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The Atomwaffen Division: the myth of evidence-based policy on the threat of far-right extremism

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Introduction

Since 2015, governments, law enforcement agencies and the media across several Western countries have highlighted the threat posed by the Atomwaffen Division (AWD), a neo-Nazi group. Indeed, America's initial considerations to proscribe the group as a terrorist organisation have led Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia to do so. However, some observers have questioned how significant the threat of violence is from the group. While articles and reports are often published to educate and inform the public, scholars contend that the academic and policy literature regarding the AWD and its later reincarnations as the National Socialist Order (NSO) and National Socialist Liberation Front and other similar groups, tends to inflate and sensationalise the actual threat posed. Subsequently, as reflected in Beck's *Risk Society* (1992, p 260), the extensive coverage of such a minor organisation could potentially create a misleading amplification of a risk narrative within the public.

This chapter examines the dynamic between risk and threat and evidence-based policy. It takes the AWD as a case study. The aim is to evaluate the existence of violence and risk the group poses, and whether this informs and justifies counter-terrorism policy.

Counter-terrorism has long been a contested issue, and it seems that governments are driven by the principle of not being taken by surprise; this approach reflects the concern voiced in the quote, 'price paid for omission, is far greater than that paid for an overreaction to a threat' (Beck, 2006, p 336). The importance of this study lies in the need to draw attention to the question of the diversion of resources; it is one thing to prosecute individuals for the threatening of journalists (as in the recent AWD case), while it is another to invest energy, personnel, finance and other resources in preventing risks that do not exist in their current form. This does not suggest that inciting a race war should not be taken seriously. However, given the otherwise high crime rates compared to terrorist acts, a more realistic threat assessment should be constructed.

The chapter opens with a discussion on the construction of risks and threats from terrorism. It draws on Beck's concept of risk society, examining how the media fuel social perception and how this, in turn, drives governmental anti-terrorism policies. Then, a more detailed discussion on the media's construct of threat in the context of the AWD follows. The chapter then provides an overview of the AWD, highlighting its nature, structure and characteristics. The following section evaluates governmental counter-terrorism policies concerning far-right extremism and, second, the effects these may have on the civil liberties of other non-terrorist minority groups. Finally, the chapter concludes by examining the AWD action dynamic; this draws on the perspective of internal brakes and demonstrates the extent to which policy related to countering this group's actions may not reflect the evidence.

Despite the metamorphosis experienced by the group and subsequent changes in name, the chapter will refer to it throughout as the AWD. This is the most recognised feature identified with this small group. According to one of its latest members, Ryan AW, 'You either loved us or hated us. And our name is now more famous than it has ever been, even though we now only exist in the collective imagination' (Ryan, 2017, p 620).

Terrorism: risks and brakes

A discussion on policy, the construction of crime and fear perception must start with acknowledging Beck's concept of the

'risk society'. Beck (2006) contends that over recent decades, societal understanding of risk has transformed from a neutral term that can be quantified positively and negatively depending on the outcome to one predominated by fear. This heightened societal fear has led Beck to argue that we now live in what he labels a 'risk society'. This perspective has been used in different contexts (most recently regarding the COVID-19 pandemic) to define Western society's incessant preoccupation with its safety and commitment to eliminate or minimise future unknown risks. These risks are a socially constructed anticipation of a catastrophic event; risks mainly relate to future incidents, and the constructed fear feeds into a deep sense of threat. Hence the urgent need to prevent it. However, while risks are always considered threatening, they are hypothetical and yet to be experienced (Beck, 2014).

Several characteristics have been attributed to modern societal risk. First, 'delocalisation' refers to new threats that contemporary societies face, such as global warming, man-made pandemics or terrorism, which are not restricted by geographical boundaries, rendering them omnipresent. Hence, risk, directly propagated through the media, becomes visible, tangible and 'real': anyone can become a victim of the threat at any point. Another characteristic, 'non-compensability', reflects the notion that the eventual damage and harm will be irreversible. This taps into apocalyptical fears, such as the extinction of humanity following climate change or the use of biological or chemical weapons of mass destruction (Beck, 2006). The previous two characteristics are fundamental to constructing fear and threat; if the previous are not present in the citizens' perception, there is no case to answer regarding governmental responses to the threat.

