

“The number of hate groups in the United States rose for the fourth year in a row in 2018, pushed to a record high by a toxic combination of political polarization, anti-immigrant sentiment and technologies that help spread propaganda online” - The New York Times, citing Southern Poverty Law Center

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Why America Must Remember the Murrah Building Bombing

On April 19, 1996, Timothy McVeigh, aided by Terry Nichols, detonated an ANNM fertilizer truck bomb that killed 168 people, including 19 children. This attack changed the lives of Oklahomans and Americans forever.

The number of hate groups, independent militias, and acts of white-supremacist terror in the United States is growing. Before and after the gross mishandling of Ruby Ridge and Waco by the AFT (The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives), McVeigh became increasingly radicalized against the United States government. He began following the gun show circuit, distributing pro-gun literature - including a bumper sticker that read "When guns are outlawed, I will become an outlaw." ¹Pro-gun, white-supremacist organizations radicalized McVeigh, and they are growing. Research by the FBI and Southern Poverty Law Center agree that the number of terror attacks perpetrated by white supremacists and anti-government independent militia members are on the rise. ²³

How the American government and media react to terrorism committed by white Americans, and terrorism committed by non-white, non-American citizens is dangerously flawed. Rather than regarding white terrorists as members of increasingly active domestic terror organizations and movements, they are regarded as “mentally ill” individuals whose actions do not speak to larger trends within the United States. This false narrative is dangerous. Not only does it keep many Americans ignorant of the nature of the threats we face, but it also translates directly into how American systems of counter-terrorism work and are funded.

Immediately after the Murrah building bombing, President Clinton passed the *Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996*. Among other things, this bill increased funding for victims of terrorist attacks, increased funding for terror

¹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20141129155757/http://www2.citypaper.com/eat/story.asp?id=17888>

² <https://vault.fbi.gov/White%20Supremacist%20Groups>

³ <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch>

prevention, “increas[ed] protections afforded to federal workers and the facilities they work in,” and expanded “the FBI’s authority to investigate terrorist attacks against U.S. persons overseas.”⁴⁵ Additionally, in the immediate aftermath of the Murrah building bombing, the FBI allocated an additional 500 agents to investigate domestic terror plots, and the Southern Poverty Law Center reported that “in 1996 there were approximately 858 domestic militias and other antigovernment groups but the number had dropped to 152 by 2004.” Clearly, this increased focus on domestic terror made Americans safer by discovering and preventing terror plots by domestic anti-government groups. Unfortunately, the threat of domestic terror goes overlooked by the American government and many mainstream media sources.

9/11 marked a transition from a focus on domestic terror plots to foreign terror plots. Following 9/11, the United States government passed the *Patriot Act*, created the Department of Homeland Security, strengthened U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CPB), and increased funding for anti-terrorism (\$589 billion from 2001-2011.)⁶ The United States government voted to take military action against Iraq in an effort to squash further attacks by the hands of foreign, anti-American terrorists. The Bush administration adopted a counter-terrorism approach that revolved around immigration, specifically increased deportation, border enforcement, and increased immigration enforcement.

The post-9/11, immigration-centric approach to terrorism dominates today’s political landscape and makes for an America that is less safe. ICE has more power and money than ever, Trump continues to fight for a border law, and thousands of children are being held in concentration camps at the US-Mexico border.⁷ The media and governmental focus on “foreign threats” distract from the deadly threat of violence from American citizens within our country; increased mass shootings; attacks on synagogues, mosques, and abortion clinics; deadly white supremacist rallies; bloodshed within our

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<https://www.newseum.org/2015/04/17/impact-of-the-oklahoma-city-bombing-20-years-later/>

⁵ It also tightened *Habeus Corpus*, which limits the number of appeals an accused person may pursue. Critics say this could increase the chance of an innocent person being executed by the state.

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https://abcnews.go.com/ABC_Univision/News/ways-immigration-system-changed-911/story?id=17231590

⁷ <https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/ICE%20FY18%20Budget.pdf>

schools. Between 2001 and 2015 “nearly twice as many people have been killed by white supremacist, anti-government fanatics and other non-Muslim extremists than by radical Muslims.”⁸ It is also important to note that there is still no law against domestic terrorism.⁹

Instances of domestic terror by white, cis male, American citizens, like McVeigh, are increasing, but actions to prevent them are minimal to non-existent. Not only are organizations that hold these same beliefs growing in numbers, they are becoming increasingly violent. By his own admittance, McVeigh killed 168 Oklahomans in the name of white supremacy, and his anti-government and pro-gun beliefs. But today these deadly organizations are ignored by both the media and the government. When a President responds to the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville by saying “there are some very fine people on both sides,” white supremacists are actively affirmed by the government and emboldened to be more violent.^{10 11} Despite intense public pressure, no federal legislation has been passed to close the gun show loophole, create more stringent background checks, combat the NRA (National Rifle Association) lobbying, and ban automatic weapons.¹² The gun shows where McVeigh distributed anti-government propaganda exist and are thriving. The white supremacist organizations that reinforced and grew McVeigh's racist beliefs are increasing in numbers. The white supremacist rallies that McVeigh participated in happen today and are deadly.

