors in airports (Enders and Sandler 1993) or the effects of border fencing (Avdan and Gelpi 2017) – on subsequent terror attacks.

Others have studied the effects of laws and policies that are designed to deter terrorists or would-be terrorists from acting, by enhancing punishment for specific acts (see Epifanio 2011 for a list of regulatory counterterrorism measures in Western democracies). Research is mixed on how well these efforts deter terrorism. Dugan, LaFree, and Piquero (2005) found that when Cuba punished those who hijacked aircraft to Cuba, aerial hijackings decreased. However, that finding was unlikely driven by terrorists’ motives, as terrorist hijackings were unaffected by the law. Carson (2014) found that only one of four key pieces of US legislation seemed to successfully deter crimes by environmental and animal rights extremists by enhancing punishment. However, the “successful” law might have overstepped, as it deterred previously *legal* activities, such as protesting, if they cost businesses more than \$10,000 (Carson 2014). The impotency of (Enders and Sandler 1993; Pridemore and Freilich 2007) and even havoc caused by counterterrorism laws and policies (LaFree, Dugan, and Korte 2009; Argomaniz and Vidal-Diez 2015) have been found in other efforts used by governments to deter terrorism, further demonstrating that some government actions may garner additional violence across a variety of terrorist conflicts.

While these laws are directly aimed to punish those who break the law as a way to both deter terrorism and compel others to stop it, other government actions affect bystanders simply because bystanders’ interests align with the suspected “terrorists”. Examples range from issuing curfews, such as those imposed in Northern Ireland and in the Palestinian territories (Dugan and Chenoweth 2012; LaFree, Dugan, and Korte 2009) to deadly acts, including firing artillery on civilian villages (Lyll 2009). As innocent people’s lives are disrupted at best and ended at worst, grievances can intensify, perhaps escalating the momentum of demands against the government. Indeed, Dugan and Chenoweth (2012) found that indiscriminate repression against Palestinians during the Second Intifada was associated with more terrorist attacks

against Israelis. Promisingly, terror attacks declined when Israel used indiscriminate conciliation. Combined, these findings suggest that the effects of government efforts can extend well beyond their intended consequences.

Yet, not all counterterrorism is physical action. When considering the range of government activities that affect the constituencies of violent movements, intangible actions – including praise, threats, promises, and warnings and guarantees – may play a crucial role in signalling the intentions and resolve of the government in combating terrorism. Here we turn our attention to the United States. Many pieces of legislation debated by the US Congress touch upon collective grievances that different extremist groups cite as motivating their ire. For instance, the far-right movement (e.g. white nationalists, hate groups, neo-Nazis and anti-government patriot groups) protests against expansion of federal powers, civil rights protections, gun legislation and taxation, among other things. Energy and agricultural policy typically affects the environment, which rouses environmentalists and, at times, animal rights groups. Efforts to change health care draws debate on women's access to pregnancy prevention and termination, provoking the anti-abortion movement. As Congress debates legislation, extremist groups can strengthen by recruiting their discouraged neighbours and rallying for violent responses. Indeed, preliminary research by Dugan and Chenoweth (2018) finds that when the US federal government has acted in ways that favour minority groups, hate crimes against those groups have increased. Further, even the mistaken perception of culpability for an attack or grievance can increase hate crimes, as hate crimes are often retaliatory (King and Sutton 2013). Consequently, beyond legislation and government policies, actions that alter the perceptions of group grievances can also motivate terrorism and hate crime.

As the highest elected US political official, presidents have wide latitude to craft political messages and control political narratives. Presidential terrorism communications can facilitate deterrence by advertising the certainty and severity of punishment (Fisher 2017), arguing that terrorist organisations are oppressing a political constituency (Zhang 2007), or encouraging resilience following a terrorist attack (McCrisken 2011). Presidential remarks on terrorism and counterterrorism have varied in content and sentiment, while many themes have persisted across numerous administrations. In the light of the US policy of no negotiation with terrorists established by President Nixon, presidents typically use their speeches to communicate indirectly with terrorists by criticising, warning and invoking fear in them (Sarfo and Krampa 2013). Presidential speeches also commonly aim to “discredit terrorist propaganda by promoting truthful and peaceful messages” (U.S. Department of State 2006, 4).