Another characteristic that makes the discussion on justifiable governmental response interesting is 'incalculable' risk. This refers to the idea that because risks are hypothetical, they cannot be quantified and calculated (Beck, 2014). However, this notion has not been taken at face value. For example, Richards (2014) contests this perspective; he argues that if the risk is a constructed reality, it does not exist. Therefore, by definition, it is controlled by those who have constructed it. Amoore's study (2014), on the other hand, shows how a risk (in this case, one that seemed predictable: an earthquake) was wrongly 'calculated' and evaluated

as 'minor', leading to fatal consequences. Still, the importance of this characteristic lies in its nature; whether the risk can be calculated or not, it places pressure on the government to resolve it, thus justifying intervention. This has allowed the position of 'precaution by prevention', inducing a state of security perception. Therefore, the anticipation and prevention of risks that have not been proven has become the predominant driving factor of restrictive government policies impinging on civil liberties (Da Silva et al, 2022).

Prevention has become even more justifiable in the case of terrorism. As opposed to, for example, ecological or global financial catastrophes (mere by-products of unrelenting modernisation), terrorism is intentional (Beck, 2002). The opening address in the US Department for Homeland Security declaration fatuously stated, 'Terrorists can strike any place, any time, using any weapon' (Mueller, 2009, p 9). However, the disruption is not only physical. As acts of communicative violence designed to challenge usually taken-for-granted values and social order, terrorist incidents dramatically encode the limitations of the state's responsibility to protect its citizens. Stanley Cohen (1985) drew attention to this, indicating that 'there is never the fear of too much control, but of too much chaos. If we are losing control, we must try to take control' (p 235). However, prevention has less to do with 'doing justice' and more with the systematic management of security (Mythen and Walklate, 2008). Therefore, the success of 'prevention' has significant implications on the notion of 'state power' and its successful endorsement by the citizen. This fuels a climate in which certain groups or organisations, in the case of this chapter, the AWD, are systematically overly characterised as a dangerous threat.

However, research has demonstrated that extremist elements or entire groups within the far-right milieu rarely carry out anything like the amount of violent activity their propaganda and rhetoric suggest. Focus has been placed on explaining why these groups are unwilling to initiate violent action, preferring to limit themselves to purely self-defensive measures. An example is the Nordic Resistance Movement's declaration that 'In the future weapons will be decisive … but as long as we can act legally, there is no reason for the Resistance Movement to arm itself'

(Nordfront forlag, 2016, cited in Bjørgo and Ravndal, 2020, p 37). Furthermore, interviews with far-right extremists identified social or psychological 'barriers' that restricted migration into Mass Casualty Terrorism (MCT). The interviewees viewed MCT as counter-productive; they suggested that members supporting MCT merely demonstrated a predilection for interpersonal violence. Other reasons for leaning towards a non-violent milieu were unforeseeable changes in personal circumstances such as addiction, marriage or employment, organisational infighting, and moralistic reluctance to cross the threshold from low-scale violent behaviour to murder (Simi and Windisch, 2020).

This disjuncture between rhetoric and the employment of violence by extremist groups is also related to internal group policy. Researchers have argued that internal policing exercised by group leaders and advisors accounts for restraint when using violence within various groups, including those that espouse or even engage in serious violence (Dutter, 2011; Bjørgo and Ravndal, 2020; Macklin, 2020). Restraint is understood as 'a process whereby militants choose to drop, downscale or limit an attack or campaign, or adopt tactical or strategic innovations that lead them away from violence' (Busher and Bjørgo, 2020, p 2). Wilson and Halpin (2022) contend that this is primarily in recognition that such acts would be detrimental to recruitment, group expansion and, ultimately, group survival. Expanding on the theory of internal extremist group policing, Busher et al (2019) offer a working framework of 'internal brakes' on violent action. These factors account for restraint when using violence and can be found within various groups (see examples in Macklin, 2020; Wilson and Halpin, 2022).

Busher and Bjørgo (2020) explain that this framework should be examined within the context of 'multi-level ecologies of conflict'. Although the authors identify five categories of internal brakes, this chapter will focus on the first two brakes only. Brake number 1 reflects the 'strategic logic' that aims to identify effective, less violent strategies. The authors define this brake as the '[i]dentification of non – or less violent strategies of action as being as or more effective than more violent alternatives' (Busher et al, 2019, p 9). This indicates several concerns; for example, it might reflect an expression of scepticism about the group's ability to

achieve its goals using violence and the recognition that violence can lead to greater levels of repression by the authorities. Similarly, a violent milieu might discourage support for the group's cause and thus limit recruitment. Therefore, opting instead to carry out activities concerning shaping the group's image, such as speeches and publications, is far more favourable. Brake number 2 is the 'moral logic', this functions as an ethical threshold. The authors define this as the '[c]onstruction of moral norms and evaluations that inhibit certain forms of violence and the emotional impulses towards violence' (Busher et al, 2019, p 9). Here, the aim is to encourage a working framework that sets limits, for example, on who and what is a legitimate target for violence (Busher and Bjørgo, 2020). According to Morrison (2020), this framework parallels political-organisational theory, particularly with the notion of organisational survival. Hence suggesting that these brakes are not incidental.

