
THE THIN BLUE (AND BLACK) LINE: ON THE PERMEABILITY OF ANTIFASCIST-POLICE INTELLIGENCE EFFORTS

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I. As Oscar Wilde wrote in 1891 in *The Decay of Lying*, “life imitates art,” and while I do not often consider the painstaking construction of a journal article “art,” the adage still holds some relevant truth. Recently, while putting the finishing touches on “We Protect Us: Cyber Persistent Digital Antifascism and Dual Use Knowledge,” published as part of a Special Issue of the top-ranked terrorism studies journal, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, I reconsidered how my own scholarship had recently become unintentionally reflective of my own lived reality.

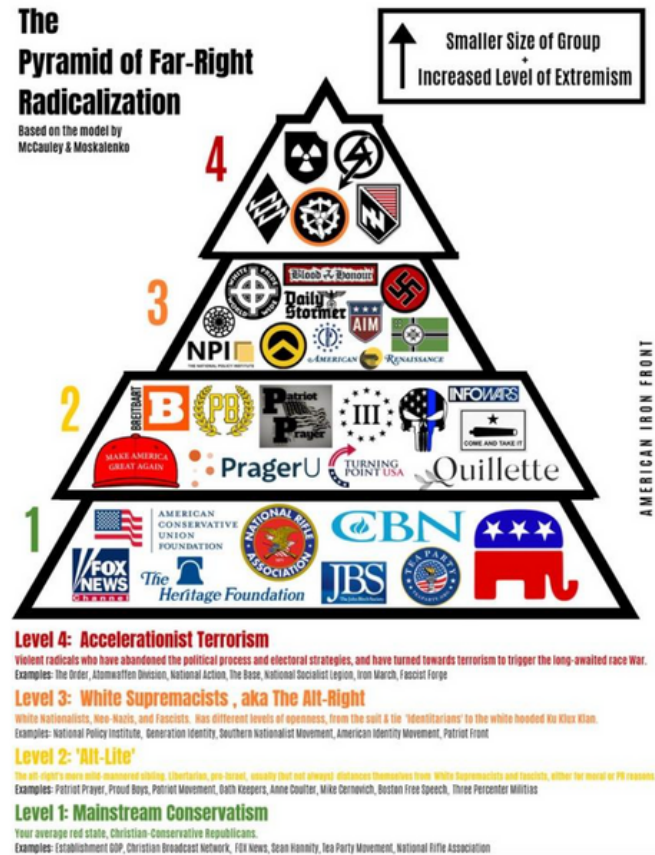
For me, Wilde’s pithy observation rang recurrent in my ears as I sat at my desk, pinned between two monitors—on the left, the copy edits for [this journal article](#), and on my right, an ever-growing list of articles denouncing me as the result of false

reporting by North America’s favorite center-right news network. While the right’s articles’ accusations spanned the gamut—ranging from ‘Michael the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) stooge was weaponized by the Biden administration to attack conservative, Christian America’ to ‘Michael the militant antifa extremist taught children how to doxx’—the sentiment was overwhelmingly and undeniably threatening. The original Fox article spawned several dozen derivatives, each one a bit farther from the truth—reminiscent of the children’s game telephone, where a message is relayed person-to-person until it is unrecognizable to its creator. From there it made its way to cable news, a certain Senator’s podcast, and into my DMs, email, voicemail inbox....

The genesis for this confluence of events—writing and reality colliding—is worth a quick recap.

II. In May 2023, a conservative 'media watchdog group' known for climate change denialism and misrepresenting the January 6th attack on the US Capitol as "99%...peaceful", published a report, rife with mischaracterizations, half-truths, and dubious framing. The authoring organization was described by the Columbia Journalism Review as "just one part of a wider movement by the far right," and has reportedly "posted white nationalist screeds", including promoting an article claiming Black people "are a threat to all who cross their paths."

The report they authored stated that through its "new Freedom of Information Act investigations," the investigators discovered that a DHS grant was being used to "target the entire spectrum of the political right and Christians...as part of a coordinated effort to make America into a one-party system." The Executive Summary states that the "Biden administration is weaponizing a government-funded anti-terrorism grant program in an effort to destroy conservatives, Christians and the Republican Party." A central piece of 'evidence' in this expose was a diagram I had used several years prior during a talk I delivered, on request, for the University of Dayton's Human Rights Center. I had been asked to speak about "my community's" (i.e., anti-fascists') strategic response to white nationalism.