Governments also use communications to intentionally prolong or intensify conflicts for political gain, while also subjugating or suppressing calls for conflict resolution or conciliation. The propensity for forgiveness and conciliation as a pathway to resolving crises was largely absent in Northern Ireland, for instance, particularly after civilians or groups were victimised or had witnessed high levels of violence (Hewstone et al. 2004; Ferguson et al. 2007). In Northern Ireland and elsewhere, governments often respond to calls for justice by using tough talk and implementing visible, albeit ineffective, counterterrorism measures that bolster their public support (Bueno de Mesquita 2007). Consequently, there may be political benefit in prolonging grievances.

Taken together, a wealth of evidence suggests that what the US government says and does matters for terrorism. These impacts likely depend on political regimes (see Dugan and Chenoweth 2012; Fisher 2017), particularly if the political incentives for ending a conflict change. Consequently, the change in US presidential administrations – and the subsequent counterterrorism approaches they take – presents an opportunity to examine the influence of political rhetoric and framing on political violence from below.

The developing US terrorism context

The roots of terrorism and counterterrorism in the US extend well before the shifts prompted by the September 11th attacks in 2001, as each presidency has faced unique political tension and terrorist threats. All presidents inherited conflicts from their predecessors, and many current counterterrorism policies stem from the actions of presidents as far back as Nixon. Yet, counterterrorism strategies also vary across presidencies, some based upon political ideology and others for more nuanced reasons. Starting with President Clinton, US presidents began to discuss terrorism more routinely, both in response to prominent attacks and in preparation for future attacks (see Figure 1), confounding the causal ordering between rhetoric and attacks (Fisher 2017). Further, as rhetoric takes time to impact terrorism, exploring the context of terrorist conflicts is vital to situate future research that disentangles the relationship between political rhetoric and terrorism. To contextualise these developments, we document some of the key characteristics of previous US presidencies and their policies and rhetoric relevant to terrorism.

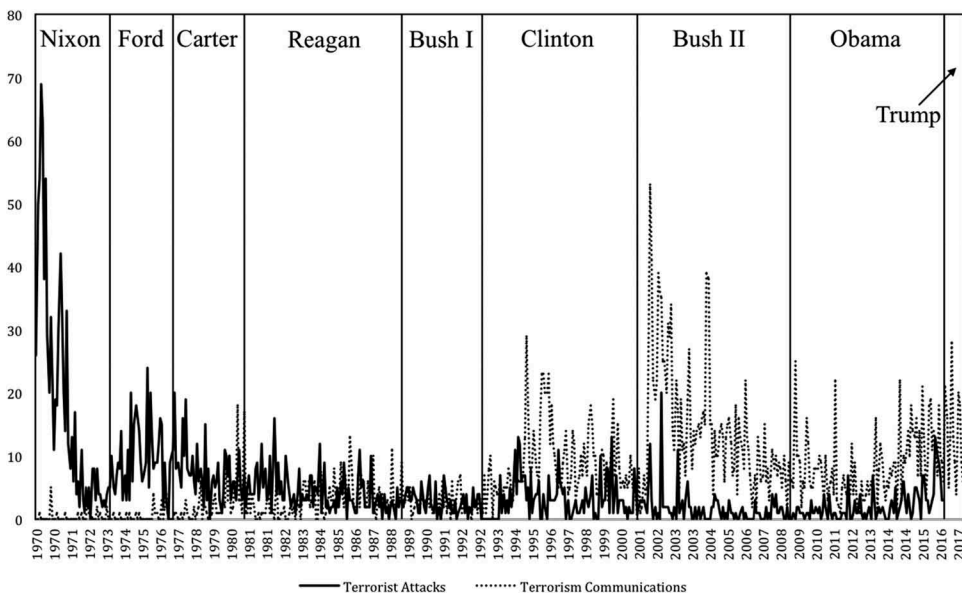


Figure 1. Monthly frequency of US domestic terrorism and US presidential terrorism communications.

The counterterrorism legacy of previous US presidents

Contemporary counterterrorism strategies began under the Nixon administration (Sloan 1993), and had a formative impact on how future US governments and the world would define, understand and respond to terrorism. Prior to Nixon, the US government either ignored or treated as criminal organisations many groups now designated as terrorist organisations, such as the Ku Klux Klan (Sloan 1993). Even after increases in attacks by Puerto Rican nationalists, culminating with the attempted assassination of President Truman in 1950, terrorism was not treated as a major threat that required systematic policy (Sloan 1993). The vestiges of this stance continued into Nixon's administration, where the term terrorism was used loosely, often as a synonym for various forms of hijacking, air piracy and guerrilla warfare (Naftali 2004). Terrorism was thus defined and understood poorly, permitting the Nixon administration to craft its responses to terrorism unencumbered by previous political positions.