In this chapter, these brakes will be used to guide the analysis of the main instruction manual of the AWD, *Siege*, by James Mason (editions 1993–2021). This text, updated in 2021, is an anthology of Mason's newsletters written and distributed throughout the far-right community during the 1980s; this latest edition was created, edited and written mainly by James Mason, the individual considered to be the ideologue of the AWD; the collection includes photos, pamphlets and flyers, as well as writing by other members.

Media's construct of threat

We find the media playing a fundamental catalyst in the space between the implications driven by a 'risk society' and subsequent governmental policy. This is true for any area of our life, but certainly for what the media deems newsworthy. When it occurs, terrorism dominates the headlines of all mass media, informing the public immediately of incidents as and when they happen. The intensive media coverage serves at least one of the terrorists' aims, to instil fear; however, it also makes contextualising the actual extent of terrorism problematic (Zulli et al, 2022). The 'availability heuristic', a cognitive bias in decision-making based on recent experiences or information readily available (Tversky

and Kahneman, 1973, p 207), triggers an unrealistic multiplication of the risk from terrorism as the boundaries between reality and fantasy become increasingly blurred (Kollmann et al, 2022). For example, in the 20 years before the 9/11 terrorist attacks, very few Americans considered the threat of terrorism a critical national concern. Yet the day following the attacks, the threat of terrorism was named by 46 per cent of those asked as the number one concern (Stewart and Mueller, 2016). A Gallup poll conducted in 2006 saw 43 per cent of Americans worried about becoming a victim of terrorism (Woods, 2007). However, by 2017, this had risen to 70 per cent (Mueller, 2021).

The media feeding and enhancing public alarmism has damaging implications. The continuous flow of scaremongering rhetoric across the airwaves affords insignificant terrorist groups an acknowledgement of their power beyond reality (Livingston, 2019). For example, while the potential for far-right use of chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons is considered unlikely, with little or no evidence to support such a hypothesis (Earnhardt et al, 2021), a simple Google Scholar search returns over 78,000 articles suggesting such a threat. Fear, as a commodity (Altheide, 1997), generates profit, and the spectacular theatre offered by terrorism, regardless of the accuracy of coverage, is impossible for the media to resist (Mythen and Walklate, 2008). With the rise of the Internet, the media can rely on the new notion of 'citizen journalism' to get hold of newsworthy, often uncensored material. Subsequently, the thirst for ratings forces other mainstream media outlets to broadcast extreme content they might not otherwise feature. For example, the AWD and other White extremist groups' narrative concerning White farmer genocide in South Africa directly influenced the American television channel Fox News' decision to cover the subject and display untypically gruesome images for which they were roundly criticised (Hendry and Lemieux, 2021). Recuber (2009) has taken further the notion of utilitarian mass media, arguing that 'terrorism today is consumed like a brand, with a host of spin-off products, and terrorists are recognised as a distinct and dangerous social type through advertisements, rumours, and staged public relations pseudo-events' (p 160).

Subsequently, the public understands the threat based on information fuelled by fear. For example, the American Centre for Strategic & International Studies, a non-profit policy research organisation, has recently expressed concerns about the escalation of terrorism, particularly of far-right groups (Jones et al, 2020a, 2020b). However, the authors' colourful charts should be read with caution. For example, research by Jones et al (2020a) suggests that in 2020, 90 per cent of terrorist attacks and plots are attributed to right-wing terrorist groups; however, in Jones et al (2020b), the authors' research suggests only 67 per cent, and of these only one fatality. The previous (Jones et al, 2020a, 2020b) hardly indicates an increase in terrorism threat; also, the AWD is categorised under the umbrella of 'White supremacists'; therefore, there is no real indication of their actions. Jones et al (2020a) describe the AWD threat as the following: 'In January 2018, the AWD hosted a "Death Valley Hate Camp" in Las Vegas, Nevada, where members trained in hand-to-hand combat, firearms, and the creation of neo-Nazi propaganda videos and pictures. In August 2019, leadership members of the AWD attended a "Nuclear Congress" in Las Vegas, Nevada' (p 6). Therefore, it is argued in this chapter that for all the attention terrorism garners, while acknowledging that the threat and potential harm posed by the AWD exists, it is essential to recognise that it has been vastly overstated.

