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# SECURITY NEXUS

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Security Nexus Conversations

## RIGHT-WING TERRORISM: AN INTERVIEW WITH RETIRED FBI SPECIAL AGENT TOM O'CONNOR

By Dr. Sam Mullins

After more than 20 years investigating terrorism for the FBI, Special Agent Tom O'Connor and his wife, Jean, retired on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019 in honor of the victims of 9/11 and those who tragically lost their lives due to 9/11-related illnesses. As a member of the Evidence Response Team (ERT), SA O'Connor worked some of the most significant terrorism cases in modern history, to include the bombing of the US Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya in 1998, the attack on the USS COLE in Yemen in 2000 and the plane strike on the Pentagon on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. He also worked assignments in the Balkans, Latin America, Iraq, Pakistan, Ukraine and many more countries around the world. In the United States, he specialized in criminal investigation of right-wing violent extremists and was part of ERTs deployed in the aftermath of numerous mass shootings, to include the attack on the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh in October 2018. The following is an edited transcript of an interview with SA O'Connor, focused on the growing problem of right-wing terrorism, that took place on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020 (just a few days before the world's first [incel terrorism charge](#) in Canada, and an incel-inspired shooting [took place](#) at an Arizona mall). The full interview is available to listen to at [this link](#).

**Sam Mullins [SM]:** To start us off here, Tom, could you just explain some of the terminology here for us? What are we talking about when we say “right-wing terrorism”?

**Tom O'Connor [TO]:** Well, the right-wing terrorist is an individual who is a racially motivated violent extremist, or a religiously-motivated violent extremist, or an anti-government violent extremist. These three mixes make up the right-wing side of domestic terrorism.

Neo-Nazis, they have a racial side to them, obviously, but they also have a religious side. Then you get into groups like The World Church of the Creator, which is their own religion, mixed with neo-Nazi political, anti-government, racial and religious [views]. So, they mix between [motivations] very frequently.

[Another example is] the incels [“involuntary celibates” who are part of the right-wing extremist spectrum]. I think a lot of that is people spending a lot of time on the internet and finding like-minded individuals. The way I put it, if you have somebody that’s involved in child pornography, if they’re on the internet and they’re chatting with people who are not into child pornography then they’re thought of as the outcast. But if they’re able to find like-minded individuals online, then all of a sudden, their thoughts—that they realize are deviant in some way—they start to feel that they’re more accepted, because they find more and more people that feel the same way.

And all of these groups, they radicalize online. In the old days, back in the ’90s, when I started working right-wing extremists, they had to get together in a compound somewhere, or in a library, and sit down and have meetings where you actually talked face-to-face. So, the numbers, and the ability to radicalize [were] much less. Now, with the internet and all these chatrooms and Gab, and all the different places where people can go to find like-minded individuals, that ability to radicalize and push out their message is just on fire right now.

I’ve worked right-wing extremism predominantly as a case investigator for about 23 years. As times have changed, one thing’s been pretty current. The people who are looking for this are missing something in their lives a lot of times, and they’re looking for something to fulfill that. So, when we think about gang members—any type of gang member—those people who become involved in gang activity are seeking some kind of camaraderie. And a lot of this stems from that. And then they get into it further and further. And it’s unfortunate, but there are a lot of people out there that don’t have that support network and structure and they’re looking for it.

They find it [in these groups where] a lot of people are just “shitposting.” That’s the vast majority of it. A lot of it is talk. But the problem is there [is a] small [minority of] that membership of right-wing adherents that are going to go out and do something. The [online] posting is very important for them to get people to actually go out and do an act. So, this stuff should be taken seriously. As we’ve seen over the past several years, right-wing ideology has grown exponentially. And with that comes the number of people who would actually go out and cause a violent action.

**SM:** You mentioned you’ve been working this for 23 years. That goes back almost as far as the Oklahoma bombing in the United States [in 1995]. How did you first get involved in investigating this type of activity, and what kind of right-wing cases did you work over the years?

