

Chairman Thompson, I would like to thank you and the other members and staff of the January 6th committee for your invitation to provide information relevant to the significance of the attack on Capitol Hill. While I speak for myself, as someone who has taught civics and American history to teenagers for the past 18 years, I cannot emphasize enough to you, just how significant your work is and just how important it is that we, as a nation, get this right for posterity.

My name is Stuart Wexler. I am an historian and researcher whose books and articles on modern domestic terrorism in the United States have been featured in Newsweek, on NPR and in *The Washington Post*, among other outlets. My work has also been cited by scholars of counter-terrorism such as Peter Bergen. I have a Masters in Political Science from Rutgers University with a focus on American Government.

In preparation for one of my books, *America's Secret Jihad*<sup>1</sup>, I spent several years analyzing archival and primary source material on some of the most well-known acts of domestic terrorism in American history. Through that research, I identified several patterns and themes that are relevant to the events of January 6th, and just as importantly, could forecast the direction that domestic terrorism may take in the future if an appropriate response to that event is not enacted. I say "could" less for a lack of certainty and more as a warning of what history suggests could follow; indeed, if the types of people I study view January 6th through the same lens that they viewed events like the integration of Ole Miss in 1962, or the violence at Greensboro, North Carolina in 1979 or the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in April, 1995, the future will be more fraught than anything we've experienced for some time. My research also shows that the federal response in the aftermath of these events plays a key role in determining the scope of the danger to follow.

Each of the three aforementioned events played important roles in inspiring domestic violence in general, but they played an especially important role in fueling what modern scholars now refer to as accelerationist terrorism<sup>2</sup>, in some cases continuing for more than a decade after the original event. Unlike "conventional" ethno-nationalist terrorists, such as Ku Klux Klan members, accelerationists are not reactionaries with limited political goals. Rather, they see acts of political violence as portents and sparks for a much grander purpose: to provoke a civil war or a violent and radical revolution or a race war. Some accelerationists, including those who are the focus of my research, see these goals as an outright religious imperative, and view their role in fomenting or participating in such violence in much the same way Salafi jihadists viewed the 9/11 attacks. Evidence shows that accelerationist-adjacent groups and individuals participated in and have been inspired by the events of January 6th, and for this reason that day holds the potential to inspire multiple acts or attempts at accelerationist terrorism in the future. An examination of what happened at and after the events in Mississippi, North Carolina and

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Wexler, *America's Secret Jihad: The Hidden History of Religious Terrorism in the United States* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> While the strategy of provocative violence is not new, the actual term describing it-- accelerationism-- is of recent vintage. I did not use it in my first edition of my book in fact.

Oklahoma years ago illustrate parallels to those historic events and 1/6 and the potential risks that may lie ahead if we fail to embrace countermeasures.

Accelerationism was all but unknown and unacknowledged by scholars and law enforcement when out-of-state agitators inflamed a mob of white students and spectators to violently resist the admission of James Meredith into the University of Mississippi in 1962. That is because the media and law enforcement paid little attention to the ultimate agenda of one of the most active agitators, Oren Petito. Historians who chronicle the events that day often cite Petito, and not the more well-covered racist General Edwin Walker, as the key figure in fomenting the violence that forced John F. Kennedy to federalize the National Guard to protect Meredith. Some pointed out that Petito belonged to an ostensibly political, segregationist political group called the National States Rights Party (NSRP); he served as the East Coast regional leader. And while law enforcement recognized the NSRP as perhaps the most violent segregationist group in the country (even large KKK groups avoided association with them for this reason), they failed to note the influence and importance of a then-little known and radically militant religious ideology identified today as the Christian Identity Movement (CI) as a driving force within the NSRP and other supremacist groups.

Having radically reinterpreted the Bible in a violently anti-Semitic and racist direction, CI believers envision the Christian End Times in the form of a holy, genocidal race war with the true chosen people — White Europeans — emerging victorious over satanic Jews and their so-called minions (in their view, sub-human people-of-color). As the FBI would observe almost 40 years later: “Christian Identity followers believe they are among those chosen by God to wage this battle during Armageddon and they will be the last line of defense for the white race and Christian America.”<sup>3</sup> The federal intervention at Ole Miss, and the participation of rank-and-file white southerners in the actual violence, convinced CI zealots that the so-called “Zero Hour” had begun, initiating the time clock for their hoped-for race war.<sup>4</sup>

Oren Petito was an ordained minister in the Church of Jesus Christ Christian, the organizational centerpiece for CI, which counted nearly every senior member of the NSRP under its religious influence. It became and remains the central church for the Aryan Nations even though it physically moved its headquarters from California to Idaho. The types of Christian nationalists who were well-represented on January 6th may be a step short of Christian Identity in their extremism; but, in my opinion, they are even more ripe for exploitation and recruitment by demagogues than the students at Ole Miss... by even more sophisticated rabble-rousers than Petito; firebrands with a much larger audience than a college campus.