Review of the Atomwaffen Division

On 12 October 2015, founder Brandon Clint Russell formally announced the creation of the AWD (German for 'Nuclear Weapons Division') on the now defunct far-right extremist forum Iron March (Hawley, 2017). Describing itself as a 'revolutionary, national socialist movement', the AWD espouses a violent accelerationist political ideology, aiming to achieve 'purity through revolution' (May and Feldman, 2019, p 26). It has been argued that the AWD's strategy strongly resembles that described in the book by Abu Bakr Naji, *The Administration of Savagery* (2004), also used by Al-Qaeda and Islamic State in their quest to establish a caliphate (Makuch and Lamoureux, 2019). Indeed, the leadership of the AWD has praised the willingness of members of Al-Qaeda and Islamic State to sacrifice themselves

for their cause, leading a member to claim that the AWD also wanted 'radicals … young men willing to put down their lives for our ideas' (Makuch and Lamoureux, 2019). Hence, the AWD has been described as 'violent fetishists' (Ware, 2020; Southern Poverty Law Center, nd).

The AWD employs a 'leaderless social resistance' model espoused by White supremacist Louis Beam in the journal *The Seditionist* (1992) (Ware, 2020, p 6). Accordingly, this operation requires small cells or lone actors to conduct acts of anti-state terrorism independently without oversight or direct communication with the core organisation. Thus, it becomes increasingly difficult for law enforcement to monitor the AWD's operations and communications. The Center for International Security and Cooperation (2023) indicates that the AWD membership included more than 80 members (at its height), divided into 23 cells across the United States; it has grown its international footprint with affiliate groups the Sonnenkrieg Division (UK), AWD Deutschland (Germany), Feuerkrieg Division (Estonia) and the Northern Order (Canada). However, identifying the leadership or the membership of the AWD remains problematic due to the sophisticated online encryption systems employed by the group. More recently, the AWD has profited from the opportunities provided by new social media ecosystems. Adherents use media platforms such as Telegram and Parler to maximise recruitment, manipulate public opinion and intimidate political opponents (De Vynck and Nakashima, 2021).

The AWD continuously releases public statements promising an intensification of its violent activities. The group's chat room logs reveal how power stations, powerlines and other critical infrastructure sites have been earmarked for attack (Thompson et al, 2018). However, counter-terrorism authorities have struggled to accurately assess the group's capacity to carry out its threats. Still, after the arrest and jailing of Brandon Russell, while possessing components believed by law enforcement capable of creating a viable 'dirty bomb' (the combination of radioactive material and conventional explosives), the public espousal of violent intent made by the AWD may now be supported by a capability to do so (Ware, 2020). Compounding this was the AWD's calculated strategy of recruiting members and veterans of

the armed forces who often gravitate towards violent extremism. Thus, the AWD's strategy appeared to be the accumulation of combat-hardened military professionals, utilising their expertise in future terrorist attacks (Norris, 2020).

However, despite the AWD's growing reach at home and transnationally, 2020 was challenging for the organisation. In February, 'Operation First Pillar', conducted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)'s Joint Terrorism Taskforce, arrested 18 members, and incarcerated five of the AWD's most senior leadership (Norris, 2020). All were found guilty of instigating a campaign of 'swatting', making hoax emergency calls regarding ongoing violent situations hoping to garner a response from law enforcement SWAT teams (Baker et al, 2021) against political opponents and journalists. Furthermore, Max Rose, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Intelligence and Counterterrorism, has been placing increasing pressure on the State Department to proscribe a White supremacist group, with the AWD top of the list (Ware, 2020). Consequently, the increased pressure on the organisation led the AWD's chief advisor, James Mason, to announce the group's disbandment on 14 March 2020 (Makuch, 2020). However, some scholars, such as Bertrand et al (2020), argue that the demobilisation of the AWD was a temporary measure to avoid proscription by the US government. In other words, the group could not be proscribed with the AWD disbanded, leading to the US government proscribing the Russian Imperial Movement instead (Tech Against Terrorism, nd). Indeed, the AWD announced its re-emergence as the NSO in July 2020 (Ware, 2020).