Although President Nixon publicly discussed terrorism in an official capacity only 23 times (Fisher 2017), one of his impromptu remarks would shape US counterterrorism to the present day. Following the 1972 Munich Olympic attack by Black September, the mounting pressure and proximity of airline hijackings, and the political latitude created by these events, the Nixon administration introduced the US policy of "no negotiations" with terrorist groups on 2 March 1973:

As far as the United States as a government giving in to blackmail demands, we cannot do so and we will not do so ... We will do everything that we can to get them released, but we will not pay blackmail. (Nixon 1973)

This statement would set the tone for future presidents, demonstrating the potential for an unscripted statement to wield repercussions across generations.

Gerald Ford placed a lower priority on terrorism as a policy issue compared to Nixon, leaving federal agencies, including the CIA, to respond to threats from increased Palestinian terrorism and nuclear terrorism (Naftali 2004). Despite this overriding approach, Ford left a marked counterterrorism legacy in his decision to forbid any person employed by or acting on behalf of the US government from engaging in, or conspiring to engage in, assassination (Abramowitz 2002). Largely motivated by an attempt to manage the destabilising effects of foreign leadership assassination, this new norm would also guide counterterrorism efforts for the next 20 years by publicly emphasising the importance of protecting human rights in matters of conflict (Brinkley 2007).

Ford's overall focus on protecting human rights continued and expanded within the subsequent Jimmy Carter administration (Carleton and Stohl 1985). Despite Carter's dovish reputation among the US public, perhaps exacerbated by the media's preoccupation with the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979, Carter employed a somewhat hawkish approach concerning terrorism (Müller 2005). This led in part to the public perception that Carter's "foreign policies in general were confused, incoherent, lacking in strategy, and inconsistent" (Cottam 1992, 123). Cottam (1992) further suggests that similar to Nixon, Carter attempted to balance national security with human-rights policy on a case-by-case basis, instead of through an overarching strategy.

Unlike his predecessors, President Reagan created political narratives that were central to fomenting support for his policies and for launching the US first declared

war on terrorism (Gilboa 1990). By proclaiming terrorist attacks as “acts of war”, rather than criminal acts, Reagan presented a marked departure from previous administrations. This new rhetorical framework placed terrorism within a broader set of cultural narratives surrounding America’s previous war experiences, justified a military rather than a criminal justice response, and transformed the administration into a “war presidency” (Jackson 2006). As Reagan’s rhetorical framing “blurred the disparate causes of international terrorism and the varied motives of terrorist groups”, he was able to impose the same types of military responses on all terrorist threats, which eventually “called into the question the Reagan administration’s willingness to adhere strictly to international law” (Joyner 1988, 29). Reagan (1985, 104) claimed that foreign governments were becoming more influential by “actively supporting a campaign of international terrorism against the United States, her allies, and moderate Third World states”. Reagan’s use of public communications entrenched Nixon’s “no concessions” stance, established clear narratives regarding the causes of terrorism, suggested methods to prevent future terrorist attacks, and brought terrorism to the forefront of public’s discussion (Hinckley 1989).

As Reagan’s former Vice President, President George H. W. Bush (Bush I) reproduced Reagan’s rhetoric and counterterrorism strategies, while also presenting the “illusion of triumph” in matters of conflict, and portraying anti-war protesters as anti-patriotic (Reese and Buckalew 1995, 40). Bush I further blurred the political distinction between terrorism and warfare by justifying his expansion of the “war on terrorism” to include oil-funded state dictators by proclaiming a “war of liberation” for the Kuwaiti people (Le Billon and El Khatib 2004, 109). Indeed, by publicly redefining US and global security related to the Persian Gulf War, Bush I laid the groundwork for the strategic objectives used by his son, George W. Bush, during the second “war on terrorism”, following the attacks of 11 September 2001 (Gershkoff and Kushner 2005).

President Clinton’s rhetoric and subsequent counterterrorism strategy initially contrasted from previous allusions to war by actively seeking ways to prevent terrorism (Feste 2011). Clinton broadly employed his conflict-avoidance strategy through informally styled public communications (Feste 2011). Following this approach, when confronted by the 1993 World Trade Center bombing one month into his presidency, the Clinton administration responded by producing a publicly discernible, cohesive and proactive counterterrorism policy (Badey 1998). Clinton’s initial approach to terrorism, particularly in rhetoric, developed over the course of his administration. Adhering to his commitment to employ the best available resources to combat terrorism, Clinton’s administration initially publicly advocated for “bridging the gap” to bring about closer collaboration between academics and policy-makers (Crenshaw 2000). Over the course of his presidency, however, Clinton began to respond to terrorist attacks by using classic deterrence language, and eventually language reminiscent of Reagan’s allusions to terrorism as war (Badey 1998). Weakened by domestic political issues towards the end of his second term, Clinton adopted a more hard-line approach to terrorism, as he lacked the political capital to mobilise security agencies to address the terrorist threat consistent with his initial, less combative approaches (Feste 2011).