Today, white cis males with anti-immigration, pro-gun, and white supremacist beliefs are this nations greatest threat.¹³ McVeigh was not a “lone wolf” terrorist. He was a man with racist and pro-gun beliefs that were actively radicalized by organizations that harbored those beliefs, and still harbor those beliefs. By continuing to ignore the violence caused by people like McVeigh we actively create an environment that harbors monsters like him.

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https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/25/us/tally-of-attacks-in-us-challenges-perceptions-of-top-terror-threat.html?_r=0

⁹ <https://www.lawfareblog.com/its-time-congress-make-domestic-terrorism-federal-crime>

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<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/trump-defends-white-nationalist-protesters-some-very-fine-people-on-both-sides/537012/>

¹¹ <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/white-nationalist>

¹² <https://www.csgv.org/issues-archive/gun-show-loophole-faq/>

¹³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/03/magazine/FBI-charlottesville-white-nationalism-far-right.html>

The parallels between McVeigh's motivations and the motivations of domestic terrorists in 2019 are clear. Until the American people, our communities, and our media demand action from our representatives against white supremacist, anti-government domestic terrorists like McVeigh we are unsafe.

168 people died. 680 people injured. \$250 million in damages. The deadliest domestic terror attack in American history. The people of Oklahoma will never forget what happened, but unfortunately little to nothing about the tragedy is taught in schools across America. In fact, it was not until 2010 that the history of the attack was required to be taught in Oklahoma schools.¹⁴ It is not required to be taught in all American history courses. Americans must stand with Oklahoma in refusing to forget this attack. Americans must stand united against white supremacy, independent militias, pro-gun radicals, and the forces that fund them. Americans must demand their representatives pass the legislature and push funding into uncovering and imprisoning would-be domestic terrorists. We must act now before it is too late.

Why Build a Cake?

I built the destroyed Murrah building to raise awareness of the attack, and to call attention to the present-day American cultural landscape, which deeply parallels the landscape of the organizations and movements that radicalized McVeigh and incited his horrific violence. The cake is a physical testament to the reality that our nation's greatest threats come from radicalized, white supremacist, cis-male, American citizens.

Cake is impermanent. It's eaten, it rots. Cake moves past visual consumption into physical consumption.

For many, the constant bombardment of horror after horror, tragedy after tragedy, simply becomes too much to bear. We tune it out, and fail to look at the larger picture. For many, the tragedies run together in their minds until, one by one, they simply rot away.

I was born in 1991, and, like many kids my age in 1996, I grew up hearing about the bombing, but not understanding the context. Education about the Murrah building

¹⁴ <https://www.kxii.com/home/headlines/91556644.html>

is not required in US public schools and was only just made mandatory for Oklahoma public schools in 2010. There is a huge portion of American people who know little about the attack, and even less about the motivation. As I researched more into McVeigh and the historical context surrounding the attack itself, I learned more about the parallels between his beliefs and the ways he was radicalized, and the increasingly more outspoken and violent factions of the “alt-right.” His pro-gun, white supremacist, anti-government beliefs are the same beliefs that embolden white, cis-male terrorists to kill today.

Cake has a ubiquitous presence in American society. It is quite literally baked into the fabric of our culture. White supremacy is also baked into the very bones of American society. Our nation was founded on white supremacy. Our global legacy is that we were the first nation to racialize slavery. Cake is ubiquitous. White supremacy is deadly. The cake is a stand-in for the

The story of a disaster is an easy one to tell: a person or people do something bad; we see a physical expression of that badness (flames, melted metal, death); and we have people to blame. Not only is it easy to tell, it's easy to consume. Stories of man-made destruction are as ubiquitous as birthday cake. I choose these disasters because they are stand-alone moments of destruction that encapsulate our deepest cultural anxieties. They speak to the power that small groups of people have to kill us. The cakes are a physical expression of the collective consumption of real life horror. We quite literally devour the story. It's indulgent, feels good to eat, then leaves us with a sugar-high, subsequent crash, and desire for more.

Eating the disaster lets our bodies do what our minds want to. The act of eating gives us a false sense of power to physically destroy the horror that perpetually looms in our subconscious. We eat the beast. It's an act of mutual destruction, much like the disasters themselves. Using cake, I make the proverbial car crash you can't look away from, the bad news you can't help but devour. The viewer recognizes the sculptural material: cake, marshmallow, wafer cookies. I take familiar indulgences and distort them into repulsive forms: the viewer confronts simultaneous desire and disgust. The viewer is complicit in eating up the horror

stories we're told by the media and the government. We demand cake, and they supply.

I choose the disasters intentionally. Personally, they are the real-life horror stories I grew up on. But on a larger cultural scale, although they come from completely different historical contexts, they're both dreams turned into nightmares: for Chernobyl, the collective dream of harnessing nuclear power to transform the Ukrainian SSR; for the Oklahoma City Bombing, Timothy McVeigh perverted his belief of "freedom of expression" into freedom to kill in order to make a point. Both of these disasters led to horrific, long-lasting trauma for an entire nation (the largest nuclear meltdown in history, the most deadly attack on American soil at the time.)

Most people have eaten a birthday cake. Everyone has eaten the narrative of people doing something bad that results in death. We've all consumed disaster, we've all consumed cake. Let's put that consumption on display and sit in the pleasure and disgust. Let us eat cake.