However, the existence of the NSO, created from the residual membership of the AWD, would be short-lived. The NSO was infiltrated and taken control of by the Satanic group Order of Nine Angles. The open promotion of Satanism and sexual violence towards children led neo-Nazi websites and other influential neo-Nazi groups, such as The Base, to distance themselves from the NSO in early September 2022. The NSO was subsequently discontinued; on 12 September 2022, former members announced that a new organisation called the National Socialist Resistance Front had been created (Counter Extremism Project, 2022).

Policy and the myth of threat

There is no doubt that federal law enforcement agencies have recognised far-right violence as a threat to national security (Erlenbusch-Anderson, 2022). Newly elected President Joe Biden introduced America's first strategy to combat domestic terrorism with the National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism 2021. And most recently, the US Congress passed the Domestic Terrorism Prevention Act 2022 (Domestic Terrorism Prevention Act of 2022, 2022). However, it is arguable whether this extensive legal framework is justifiable on legitimate grounds. For example, in 2017, the Trump administration released to the media a catalogue of 78 terrorist attacks between 2014 and 2016. When asked what the aim of the publication was, the White House declared, 'What we need to do is to remind people that the Earth is a very dangerous place these days' (Spicer, 2017). The constructed risk is fundamental to reinforce further the justification and, therefore, the need to invest taxpayers' money in protecting against a (mythical) threat. The recent narrative uses far-right terrorism as the 'poster boy' to justify counter-terrorism campaigns. As indicated by Zenn's research, this has been further facilitated by the media's constructions of new definitions of terrorism that capture lethal and non-lethal acts to reflect the a-typical non-violent political campaigns by far-right groups (Zenn, 2022). Indeed, Dr Miller-Idriss (2020) declared 'a spike in far-right terrorist violence around the world', while the US Bureau of Counterterrorism (2019) claimed that far-right extremism is 'a growing threat to the global community'. Also, President Biden's National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism claimed ideological neutrality but only referenced far-right/White supremacist attacks, overlooking attacks by the far left, incels and jihadists (Zenn, 2022).

The AWD has appeared to be an easy target for politicians and government advisors. When addressing the US Committee for Foreign Affairs, Christian Picciolini (2020), an American former White supremacist, wrongly claimed that the AWD was responsible for five homicides and then likened the group to an Islamic State terror cell. In 2021, the FBI and Department of Homeland Security claimed that the AWD was responsible for a

'significant domestic terrorist incident'. Yet this single incident happening across two years was the mailing of posters meant to intimidate journalists. Although widely reported, no mention was made that the offences were directly linked to terrorism legislation, nor that any of the actions of those prosecuted met the threshold for terrorism as contained within the multitude of its definitions. The AWD also made news when the group's founder, Brandon Russell, was accredited with a terrorist threat against US nuclear power infrastructure, despite no evidence corroborating this (Krill and Clifford, 2022). Indeed, Russell, who received a five-year jail term, was only charged with unlawful possession of a destructive device and explosive materials, all of which were in his apartment and not with him when arrested (Office of Public Affairs, US Department of Justice, 2018). Still, researchers from the National Nuclear Security Administration in Washington, DC, which deals specifically with the risk of nuclear terrorism, have used the AWD logo as evidence of the far-right's 'explicit interest' in nuclear terrorism. For them, the name Atomwaffen, German for atomic weapons, suggests the group's threat. This is despite academic literature indicating that its future use by the far-right is widely adjudged as very unlikely (Earnhardt et al, 2021); significantly, during 2016–2021 the AWD was only connected to the incident mentioned earlier.

Similarly, the international reach of the AWD's threat seems to have been inflated by its proscription. Proscription refers to a suite of legal measures permitting a government or security authority to ban the presence or support of a recognised group within its jurisdiction to limit possible terrorist acts (Jarvis and Legrand, 2018). Much was made of the Australian government proscribing the Sonnenkrieg Division, the UK-based arm of the AWD, in November 2021. Yet, when Peter Dutton, the Australian Home Affairs minister who decided to proscribe the AWD, was questioned, he conceded that the group had no presence or conducted any activities 'on the ground in Australia' (Theodorakis, 2021). The UK government proscribed the AWD in April 2021 (GOV.UK, 2021). Yet Evans (2021) argues that proscription was a symbolic gesture of geopolitical solidarity with international partners rather than in response to the group's threat to the UK, which is described as 'negligible to non-existent'.