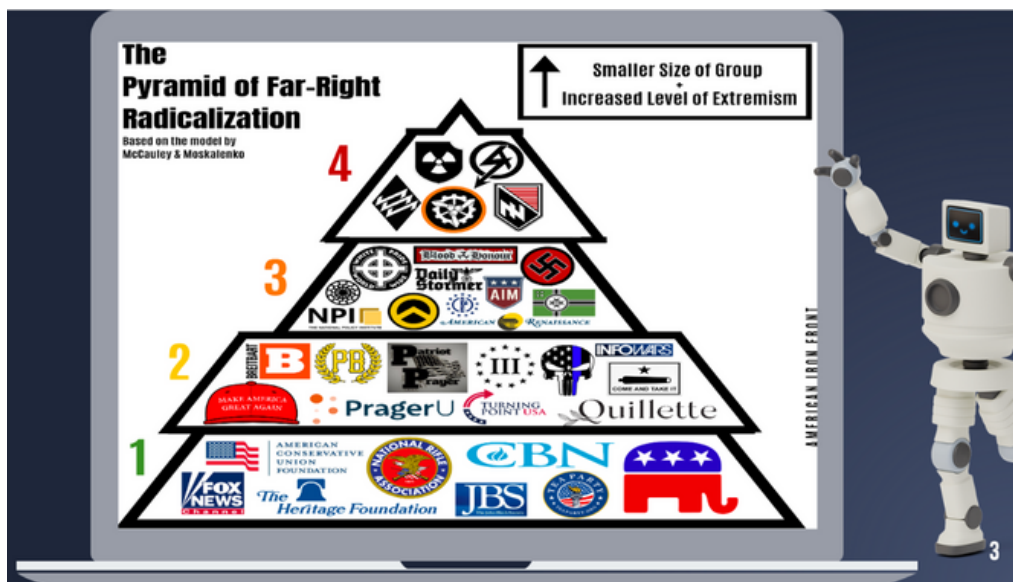
Source: American Iron Front Twitter account (posted 16 August 2019)

Although the slide in question had two separate, plainly visible attributions—one for the creator of the image and one for the academics who penned the theory of radicalization undergirding it—the image was misconstrued as my creation. The chart (shown above) was mischaracterized, as a chart used by DHS and its grantee in a training program [which] equates mainstream groups and militant neo-Nazis."

When examining this claim, it is simply false. The chart was not "used by DHS" nor am I, the person displaying it within the context of a lecture, a "DHS...grantee." Further, the session

was an academic exchange for professional practitioners, not a “training program” for students, and finally, in no way does the tiered image “equate” groups. In fact, even a superficial interrogation of the chart demonstrates just the opposite. The chart communicates that “mainstream conservatives” and (what the chart terms) “accelerationist terrorism” are not the same but rather non-deterministic phases in “far-right radicalization.” The groups at the top—Atomwaffen Division, National Action, the Base, the National Socialist Legion, and the Iron March network—are fed by the groups below, but quite obviously the chart is not meant to imply that everyone who forms the base of mainstream conservatism progresses to terrorism. That would be a silly claim, unsupported by fact, and indefensible in an academic setting.

Any sober, honest evaluation of the image makes this clear. This is precisely why the image is structured as a triangle—as one moves up the shape, fewer individuals are involved. In other words, only a portion of individuals move from tier 1 to tier 2. An even smaller selection moves from tier 2 to tier 3, and so on. If this image was meant to communicate that the mainstream conservatives of tier 1 are the same as tiers 2, 3, or 4 as my detractors claimed, the images would be structured as a square, not a triangle. The decreasing size of the levels is meant to be self-explanatory. It should be noted, lest I be accused of deception, that when I displayed the image, I cropped the colorful text below the chart to make a square image and to fit within the slide deck’s modernist robotics theme (see below), but I explained the tiered system, even voicing my disagreement with elements of the taxonomy.



Source: “Digital Communities of the Modern Far Right: from eco-attack to the embrace of accelerationist collapse,” Michael Loadenthal (delivered 3 December 2021)

While this intentional misunderstanding of the diagram is frustrating, it is compounded by a series of other misrepresentations throughout the short-lived virality of the story: the men sitting next to me are DHS agents, my current affiliation is as an abortion provider, I am lavishly supported by DHS, I am training students to break the law...all said in plain language and all demonstrably false.

The men sitting next to me were professors, an uncontestable fact as the entirety of their remarks proceeded my own in the same video. While I did work as an abortion provider for nearly a decade, that was more than 15 years ago. The event was not in any way funded by DHS, nor did the DHS have any input into my remarks. The event was not a professor instructing students, but rather a practitioner sharing strategies for community-level defense to a room of other practitioners.