More than any preceding administration, terrorism and responses to terrorism were central to the presidency of President George W. Bush (Bush II). Bush II’s administration portrayed the revival of terrorism as an act of war by relying on Reagan’s rhetorical approach and raising concerns about a global jihadi (Turek 2014). The public rallied

behind President Bush and his efforts, as the unprecedented 9/11 attacks in New York, Pennsylvania and Northern Virginia roused a unifying patriotism across the typically divergent US populous (Hetherington and Nelson 2003). Bush II framed the 9/11 attacks as vile and heinous, declaring that a decisive US response was essential for security from terrorism and other existential threats (Buckley and Singh 2006). His speeches often recalled images of 9/11, reminding citizens of their mortality and maintaining his favourability among listeners (Landau et al. 2004), a key factor for his re-election in 2004 (Abramowitz 2002).

Within this political climate, Bush II centralised and nationalised policy on education, sales tax, emergency management, infrastructure and elections administration that was formerly controlled by state governments (Posner 2007). After initiating major tax cuts in early 2001 and beginning wars in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, Bush II's administration depleted the national economic surplus left by the Clinton administration (Canova 2008). Notwithstanding the economic downturn at the end of his second term, through Bush II's calls for multilateral and global responses to terrorism, both the prominence of Islamic terrorism and the use of US militarism to combat terrorism increased dramatically during this period (Kellner 2004).

By 2008, the American public was discouraged by the continuing war against terror, and the Obama administration moved to reframe terrorism as a criminal act rather than an act of war. Distancing himself from Bush II, Obama immediately began to construct a counterterrorism campaign that was perceived to be morally acceptable, more focused on key strategic initiatives and more effective (McCracken 2011). For instance, Obama often touted the ending of the Iraq War as an accomplishment of his administration, although the withdrawal of American troops was due to a settlement negotiated under Bush II's administration (McCracken 2011). Despite this difference in political framing, Obama's counterterrorism strategies still relied on some of Bush II's militaristic counterterrorism tactics, as demonstrated by his pursuit and targeted killing of the Al-Qaeda leader, Osama bin Laden (McCracken 2011). Further, Obama's administration killed dozens of high-value terrorist targets by deploying Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (drones) to kill terrorist operatives in Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen (Boyle 2013). Consequently, Jackson (2011) concluded that "the actual practices of the war on terror will continue along their current trajectory under [the remainder of Obama's] administration with only slight tactical adjustments".

Counterterrorism and the rise of presidential candidate Trump

A profound shift in political discourse first became apparent during the 2016 Republican primary season, as Donald Trump's campaign seemed to simultaneously legitimise the ideas of US white nationalism that fuelled hate crimes and terrorist attacks (Berger 2016), while also alienating US Muslims and Muslims across the globe. Indeed, Trump's announcement of his presidential bid signalled a strong anti-immigration platform by declaring that Mexican immigrants are "... bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're bringing rapists" (Trump 2015), which simultaneously courted the US nationalistic movement while alienating Hispanic Americans, as well as Latin American immigrants. His Twitter posts seemed to further reinforce his alignment with the far-right as demonstrated on 22 November 2015, when then-candidate Trump falsely tweeted that

81% of white murder victims are killed by black persons. This Tweet implicitly endorsed racist rhetoric about the criminal disposition of African Americans. Indeed, his litany of hateful oratory earned Trump an endorsement by *The Crusader*, the Ku Klux Klan's official newspaper (Robb 2016, 1).

Given this apparent strategy by Donald Trump to ignite the far-right during the Republican primaries, it is unsurprising that the counterterrorism strategies he espoused were repressive towards radical Islamic terrorism – a term he and other Republican candidates proudly used to protest the Obama administration's avoidance of the phrase.¹ In fact, when asked on the programme *Fox and Friends* how he would fight ISIS, then-candidate Trump explained that he would

... knock the hell out of ISIS ... the other thing is with the terrorists you have to take out their families, when you get these terrorists, you have to take out their families. They care about their lives, don't kid yourself. But they say they don't care about their lives, you have to take out their families. (Fox News Insider 2015)

Trump's repressive policy proposals extended well beyond terrorists and their families as his campaign released a statement in December 2015 calling for a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States, until our country's representatives can figure out what the hell is going on" (Johnson 2015). Candidate Trump took such effort to distinguish his ideas from the Obama administration's strategy against terrorism that he tweeted immediately after Omar Mateen opened fire in an Orlando LGBTQ nightclub, killing 49, "Appreciate the congrats for being right on radical Islamic terrorism, I don't want congrats, I want toughness & vigilance. We must be smart!" (@realDonaldTrump 2016), instead of expressing condolences to the families of the victims. This statement also exemplifies a political willingness to exacerbate conflict for political gain rather than seeking resolution.