Following the disbandment of the AWD, Australia moved on to proscribe the group's new formation, the NSO. Yet, despite the use of proscription, there have been hardly any notable instances of individuals being indicted, prosecuted or convicted for being members thereof (Jarvis and Legrand, 2018).

Indeed, closer scrutiny reveals that no AWD group members' criminal acts and behaviour have ever been prosecuted using the American anti-terrorism legislation indicated earlier (Ware, 2020). Instead, local and federal law enforcement have resorted to employing regular statutes and laws when pursuing the group and its membership. The following indicates the various laws used to charge and prosecute AWD members; none comes specifically under anti-terrorism legislation: Brandon Russell, 2017, 26 US Code 5861(d) possession of a destructive device, and 2023, 18 US Code 842(j) unlawful storage of explosive material; Kaleb Cole, Cameron Shea, Johnny Garza and Taylor Parker-Dipeppe, 2020, 18 US Code 371(d) to mail threatening communications and cyberstalking; John Cameron Denton, 2020, 18 US Code 875 and 371 interstate threats to injure; Brian Baynes, 2019, 18 US Code 922(g)(3) unlawful acts, unlawful transport of a firearm; Benjamin Bogard, 2019, 18 US Code 2252 (US Attorney's Office, Western District of Texas, 2023). Thus, purely in terroristic terms and from legal perspectives, it is argued here that the threat or risk that the AWD represents is, in fact, speculative.

Still, the drive to expand domestic terrorism legislation has not disappeared, and this has raised concerns among minority and marginalised communities and non-violent activist groups campaigning on their behalf. Research indicates many examples demonstrating how the US Department of Homeland Security and the Justice Department already abuse current domestic terrorism laws against protected First Amendment rights (Gibbons, 2019). In 2017, Native Indian Water Protector activist Jessica Reznicek received a three-year sentence for drilling holes into the unfinished Dakota Access oil pipeline. However, applying a 'domestic terrorism clause' within the Patriot Act of 2001 enabled a judge to increase the sentence to eight years (Madeson, 2022). In 2017, despite concerns that the widening of the domestic terrorism framework could be unfairly utilised against minority communities, the state of Georgia changed its definition of

'domestic terrorism' to include property crimes. These changes allowed police to arrest 19 Defend the Atlanta Forest activists who disrupted the construction of a new police training facility in DeKalb County (Brown, 2023). Also, the Joint Terrorism Taskforce targeted Palestinian human rights student activists. In 2016, the Joint Terrorism Taskforce obtained files from the far-right website Canary Mission containing unsubstantiated claims that student activists at two universities campaigning for Palestinian human rights had links to terrorism. Another example concerns the targeting of Black Lives Matter. Throughout 2015, while tracking the group's whereabouts, the Department of Homeland Security conducted surveillance of unrelated Black community events, such as the DC Funk Music Parade. Then, in 2017, the FBI declared a new threat, namely Black Identity Extremism, hence shifting the nature of Black Lives Matter from activism to terrorism (Gibbons, 2019).

Action dynamic of the Atomwaffen Division

Scholars consider terrorist attacks a fundamental communicative strategy designed to dominate mass media, ensuring enormous publicity and facilitating the widespread dissemination of an organisation's message (Hoffman, 2006). Significantly, however, recent research has drawn attention to the importance of attacks as a recruitment tool. Hence these become instrumental to the group's survival (Limodio, 2022). For example, Reid (cited in Grey, 2021) argues that the Capitol Hill riots of 6 January 2021 were a staged publicity stunt by the far-right to bolster recruitment, with the hope that the four far-right activists who died would be considered martyrs, and their deaths will mobilise huge numbers. Therefore, with such a limited membership, a diminutive group such as the AWD would be expected to conduct violent media attention-grabbing terrorist acts.

However, although the AWD has dominated the headlines for several years, the group has not committed any indiscriminate terrorist attacks. Indeed, deadly American far-right terrorist violence has been perpetrated by individuals but not on behalf of the group as such (Ware, 2020). While scholars, media and government continually espouse the threat posed by the AWD,

evidence suggests that the group has prioritised instead the promotion of its increasingly violent rhetoric in what Post et al (2014) have labelled a 'virtual community of hatred' (p 306). Indeed, the group has considered its role to be the exploitation of the vulnerabilities of its current members to facilitate their radicalisation in preparation for a future race war, all done via online propaganda (Jackson, 2020).