**TO:** I was a police officer [for] 15 years prior to coming into the FBI in 1997, and I worked my first case related to right-wing extremism as a detective. There was a young man who put himself in the category of a hippy, and he was unlike the right-wing guys that ended up attacking him. And that’s why they attacked him, because he was different. They literally beat him close to death and then took a boiling pot of noodles from the kitchen stove and poured it on him, causing some of the worst burns I’ve seen in my career. This was really the first case that I worked where I got involved in right-wing ideology. When I joined the FBI, I

was assigned initially to the Joint Terrorism Task Force in the Washington field office, and back in '97 the Task Forces were built where we worked both international and domestic terrorism on the same squad.

In the '90s we were working groups like the National Alliance and the World Church of the Creator, the Aryan Nations. Some of the larger groups that had very, very charismatic leadership. You had Matt Hale, who was in charge of the World Church of the Creator. You had Pastor [Richard] Butler, who was in charge of the Aryan Nations, and William Pearce, who was in charge of the National Alliance. Those guys were not stupid. And they could stand up and rally their forces. They were really doing it so they could raise money for their own coffers, but they were bringing people into this right-wing movement in good numbers. And some of those [people] would go out and cause violent actions towards minorities and Jewish people. In general, [these were] the two categories that they would do attacks on.

In a lot of the [international terrorism] cases [I was involved in] I worked as a member of the Evidence Response Team that goes out and works bombings and shootings. But my main criminal investigative efforts were towards right-wing extremism. They were splitting up squads more towards international terrorism obviously, because of the attacks on 9/11. And they formed a smaller domestic terrorism group, and I decided I wanted to stay there and work this stuff. I didn't want to take my eye off the ball, so to say.

**SM:** There's a lot of conversation now, not just the United States but in many countries, where law enforcement are basically accused of having taken their eye off the ball and [having] ignored these problems. Obviously, you have been investigating and prosecuting these individuals all these years [but] it's not been for terrorism. What were these guys [investigated and prosecuted] for?

**TO:** Something that I am strongly involved in is the [domestic terrorism] laws. So domestic terrorism squads currently, and for the entire time I worked them, we worked cases that met the [definition](#) of domestic terrorism. [But] there is no charge of domestic terrorism!

I'd been working this issue for a number of years, and we had a [shooting](#) at a conservative thinktank in Washington DC [in August 2012]. The person went in there because the thinktank publicly sided with a chicken sandwich company in the United States called Chick-fil-A, whose owner came out and said that he didn't believe in gay marriage. So, that kind of set this guy off. He walked into this conservative thinktank in DC and had 50 rounds of ammunition and in his words, he was going to shoot as many people as he possibly could [and] smear Chick-fil-A sandwiches in their faces as a way to protest their political beliefs. He shot a guard in the lobby, [but] the guard overpowered him and took the gun from him. And the first thing he said was "Don't shoot me, don't shoot me! It's not you, it's this place and their political beliefs!" So, he pretty much put out the definition of domestic terrorism. As the case agent for this, I went to the United States Attorney and said, "Hey, this is a perfect case of domestic terrorism, let's charge him with it." And they looked into it and they said, "There is no charge!" They said "We can charge him with a gun

charge, we can charge him with carrying a weapon across State lines to commit a felony. We can charge him with shooting this person as assault with intent to kill. But we can't charge him with domestic terrorism."

[But] these attorneys were great. They did a lot of research and in Washington DC there happened to be a law made up after 9/11 that was a terrorism charge that didn't differentiate between international and domestic terrorism. It just said [that] acts of violence to forward an ideology are terrorism. And so we were able to charge him with terrorism under the District of Columbia's laws. And it really set me off to say, investigators, law enforcement, the FBI should be able to investigate acts of domestic terrorism, charge people with domestic terrorism, and have people actually charged for the crime they committed. Not individual elements of that crime but the crime itself of domestic terrorism.

