

The Washington Post

Right-wing warnings pose far more danger to America than left-wing violence

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September 28, 2018

In a recent address to right-wing evangelical leaders, President Trump warned that Democrats will resort to brute force if they win the midterm elections. “They will overturn everything we’ve done and they will do it violently,” said Trump, presenting his political opponents as an imminent threat to freedom of religion and speech.

This statement builds on a narrative that has gained power on Fox News and social media. It has been fed by conservative media outlets like Breitbart and organizations like the National Rifle Association, which has also publicly threatened journalists.

But the story that a wave of left-wing terrorism threatens America is wrong. The poster child for this false narrative is antifa, a small, weak organization that protests white supremacist aggression.

The real threat of violence comes from the right. The Anti-Defamation League’s Center on Extremism reports that right-wingers and white supremacists were responsible for 74 percent of the murders committed by political extremists in the United States over the past decade. Only 2 percent were committed by left-wing radicals. Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute, has calculated that “terrorists inspired by Nationalist and Right Wing ideology have killed about 10 times as many people as Left Wing terrorists since 1992.”

What’s more, white supremacists and their fellow travelers have strong connections to the establishment right and are far more organized than the antifa. They seek to provoke confrontation through armed marches onto college campuses and into the centers of liberal-leaning cities, like the confrontation in Charlottesville last summer.

These narratives about aggressive left-wing violence aren’t just distorted. They are dangerous, because they set the stage for replacing democratic institutions with authoritarian rule. Provoking street violence and blaming it on their opponents is exactly how totalitarian regimes have gained power in the past.

The 1931 to 1932 crisis in Germany that culminated in Hitler’s takeover is a case in point. It centered on frequent street clashes between Nazi stormtroopers and Communists. Both sides took the offensive, marching into one another’s strongholds seeking to provoke fighting. However, the Nazis extended their violence to assaults on Jews, trade union activists, social democrats and politicians of any persuasion (including Catholic leaders in Bavaria) who opposed

them. The Nazi strategy: to deliberately provoke street fighting, then blame it on the victims and call for strict measures to restore “order.”

The summer of 1932, just months before Hitler came to power, saw a spectacular wave of Nazi terror, explicitly recognized as such by newspapers all over Germany. But the Nazis portrayed themselves as victims, not perpetrators. The most well-known example is the case of Konrad Pietrzuch, a Communist of Polish extraction. On the night of Aug. 9, 1932, Nazi stormtroopers entered Pietrzuch’s home, brutally beat him and then shot him to death. The killers were apprehended and put on trial immediately by the government of Chancellor Franz von Papen. They were sentenced to death (though the sentences were later reduced to life in prison).

In an editorial in the Nazis’ newspaper *Der Völkischer Beobachter*, Hitler presented the murderers as martyrs responding to red terror, which he falsely claimed had killed hundreds of Nazi party members and injured tens of thousands. His chief propagandist Joseph Goebbels simply blamed the Jews.

More traditional German conservatives came to accept the Nazi narrative that the Communists and leftists in general represented a mortal threat to Germany. Von Papen himself used some of Hitler’s terminology, blaming Germany’s problems on “cultural Bolshevism” and calling for the establishment of a united national “folk community.” He went on to play a key role in Hitler’s appointment as chancellor.

Something very similar happened in the early 1920’s Italian fascist movement. Seeking to counter major socialist election victories and a wave of strikes in 1918 to 1920, the Blackshirts engaged in a terrorism campaign. They assaulted and murdered socialists, anarchists, Communists, labor union members, activists who fought for the rights of small farmers and local officials of all stripes who opposed them.

To justify their savagery, they created a false narrative of red terrorism that deliberately distorted the left-wing gains made mostly by legal and peaceful means. In one example from Nov. 21, 1920, several hundred Blackshirts opened fire on a peaceful demonstration celebrating the election of a socialist government in Bologna. When they attacked the city hall, one of the occupants threw hand grenades at them, an excuse for the fascists to claim the left-wingers were the aggressors.

The Blackshirt narrative, accepted by the press and the conservative national government (Benito Mussolini was not yet in power) was that “Bolsheviks” were responsible for starting the violence. There were two separate distortions here: that leftists were the aggressors, and that the socialists were Communists.

The Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia in the February coup of 1948 also involved vigilante street violence in response to a fabricated opposition conspiracy. Before the coup, Czechoslovakia was still in many ways a functioning democracy with active non-Communist political parties and free elections. Communists were, however, powerful partners in the coalition government.

Beginning in the summer of 1947, however, tensions between coalition members began to rise. The next year, 12 non-Communist ministers resigned to protest a Communist purge of the police force. The Communists blew the resignations up into propaganda about a supposed “reactionary” right-wing conspiracy to seize power.

They formed “Action Committees” of Communist activists and armed factory militias. These blocked non-Communist cabinet members from entering government buildings and attacked the offices of opposition political parties. Eventually the threat of widespread violence forced President Edvard Benes to accept a Communist-dominated cabinet, thus ending Czechoslovak democracy.

Trump and the movement that supports him (which now encompasses most of the Republican Party and its leadership) increasingly incline toward violence in ways that resemble modern authoritarian movements. The avalanche of death threats that Christine Blasey Ford has received since her allegations of sexual assault against Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh is the most recent example.

Additionally, we are now witnessing similar distortions purveyed by Fox News and right-wing social media that are just as extreme as those that occurred in Germany during the rise of the Nazis and in Italy during the rise of the fascists. Claims like the antifa representing a wave of left-wing terrorism threatening American democracy, and that Democrats are Communists (or Muslim terrorists) are slanderous distortions that scare people.

This false narrative of leftist terrorism that would justify right-wing violence is now in place. The parallels with previous authoritarian movements are frightening. The lesson is that the lies and those who sell them must be opposed, before it is too late.