

Toxic mix: Antifaith and antigovernment violence: Hate and extremism

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In 1981, white supremacist James W. von Brunn tried to kidnap members of the Federal Reserve in Washington, D.C., in a bid to overthrow a financial system he believed was controlled by Jews.

Experts say violent anti-Semitic outbursts, like the incident June 10 in which von Brunn shot and killed a security guard inside the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, are often fueled by extreme antigovernment views.

Such antigovernment extremism can also be found on the violent fringes of the antiabortion movement. Thirteen years before he allegedly gunned down abortionist George Tiller in the lobby of a Wichita, Kansas, church on May 31, Scott Roeder was affiliated with the Freemen, a right-wing antigovernment group.

Both cases, experts say, highlight a toxic mix of religious bigotry, apocalyptic militarism, social paranoia and antigovernment radicalism that can lead to violence.

“There’s a total, with a capital T, connection,” said Brian Levin, director of the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University–San Bernardino. “Not everyone who is antigovernment has religious bigotry, but nearly all are anti-Semitic, and many other types of bigots are, in fact, antigovernment.”

Hate-crimes researchers say violence is often fueled by a belief that government institutions are hopelessly compromised because they are supposedly controlled by a single racial, ethnic or religious group—often Jews.

Most antigovernment groups are anti-Semitic, but some are more overt about it than others, said Heidi Beirich, director of research for the Southern Poverty Law Center, which monitors extremist groups. “All white supremacists are at heart antigovernment,” she said. “They want this government overthrown. They want

white dominance. They want minorities to lose their rights.”

Government is just one of many institutions that are to blame for social ills in the eyes of white supremacists, said Jack Levin, a criminologist at Northeastern University in Boston. Churches can be another.

“Some conspiratorial thinkers are convinced that the conventional institutions of American society—religion, politics, government, the media—represent collectively a threat to their racial identity and way of life,” he said.

The recent spike in extremist right-wing violence does not appear to represent an organized effort by known groups; assailants seem to be acting alone, said Carol Swain, a political scientist at Vanderbilt University and author of *The New White Nationalism in America: Its Challenge to Integration*.

“If we focus on the groups, we are going to miss the larger picture that the danger is not from the groups like the KKK or Aryan Nations . . . but from individuals like von Brunn who act alone,” she said.

What’s fueling the acts of violence? Rabbi Abraham Cooper, associate dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, blames the Internet.

“The Internet has a viral, social aspect,” he said. “It leads you to believe that you’re acting on behalf of the greater good, it gives you a sense of validation, without actually being a part of a real community. You have more people acting alone, but not with the same sense of isolation.”

Roeder—or at least someone using the same name—has long been known on antiabortion Web sites. In 2007 a user with the name Scott Roeder asked on Operation Rescue’s Web site whether anyone had thought of confronting Tiller at his church.

Roeder represents the sector of militant antiabortion activists who believe that if a morally compromised government cannot or will not take measures to stop abortions, the task falls to volunteers who are willing to take the law into their own hands.

The election of Barack Obama as the nation’s first black president has fanned the hatred among extremist groups, experts say. With debates over immigration, the nomination of a Latina to the Supreme Court and advances for gay rights, you have

the “perfect storm,” said Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League.

“All of them fuel the anger and frustration of conspiratorial characters,” said Foxman, whose group has tracked von Brunn for years. “It’s the perfect storm of these areas coming together, which angers and frustrates them.”

Cooper, from the Simon Wiesenthal Center, said Obama’s recent visit to the Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany could have been what set off von Brunn.

“I don’t think it’s coincidence that it took place a week after America’s first African-American president walked side by side with Elie Wiesel, a Jewish Holocaust survivor, through the gates of Buchenwald,” he said. *-Kevin Eckstrom, RNS staff*