By the time Trump was elected, the Republican Party shifted from its mainstream platform developed by former presidents Reagan, Bush I and Bush II to one that condones outright anti-Muslim rhetoric. Perhaps this is best demonstrated by the change in public sentiment by Republican elites. The current US Secretary of Energy under President Trump, Rick Perry, once called Trump a "cancer on conservatism, and it must be clearly diagnosed, excised and discarded" (Livingston 2015). In December 2015, Republican leaders condemned candidate Trump's proposed Muslim ban, stating this is "not who we are as a Party" (House Speaker, Paul Ryan), and it is "completely inconsistent with American values" (Senate Majority leader, Mitch McConnell; Walsh, Diamond, and Barrett 2015). Shortly thereafter, Trump signed the January 2017 executive order banning refugees from seven Muslim countries, Ryan defended it by stating that proper vetting is important for national security and that this is not a religious test (Mascaro 2017), although McConnell still cautiously expressed concerns (Snell and Phillip 2017). These unprecedented political and rhetorical responses to terrorism have continued into the Trump presidency.

Counterterrorism and the Trump presidency

Figure 2 displays the cumulative frequency of terrorism communications delivered by each president since Nixon in their first calendar year in office. With the exception of

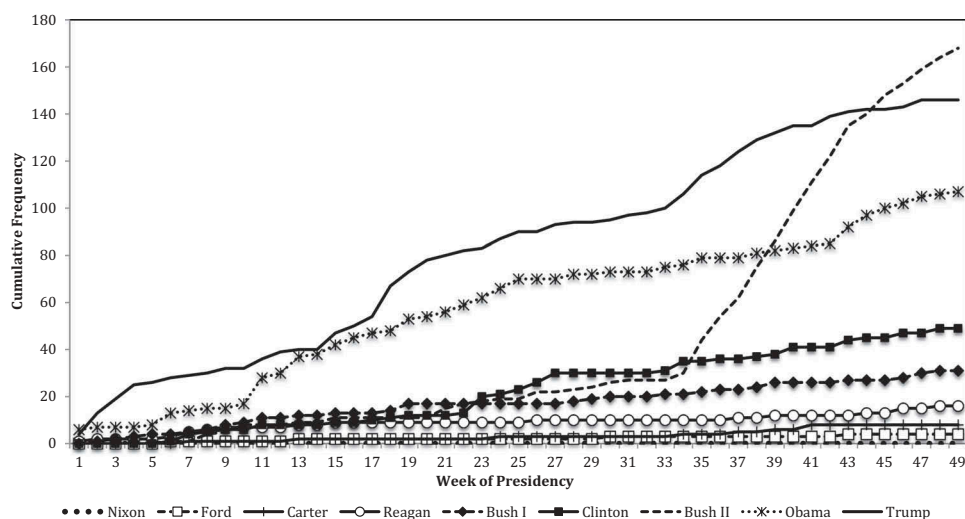


Figure 2. Cumulative frequency of presidential terrorism communications for first year in office.

Bush II, each president discussed terrorism more frequently than did their predecessor. Figure 2 thus displays the rising political prominence of terrorism within presidential communications with a sharp increase following the 9/11 attacks. Following and extending this pattern, the 146 terrorism communications that President Trump has delivered so far amount to more than the presidencies of Nixon through Clinton combined in their first calendar years ($f = 108$). In fact, through the first 43 weeks of the Trump administration, data from the American Presidency Project (Woolley and Peters 2018) reveal that President Trump delivered more official public communications containing the word “terrorism” than any previous president, including Bush II, whose administration had to address the 9/11 attacks during its 35th week in office.²

President Trump’s public communications on terrorism depart from his predecessor in other ways as well. Table 1 displays the 100 most frequently used words by both President Obama and President Trump in terrorism communications. Sixty-eight of these words were common across both presidents (italicised in Table 1), with both using “people” more than any other meaningful word when discussing terrorism. “Security” was also among the top five words used by both presidents, demonstrating the shared concern. However, words like “continue” were more prominent for Obama (30th most common) compared to Trump (85th). In contrast, the word “terrorism” has been featured more prominently by Trump (31st most common) compared to Obama (98th). The unique words in each list reveal that the broader context of the terrorism communications for Obama and Trump differed substantially. Obama conjured images of “development”, “health”, “global”, “economy” and “help” when discussing terrorism; while Trump highlighted “defence”, “freedom”, “honour”, “fight”, “homeland” and “foreign”. These distinctions align with the rhetorical foci of Obama’s global cooperation and Trump’s American isolationism, respectively.