Scrutinising the AWD's activities highlights the reluctance to engage in violence and freeriding on the back of violence committed by a violent minority within the far-right milieu. The AWD modus operandi suggests that it prefers to distribute its offensive extremist propaganda to garner as much publicity as possible. For example, in 2016, the AWD distributed flyers across the University of Chicago campus containing the message 'Hitler Disapproves'. The group continued this flyer campaign at several American universities in 2017. Flyers appeared at Florida College stating, 'How is a diploma going to help you in a race war? Join your local Nazis'; at Evergreen State College, stickers demanded to know 'Where will you be when the race war begins?'; homophobic leaflets were handed out to students at the University of Western Florida; and members attended the National Front White Lives Matter rally in Tennessee (Jackson, 2020). According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (nd), the AWD has also organised hate camps and uploaded and published their footage. For example, the Doomsday Hate Camp: Mid-West was held in 2017 and provided the attendees with weapons and combat training.

While most of the AWD's activities have been restricted to campaigns that do not deploy physical violence, on occasion, acts of extreme violence, often not approved by the group although celebrated by its members, are attributed to it. Between May 2017 and January 2018, five murders were linked to AWD members (Boghani et al, 2019); while horrific, none of these turned out to be a terroristic event (Jackson, 2020). The shooting of two fellow AWD members in 2017 by Devon Arthurs received mixed reports by the media; while emphasising Arthurs' links to both neo-Nazi and jihadist terrorists' ideologies, it also suggested the killing was 'to prevent an act of domestic terrorism' (Dearen, 2017). However, it transpired that Arthurs had shot his friends because they had

continuously ridiculed him regarding his recent conversion to Islam (Norris, 2020); his reaction seemed to have been affected by what later was diagnosed as schizophrenia and autism (Sullivan, 2017). The double homicide by AWD member Nicholas Giampa of his girlfriend's parents and his attempted suicide were attributed to the AWD cause (Schulberg and O'Brien, 2018). However, it seems that a history of mental health issues and his girlfriend's parents' efforts to get the couple to separate were the critical factors in the homicide (Jackson, 2020); more recent reports have even suggested that the act was a suicide pact between Giampa and his girlfriend (Barakat, 2022). Finally, the alleged murder committed by AWD member Samuel Woodward of his Jewish homosexual classmate followed a three-day hate camp organised by the group in Texas (Thompson et al, 2018). The investigation uncovered anti-gay and hateful material in Woodward's possession, yet it was also revealed that he had autism, and evidence suggested that he was 'sexually confused' (Melley, 2018). According to Jackson (2020), Woodward was also diagnosed with Asperger syndrome and expressed suicidal thoughts; thus, not simply ideology would seem to have played an essential role in driving his action.

However, this does not suggest that the group does not glorify violence. For example, James Mason (2021), the AWD's ideologue, describes the racist killing spree in New York state by White supremacist Joseph Christopher in 1980 that left 13 dead and seven seriously injured as 'outstanding news' and 'positively electrifying' (p 274). Another example is that of White supremacist serial killer Joseph Franklin who in the 1990s travelled up and down the East Coast of America, aiming to kill African Americans and Jews; he would later be convicted of murdering eight people and was executed in November 2013. Describing these actions, Mason (2021) succinctly exclaims, 'Bravo!' (p 275). The AWD has celebrated other terrorist acts by, for example, producing a flyer depicting an image of Osama Bin Laden set against the background of the crumbling Twin Towers (Makuch and Lamoureux, 2019). Also, AWD member Samuel Woodward openly promoted rape to terrorise ethnic minorities by referring to the mass rape of Muslim Bosnian women by Serbian soldiers during the Bosnian War in the 1990s (Thompson et al, 2018).

Although this attitude to freeride on other far-right groups' violence is arguably accidental, examining the group's literature suggests a contained, orderly approach to violence and its dissemination. By applying the internal brake classifications Busher et al (2019) offer to the AWD's guiding text and self-produced literature, one finds clear indications suggesting brakes are employed by its author and the group. Earlier incidents in James Mason's life have shaped his views on effective modus operandi for the group's survival. For example, in his introduction to *Siege*, James Mason's collection (for the 2003 edition, 2021), Schuster recounts that Mason considered killing his headteacher and deputy's headteacher in 1968. However, it appears that William Pierce, then editor of the American Nazi Party's magazine *National Socialist World*, dissuaded Mason from entering the 'tunnel of violence prematurely'. Another example was Mason's incarceration in 1974, where he admitted to recognising the threat to his cause from external influences such as law enforcement. Mason decided to leave violence behind in both cases and concentrate his efforts on the political front.