Following the Ole Miss riot, CI followers began to assume leadership roles in many outwardly secular, reactionary and violent racist groups, such as the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi and the anti-government paramilitary group known as the Minutemen. In a pattern

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<sup>3</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation, Project Megiddo (1999), Center for Studies on New Religions, Accessed April 22, 2022, [https://www.cesnur.org/testi/FBI\\_004.htm](https://www.cesnur.org/testi/FBI_004.htm). See page 15.

<sup>4</sup> Wesley Swift, “Zero Hour 2-4-62” (sermon), February 4, 1962, Dr. Wesley Swift Library, transcript, <https://swift.christogenea.org/articles/ws1962>.

that continues to this day, these ideologues rarely shared their idiosyncratic views on their religion with rank-and-file racists, and instead chose to align themselves with and within conventional southern nationalist groups so as to harness larger membership. At the same time, they worked behind the scenes to inspire and exploit acts of violence they hoped would trigger their desired holy race war. For instance, they frequently showed up in counter-demonstrations against Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and civil rights activists, with another CI minister, the Reverend Conrad “Connie” Lynch, enraging white mobs into violent riots; modern scholars refer to this as stochastic terrorism (with obvious parallels to January 6th.) Scholars and most law enforcement overlooked the religious dimension to CI-inspired terrorism as it so closely mirrored conventional, southern nationalist aims. But my book documents that many of the best known and, importantly, provocative acts of domestic terrorism in the 1960s could be tied, at least in part, to the influence of accelerationists, always looking to exacerbate the growing racial tensions of the time.<sup>5</sup>

As secular groups grew smaller and weaker after their failure to stop the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, they became more open about their religious goals. More importantly, they attempted to unite the often fragmented right wing community under the banner of the CI ideology. But this effort was short-lived and unsuccessful both because their charismatic figurehead, the Reverend Wesley Swift, died in 1970 and because law enforcement dealt a significant blow to many racist and anti-government groups through a combination of infiltration and surveillance. The ideology nonetheless persisted in much smaller-sized anti-government groups, until another galvanizing event occurred in 1979 — the Greensboro massacre.

On November 3rd, 1979, tensions between members of the KKK and the American Nazi Party, on one side, and Communist Workers Party members, on the other, erupted in a melee and shooting that left five people dead. Many scholars of domestic terrorism recognize this as a turning point event that inspired a new wave of organized, white supremacist violence. Developments proceeded along two lines. First, leaders of disparate supremacist groups from across the country began a fresh effort to try and unite despite major differences. Accelerationism (specifically and profoundly influenced by CI) remained the major impetus for years of terrorist violence that followed the Greensboro Massacre, but thankfully they never reached their goal of widespread organized violence. Nonetheless, by 1986, the terrorism scholar Bruce Hoffman noted that every single right-wing terrorist group fell under the broad umbrella and influence of CI.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, supremacist strategists like Louis Beam recognized that large organizational structures were more open to government infiltration, spurring an evolution of these terrorist operations into cell-based groups. Even as the structure of these groups became smaller, the aspirations for violence were no less grand. With world-changing violence as their goal,

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<sup>5</sup> This includes The Mississippi Burning Murders in 1964 and the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963.

<sup>6</sup> US Department of Justice, “National Institute of Justice: Terrorism In the United States And the Potential Threat to Nuclear Facilities,” by Bruce Hoffman, January 1986, <https://irp.fas.org/eprint/megidido.pdf>.

CI-influenced cells were within one chemical precursor of brewing enough poison to contaminate the water supply of several large cities. Hoffman wrote specifically of their potential to attack nuclear facilities. They engaged in widespread counterfeiting in hopes of devaluing the national currency. And in a prelude to what ultimately transpired, they plotted to bomb federal buildings in the 1980s. They succeeded only in “lower level” crimes such as individual assassinations and bank robberies in part because law enforcement became as concerned about their goals as experts like Hoffman.

But there was a downside to that law enforcement response that should also concern the Committee and inform responses going forward. This is the problem of overreaction. Misjudgements in places like Waco and Ruby Ridge inspired a new wave of anti-government agitation, and a rising militia movement that increasingly considered more frontal attacks on the government itself. At almost the same time, Louis Beam revised his work on phantom cells and encouraged white supremacist ideologues to use their platforms — increasingly the internet — to inspire and guide so-called lone-wolf terrorists. The attack on the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building by Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols in April, 1995 represents a deadly example of where these trends can lead.

As the mastermind, McVeigh was not simply exacting revenge for what he saw as government overreach. He hoped his attack would inspire another American Revolution. In other words, the Oklahoma City attack remains the most egregious example of accelerationism in action to the present day. While McVeigh and Nichols themselves did not belong to any specific CI group, they clearly were on the periphery of such groups. McVeigh briefly joined a Ku Klux Klan group run by one of the country’s foremost CI ministers and he also made contact with a CI community in Oklahoma. Most significantly, his violent actions mirrored those found in a fictionalized book that he treated as his bible, *The Turner Diaries*. Scholars view that book as a how-to manual for operationalizing CI aspirations — a multi-stage accelerationist strategy guide.