III. Returning to where we began, what is the relevance to life imitating art? My central unresolved question recurrent throughout the article is: *What is the relationship between US intelligence/police and anti-carceral antifascists seeking to undermine far-right digital networks?* I argue that since law enforcement routinely scavenges antifascist intelligence products for its own ends (e.g., investigation, prosecution), antifascists cannot continue proceeding with the false notion that they are operating

outside, and apart from the State. If you need convincing, go no further:

- [BREAKING: Antifa Used as Source in Coeur d'Alene Police FOIA Documents after 'Pride in the Park' Arrest of 31 Members of 'Patriot Front' in North Idaho](#) (Idaho Tribune)
- [2 Capitol riot suspects were arrested from online sleuths' info, documents show](#) (National Public Radio)
- [Jan 6 series: How OSINT powered the largest criminal investigation in US history](#) (Institute for Strategic Dialogue)

In my research, I found scores of similar articles, including four from explicitly far-right (e.g., [The American Futurist](#), [National Justice Party](#)) and slightly-less-right (e.g., [Front Page Magazine](#)) outlets. With odd uniformity, nearly all of the articles reached varied versions of the same conclusion, namely that police, prosecutors, and intelligence officials were combing through activists' efforts for their own ends.

This argument was not one forged from an armchair but from my own work as an antifascist investigator outside of law enforcement. I have become increasingly uncomfortable with the frequency in which I see my own work appear in evidentiary records and the commonality of requests for information sent from federal intelligence officials. Even though intelligence-police

official and antifascists may find themselves on the same side of the us v. far-right seesaw, no one seems comfortable with the current ambiguity.

I wrote the article to try and make sense of this increasingly entangled assemblage. I wrote to try and identify the location of the red line demarking a weaponized civilian engaged in crowd-sourced policing. I wrote to explore what this unintentionally-shared moment means for those engaged in this work. I wrote to try and make sense, and in the process of doing so, discovered even more nuance and complexity than I had originally predicted. This process was made more difficult by my own predicament—being accused of acting as a State agent when in fact I was not. This conflation of roles spoke precisely to the tension I had identified; the poorly-delineated siloing of the State and non-State.

As I investigated this issue, I found more and more evidence to support my conclusion. In the post-peer-review revision stage, months after the article has been written, I came upon a large cache of leaked far-right communications, and within that trove, found additional confirmation of this discourse playing out in the encrypted chats which form the communication bodies of the modern far-right. I saw agitprop stickers supporting my thesis, and a host of anonymous individuals and organizations

parroting the claim on Telegram, Tam Tam, Gab, and elsewhere. Then, more than a month later, while I was completing the final pre-publication copy edits, the crosshairs encircled me, and for a short while, I became the focus. Not only did this public harassment drive home the words of Mr. Wilde, they demonstrated in no uncertain terms, that whether the product of confusion or intentionally-mischaracterized defamation, for mainstream conservatives as well as the rightists who sent violent, antisemitic, homophobic, and (oddly enough) transphobic threats to me in response, for a seemingly growing community, there is little to no difference between antifascist activists and State intelligence agencies, despite neither community sharing much in the way of affinities.

When I began writing this article in August of 2021, I had assumed that engaging US cyber defensive measures with antifascist deplatforming politics would arouse controversy, but after I saw the parallels, I could not unsee them. In seeking to make sense of all this, I am reminded of the words of Kurt Vonnegut, who in *Mother Night*, warned that given time, “we are what we pretend to be.” While I certainly do not think that antifascist researchers are pretending to be cops, I wonder—Does this symbiosis we find ourselves immersed within amount to an unwitting civilian security force; an unintentional, unacknowledged, unpaid

internship functioning as hobbyist intelligence agents?

When writing [the article unpinning this essay](#), I had assumed scorn would come my way, but expected it from my own community of antifascists whom I've organized and sacrificed with for more than two decades. I had thought that I would be accused of some manner of proto-State conspiracy for problematizing the separation between police and activists. I did not consider that those roles would be conflated by my opponents, and that I would become the target of harassment and threats because of an ill-conceived, intentionally-deceptive blending. I felt prepared to deal with my detractors, but had not properly anticipated who they would be.

Maybe I am just yearning for a simpler time—a time before the civilianization of deplatforming and before the January 6th riot ushered in a new era of crowd-sourced policing. Maybe I am simply seeking to return to a time of more stark contrast, or as my favorite Canadian antifascists [once sung](#): “I’d rather know my enemies and let you know the same—whose windows to smash and whose tires to slash, and where to point the f**ing blame.”

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