[If you're] researching all this stuff, you really couldn't find how many acts of domestic terrorism have taken place in the United States, because you won't find any [official statistics]. The other side of it is the victims. Their families are never going to be able to say that their family member was killed by a terrorist [even when] that's the fact. So, I think for a lot of reasons, Congress should come together in the United States and amend the statute so that the actual charge of domestic terrorism can be charged. That also gives law enforcement different tools that they don't have now to be able to investigate potential acts of terrorism.

One of the things that we've found when we talk to people up on Capitol Hill about making this legislative change to make domestic terrorism an actual crime is people have said, "Hey, in the United States your First Amendment rights allow you to be a member of one of these organizations." Unlike the foreign terrorist organizations, al-Qaeda, ISIS, this type of thing where the State Department designates these people and Department of Justice is able to charge being a member of that organization. [With domestic groups], they don't want to [be] stepping on those First Amendment rights, which are so important to us. And I don't disagree with that. I think that you need to be able to charge the individual crimes and work them like that.

Recently there's been addition to the State Department's Specially Designated Global Terrorists, the SDGT, where a foreign group—for the first time—has been named as a specially designated global terrorist group. The [Russian Imperial Movement](#). This is a group which is linked with other neo-Nazi, right-wing nationalist groups around the world [including the United States] and has literally been involved in training individuals who have gone on and done acts of terrorism. When it has that international connection, I think that the designation of that group that took place just within the last couple of months is extremely important, and a really big first step towards showing how important it is to keep your eye on the ball on this right-wing, neo-Nazi movement.

**SM:** There's also now, in particular since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, this feeling that the right-wing scene is really feeding off of this. What are your thoughts on that and what direction do you think this is moving in?

**TO:** I think they clearly are using COVID-19 as a springboard to get [more] people recruited and to follow on with potential [violent] acts. In March the FBI was engaged with a person, [Timothy Wilson](#) in Kansas City, [who] was going to attack a hospital that was caring for COVID-19 patients. He engaged with the FBI in a shootout and was killed in that confrontation. He had previously been on Telegram [in] a white supremacist [channel] and was talking about attacks on a synagogue, a mosque and schools with large numbers of black students. He was definitely somebody who would have gone out and done something if law enforcement didn't take action.

There's an extreme of the extreme who follow a belief [in] accelerationism, [that] societal collapse is going to take place and once that happens [a] white power government will step in. They're seeing all this stuff happen [in relation to COVID-19] and posting a lot about it. In March [one of] the [right-wing] Telegram page[s] [about] COVID-19 went up 800% to 2,700 users who are posting about COVID-19 and how if somebody gets infected they should go out and infect minority populations and this type of stuff. They truly believe that the only way they're going to get their white ethno-State is through the collapse of society. And you're seeing that type of belief system being pushed out more and more.

Now we're seeing protests in the United States, which are First Amendment protected protests against the government's policy of social distancing and having businesses shut down. But then you have trucks showing up with guys with AK47s and M4s. They're working in the Second Amendment [and their belief] that government doesn't need to tell us what to do. So, you're getting a bit of that anti-government [ideology being promoted] within a group of people who may just be saying, "Hey, I've got a business and I'm suffering, we need to open things up." They're kind of getting their foot in the door with that.

The coronavirus pandemic, around the globe, is crushing economies because of the shutdowns, and these guys on the extreme right that are following accelerationism are seeing that as a way to have the collapse of global economies and [work] towards building that white ethno-State. They're welcoming the coronavirus as a way that will make this happen sooner for them. The world is going through one of the hardest times it has in history and these guys are capitalizing on that to [advance] their movement further and gain adherents to their movement. And in that, there's the potential for people like Wilson in Kansas City to go out and do attacks. And there's no doubt we'll see more of it.

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