These key differences in the words used in terrorism communications also belie other key policy differences between the two administrations. President Trump’s

Table 1. The 100 most frequently used words and their relative use in terrorism communications by President Obama (2009–2017) and Trump (2017).

Rank	Obama (<i>n</i> = 1,045,456)		Trump (<i>n</i> = 146,603)	
	Word	Percent of Words	Word	Percent of words
1	<i>People</i>	0.83	<i>People</i>	1.02
2	<i>Going</i>	0.61	<i>Great</i>	0.66
3	<i>Think</i>	0.57	<i>Security</i>	0.58
4	<i>Security</i>	0.52	<i>Country</i>	0.57
5	<i>Just</i>	0.48	<i>Know</i>	0.56
6	<i>World</i>	0.43	<i>Want</i>	0.49
7	<i>Make</i>	0.43	<i>Much</i>	0.47
8	<i>Work</i>	0.39	<i>Just</i>	0.46
9	<i>Want</i>	0.38	<i>Think</i>	0.46
10	<i>Know</i>	0.37	<i>American</i>	0.43
11	<i>Well</i>	0.37	<i>Many</i>	0.43
12	<i>Countries</i>	0.35	<i>Secretary</i>	0.41
13	<i>Like</i>	0.32	<i>Right</i>	0.41
14	<i>Time</i>	0.32	<i>Like</i>	0.40
15	<i>Thank</i>	0.31	<i>America</i>	0.39
16	<i>Government</i>	0.30	<i>Time</i>	0.37
17	<i>Right</i>	0.30	<i>World</i>	0.35
18	<i>Country</i>	0.29	<i>Good</i>	0.32
19	<i>American</i>	0.28	<i>National</i>	0.32
20	<i>America</i>	0.27	<i>Countries</i>	0.32
21	<i>Years</i>	0.27	<i>Well</i>	0.30
22	<i>Support</i>	0.26	<i>Today</i>	0.30
23	<i>Sure</i>	0.25	<i>Together</i>	0.28
24	<i>Good</i>	0.24	<i>Laughter</i>	0.27
25	<i>Nuclear</i>	0.24	<i>Work</i>	0.26
26	<i>International</i>	0.23	<i>State</i>	0.26
27	<i>Laughter</i>	0.23	<i>First</i>	0.26
28	<i>Together</i>	0.23	<i>Order</i>	0.25
29	<i>Today</i>	0.23	<i>Really</i>	0.25
30	<i>Continue</i>	0.23	<i>Nations</i>	0.24
31	<i>First</i>	0.23	<i>Terrorism</i>	0.24
32	<i>Take</i>	0.22	<i>Peace</i>	0.23
33	<i>Need</i>	0.22	<i>Make</i>	0.23
34	<i>National</i>	0.22	<i>Never</i>	0.23
35	<i>Including</i>	0.22	<i>Believe</i>	0.22
36	<i>Much</i>	0.21	<i>Years</i>	0.22
37	<i>Important</i>	0.21	<i>Every</i>	0.22
38	<i>Made</i>	0.19	<i>Government</i>	0.22
39	<i>Part</i>	0.19	<i>Support</i>	0.22
40	<i>Cooperation</i>	0.19	<i>Back</i>	0.22
41	<i>Even</i>	0.19	<i>Nation</i>	0.21
42	<i>Iran</i>	0.19	<i>Take</i>	0.21
43	<i>Back</i>	0.18	<i>Working</i>	0.21
44	<i>Economic</i>	0.18	<i>Long</i>	0.20
45	<i>Many</i>	0.18	<i>Look</i>	0.20
46	<i>Every</i>	0.18	<i>Military</i>	0.19
47	<i>Military</i>	0.18	<i>Trade</i>	0.19
48	<i>Around</i>	0.18	<i>Including</i>	0.19
49	<i>Issues</i>	0.18	<i>Tell</i>	0.19
50	<i>Last</i>	0.18	<i>Minister</i>	0.18
51	<i>Efforts</i>	0.18	<i>Even</i>	0.18
52	<i>Working</i>	0.18	<i>Important</i>	0.18
53	<i>Year</i>	0.17	<i>Must</i>	0.18
54	<i>Help</i>	0.17	<i>Done</i>	0.18
55	<i>Minister</i>	0.17	<i>Leaders</i>	0.18
56	<i>Order</i>	0.17	<i>Prime</i>	0.18
57	<i>Able</i>	0.17	<i>Homeland</i>	0.17
58	<i>Prime</i>	0.17	<i>Executive</i>	0.17
59	<i>Economy</i>	0.17	<i>Made</i>	0.17