Of course while McVeigh and Nichols inspired would-be and actual terrorists for years after their crime, they never achieved their ultimate goal. Accelerationists have never done so, yet that is a major reason why they are so dangerous. They match their unrealistic ends with dreams of plausible mass-casualty provocations. My fear is that the events of January 6th will inspire similar aspirations to violence, and that — like the bombing of the Murrah Building — one or more might ultimately succeed.

We have been lucky to avoid another Oklahoma bombing-scale incident from domestic, right-wing terrorists, in part because local and federal law enforcement are now keen to the threat. Echoing Dr. Hoffman’s analysis in 1986, counter-terrorism experts for the FBI identified Christian Identity as one of the most important sources of potential violence during the years approaching the new millenium. What they did not realize was that, by 2000, CI was beginning to wane in influence while other white supremacist ideologies, some still influenced by CI, emerged in its place. Two of the most well-received — racist neo-Paganism and the World Church of the Creator — echo the same vision of a holy, end-times race war as was central to CI ideology.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, CI *is* making something of a comeback today. Robert Bowers, the Tree of Life Synagogue mass murderer, cited CI approvingly in the months before his attack.<sup>7</sup> John Earnest, the shooter at the Poway Synagogue in San Diego, quoted elements of the CI creed in his manifesto.<sup>8</sup> Most alarmingly, counter-terrorism experts who monitor the internet are seeing patterns of high-risk behavior described earlier in my testimony but updated for modern times. Taking advantage of our polarized environment and the re-emergence of ethnic and racial grievances, CI enthusiasts are attempting to plant ideas and stoke those grievances on online forums and through social media. Like the leading members of the NSRP and the Minutemen in the 1960s, they see an opportunity to exploit fellow travelers in white supremacist circles for their own apocalyptic ends. Only now, even many secular groups, perhaps unaware of the religious antecedents for their ideas, are beginning to speak, almost longingly, about the need for some kind of ethnic cleansing brought about by “purifying” violence. Many members of these groups participated in the events of January 6th.

Unfortunately, accelerationism is no longer an obscure idea promoted by fringe religious radicals. And it infuses some of the groups who connect most to the events of 1/6. In his recent network analysis of individual participants in the events of that day, extremism researcher Michael Jensen has identified a number of associations to QAnon (and to a lesser extent, the Boogaloo movement.)<sup>9</sup> Increasingly, these movements are embracing accelerationism. In its April/May 2021 edition of its online publication, West Point’s Combatting Terrorism Center noted “The coalition of extreme far-right ideologies whose adherents stormed the Capitol is defined by its myriad weak ties, and by the growing importance of unaffiliated actors within it, all united by their shared acceptance of accelerationist tactics.”<sup>10</sup>

But the history I describe also offers some hope. Accelerationist violence may date back as far as the 1940s (to the plotting and arrest of a group known as the Columbians in Georgia), but its influence ebbs and flows and our government has played a major role in that process. Specific paths forward emerge from that history if one wants to reduce threats while reducing the risk of unintentionally exacerbating the dangers.

- 1) The government must be cognizant of and alert to the threat posed by accelerationists. As noted above, they are not often obvious in their intentions even within the groups to which they belong.

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<sup>7</sup> Stuart Wexler, “The Roots of American Anti-Semitism,” *The Tablet*, November 1, 1918, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/the-roots-of-american-anti-semitism>.

<sup>8</sup> Seth Daire, Twitter post, April 21, 2022, 12:14pm, <https://twitter.com/SethDaire/status/1517174936699379713>. Daire is a former Christian Identity devotee who now works against their ideas.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Jensen, Twitter post, April 14, 2022, 12:10pm, <https://twitter.com/MikeAJensen/status/1514637133973184516>.

<sup>10</sup> Brian Hughes and Cynthia Miller-Idriss, “Uniting for Total Collapse: The January 6 Boost to Accelerationism,” *CTCSentinel*, April/May 2021 Vol. 14, Issue 4, <https://ctc.usma.edu/uniting-for-total-collapse-the-january-6-boost-to-accelerationism/>.

- 2) The government should — cautiously — engage in infiltration and surveillance of these accelerationist groups as they are intrinsically paranoid and will turn against each other and fracture and fragment from within. I say cautiously because this process must not martyr non-threatening extremists, however distasteful they may be (as we saw in the context of Ruby Ridge) And we must always be on guard against the kind of abuses that can emerge if these law enforcement operations remain unregulated and become directed at legitimate protest movements.
- 3) Finally, it is important that law enforcement and the Justice Department arrest and prosecute the charismatic leaders of these groups for any criminal acts. If need be, that should apply to someone like President Donald Trump who is undoubtedly an inspirational figure to groups like QAnon and the Proud Boys. Contrary to conventional wisdom, such people do not grow on trees, with new leaders at the ready to become the next Wesley Swift (or Osama Bin Laden.) In every instance when these three measures have been applied, terrorism has subsided as much as can be hoped. It is especially important that we do so after an event like January 6th, given its potential to inspire years of potential terrorism.

I would like to thank the Committee, again, for their time and for the opportunity to discuss this issue.