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Rank	Obama (<i>n</i> = 1,045,456)		Trump (<i>n</i> = 146,603)	
	Word	Percent of Words	Word	Percent of words
60	Afghanistan	0.16	Jobs	0.16
61	Global	0.16	Ever	0.16
62	<i>Great</i>	0.16	General	0.16
63	Forces	0.16	<i>Need</i>	0.16
64	Still	0.16	Section	0.16
65	Energy	0.16	Foreign	0.16
66	<i>Things</i>	0.15	Members	0.16
67	<i>Leaders</i>	0.15	<i>Things</i>	0.15
68	<i>Region</i>	0.15	<i>Last</i>	0.15
69	<i>Future</i>	0.15	<i>Strong</i>	0.15
70	<i>Information</i>	0.15	Korea	0.15
71	<i>Trade</i>	0.15	Love	0.15
72	<i>Done</i>	0.15	Defence	0.15
73	<i>Look</i>	0.14	<i>Better</i>	0.15
74	<i>State</i>	0.14	North	0.15
75	Come	0.14	Policy	0.14
76	<i>Believe</i>	0.14	<i>Economic</i>	0.14
77	Change	0.14	<i>Something</i>	0.14
78	Progress	0.14	Citizens	0.14
79	<i>Long</i>	0.14	<i>Future</i>	0.14
80	<i>Nations</i>	0.14	<i>Year</i>	0.14
81	<i>Peace</i>	0.14	<i>Cooperation</i>	0.14
82	Iraq	0.14	Protect	0.14
83	Development	0.14	<i>Respect</i>	0.14
84	Health	0.14	<i>Americans</i>	0.13
85	<i>Americans</i>	0.14	<i>Continue</i>	0.13
86	<i>Something</i>	0.14	<i>Deal</i>	0.13
87	Question	0.13	<i>Information</i>	0.13
88	Place	0.13	Care	0.13
89	Forward	0.13	<i>Region</i>	0.13
90	Making	0.13	Incredible	0.13
91	<i>Strong</i>	0.13	Always	0.13
92	Everybody	0.13	Administration	0.13
93	Young	0.13	Russia	0.12
94	<i>Better</i>	0.13	Director	0.12
95	Issue	0.13	Fight	0.12
96	<i>Deal</i>	0.13	Freedom	0.12
97	<i>Respect</i>	0.12	Honour	0.12
98	<i>Terrorism</i>	0.12	Build	0.12
99	Fact	0.12	<i>International</i>	0.11
100	Syria	0.12	Thing	0.11

Words that occurred among the 100 most frequently used words in terrorism communications by both presidents are italicised.

executive orders banning travel from Muslim-majority nations exemplify his exclusionary policies that undermine previous US attempts to include these states in global counterterrorism efforts. Indeed, Milton (2017) concludes that travel bans may only serve to increase “the risk of being blindsided by terrorist threats coming from other locations and through other avenues”. This concern is explicitly demonstrated by the renaming of the Department of Homeland Security’s Countering Violent Extremism programme to Countering Radical Islamic Extremism, as this programme would “no longer target groups such as white supremacists who have also carried out bombings and shootings in the United States” (Ainsley, Volz, and Cooke 2017, 1). By narrowing the counterterrorism focus developed by previous US

Presidents and by severely cutting staffing at the US Department of State, particularly the special envoys for Afghanistan-Pakistan and Guantanamo Bay (Lederman 2017), the Trump administration is officially ignoring one type of terrorist threat while impairing its ability to diplomatically mitigate terrorism-related conflicts.

Likely impacts

Few studies have evaluated the effects of different types of counterterrorism policies, speeches and actions on terror attacks across different types of threats. One study did evaluate the differing effects of repressive and conciliatory actions on far-right attacks, as well as jihadi-inspired attacks in Canada (Chenoweth, Dugan, and Fisher 2015). This study found that repressive actions by Canada tended to increase jihadi-inspired attacks, even when such actions took place in the Afghan theatre. Moreover, the study found that conciliatory actions tended to increase far-right attacks, likely by emboldening far-right groups. The study also found that from 1980 to 2014, indiscriminate repression by the Canadian government was almost always counterproductive (see also Chenoweth and Dugan 2016). Notably, these findings apply to tangible and intangible actions affecting terror groups that extend beyond typical counterterrorism activities.

Studies on how different types of US government actions affect terror acts within the US are still underway. However, if the same patterns hold in the US as in Canada (Chenoweth, Dugan, and Fisher 2015), we can expect a particularly troubling combination of impacts – that as the government continues to embolden and conciliate far-right groups while suppressing and repressing jihadi-inspired groups, both groups may in fact increase their attacks. This would even be true if the US actively disrupt jihadi-inspired terror attacks abroad (e.g. Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Afghanistan). And the findings in this article suggest that foreign policy decisions – such as President Trump’s recent announcement that the US recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and would therefore be moving the US embassy there – can lead to retaliatory terror attacks against the US and its allies. Indeed, Hamas responded to President Trump’s announcement by issuing a call for a new Intifada (McKernan 2017).

Setting aside the question of increasing terror attacks, recent studies also demonstrate the possibility that US federal government actions have differential effects of hate crimes by extremist groups. Dugan and Chenoweth (2018) suggest that hostile presidential rhetoric and policy-making, in particular, can increase hate crimes towards African Americans and other marginalised groups. In other words, policies implemented and rhetoric used by public officials can have important unintended consequences that affect people far beyond their intent.

Conclusion

If we are serious about reducing political violence, we need to stop thinking of counterterrorism as warfare and consider the broader range of government behaviours that empower or undermine terrorist organisations and those who are vulnerable to being recruited by them. Perhaps, President Clinton initially had the right idea when he sought advice from scholars and other experts who studied the behaviour of political antagonists. Research suggests that a wide range of government actions can fuel grievances

that can trigger violence, including day-to-day policy efforts. This is not to say that legislatures should avoid hot-button topics, but instead suggests that law enforcement should remain cognizant of violent political movements and consider enhancing surveillance when their agenda items gain federal attention.

In order to better understand how political violence is triggered or mollified, scholars should systematically collect data on all government behaviour and statements that are relevant to potentially violent political movements and their grievances, and evaluate those actions on a range of outcomes, including, but not limited to violence. Of particular interest is the influence of policies that violate international law, the content and sentiment of political messages, political popularity, public messages delivered via social media including Twitter and Facebook, policy and rhetoric changes related to immigration laws (see Flores 2018). Further, future research should assess how long it takes to observe the impacts of these actions. In the light of the previous discussion, these domains of political influence present key areas where what the US says and does matters, and systematic research is required to better identify both the intentional and unintentional consequences of these actions.

These efforts are more important now than ever, as the Trump administration appears to have abandoned efforts used by previous administrations following 9/11 to appear judicious and fair, beginning an “After After 9/11” era of US counterterrorism. President Trump’s departures in counterterrorism strategy and rhetoric seem to embolden the far-right, while mobilising those affected by his hostility. Ideally scholars should collect real-time data regarding these actions and track their associations to a host of measures indicating fluctuations in violent mobilisation. Whether current initiatives and Tweets embolden, deter or create backlash, it is highly likely that what the Trump administration does and says will impact domestic and international political violence.

Notes

1. In a 2016 speech, Obama explained: “The reason that I haven’t used the particular phrase ‘radical Islam’ on a regular basis is because, in talking to Muslim allies, in talking to the Muslim-American community here, that was being heard as if we were ascribing to crazy groups like ISIL or al Qaeda the mantle of Islam. And since we need them as allies, I think it’s useful for us to listen to how the president of the United States’ words and messages are being received, because, if we’re going to defeat those organisations, we need help from the billion-plus Muslims in this world, so that they can help root out this perversion of Islam that’s taking place” (Obama 2016).
2. The American Presidency Project database is “the only online resource that has coded and organised into a single searchable database, all presidential speeches and papers” (Bartolucci 2012: 565). In order to identify the presidential communications that concerned terrorism, a systematic search was conducted of the American Presidency Project database between 1969 and 2018 using the search term “terrorism”. This search term was selected because any communications that contained this word were explicitly connected to terrorism. Additional searches using the term “terror” did not yield any additional relevant public communications. Terms such as “assassination” and “bombing” were also trialled as additional key words; however, both included events that were explicitly connected to warfare or were framed as other forms of violence.

Disclosure statement

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