These experiences might have led Mason (2021) to reconsider the effects of direct violence on the strategy for achieving the group's objectives (Brake 1: strategic logic). Mason admits that 'we cannot challenge the government now' (2021, p 104). He matches this expression of scepticism about the success of violent struggle with the recognition of external brakes (Busher and Bjørgo, 2020), that is, the increased repression by the state consequential to violent acts. Mason (2021) states, 'We'd be absolute idiots to attack the Pigs ourselves in any attempt to initiate something of the nature of a general rebellion' (p 81). Moreover, in an essay in *Siege*, AWD member and leader Ryan AW explains that external actions, such as the one experienced by the group in 2017, being betrayed by 'traitors' and their founder, Brandon Russell, being sentenced to prison, would lead any other group to 'go into pieces' (Ryan, 2017, p 616).

Moreover, Mason's book suggests that he focused on refining the group's moral norms (Brake 2: moral logic) to minimise the emotional triggers towards violence. In other words, Mason further encourages members to adopt non-violent moral principles, thus setting boundaries on unacceptable violent actions. For example,

Mason (2021) can be seen to articulate these sentiments, stating, '[t]he objective is not to murder ethnic minorities, rather fan the flames of revolution and bring down the system' (p 64) and, 'assassinating Presidents won't change a damn thing' (p 297). For example, a propaganda pamphlet (Mason, 2021) indicates that 'the key to success in the struggle ahead is self-discipline' (p 46). Against emotionally driven action, Mason (2021) suggests that he would '[m]uch rather run the risk of a tactical, personal set-back at the hands of a sharp, intelligent person, something I would expect I could reverse in time, than to have everything, the whole ball of wax, upturned or destroyed by some flake who loses all better judgment and control' (p 108).

Indeed, research (Jackson, 2020; Ravndal, 2021) indicates that for the AWD, self-discipline and remaining 'legal' in the face of intense provocation by the state are critical to future victory. Additionally, strategic logic and moral logic could be seen as interlinked. Mason (2021) indicates that 'making headlines doesn't work and only reveals our weaknesses' (p 49); he asks members to 'stay out of their way, don't give the authorities the excuse to come after you' (p 63) and urges to carry 'no stunts, no fanfare, only long-term planning' (p 92). He says, '[b]e assured, cooler heads will prevail. It is up to you to make certain that the cooler head belongs to you' (p 113).

Capitalising on growth rather than risking repression, the focus on recruitment also reflects a strategy of survival (Makuch, 2020). Scholars have indicated that 'victory' is connected to group size (Simi and Windisch, 2020). Thus, with a membership estimated at around 80, Mason recognises the futility of waging war against the government, thus dismissing 'minor' attempts to gain publicity, preferring to 'direct ourselves towards recruitment' (Mason, 2021, p 536); also, several pre-2020 AWD flyers in the 2021 *Siege* edition address recruits, encouraging them to join their local group (Mason, 2021). Group member Ryan AW confirms (Mason, 2021) that after the AWD was disbanded in 2017, 'the group plugged along, gaining a slew of members … our propaganda was really coming into its own' (p 616). Mason (2021) further concedes that engaging in violent struggle would be stupidity without 'sufficient personnel in possession of the necessary expertise' (p 32). This reflects another concern within the strategic logic

(Brake 1), that violence will have a detrimental effect on support for the group, '[f]or sympathy is lost, and condemnation follows' (Mason, 2021, p 189). Group member Ryan AW adds to this, indicating that the 2018 events – the shutting of the website *Iron March*, the Satanic Panic infiltration events, and the leak of AWD group members' private conversations – led to the ruin of the group's public reputation, badly affecting membership numbers. He said that '[t]he old tactic of placing posters at Universities, government buildings, etc., was not netting us nearly as much press coverage as before' (Mason, 2021, p 617). Ryan AW honestly admits:

> I asked myself a simple question – if the version of me from 2016 was transferred to March 2020, would he have joined the group? Sadly, the answer was a resounding hell no. … I thought to myself, if I wouldn't join this group, how the hell can I ask anybody else to? (Mason, 2021, p 619)

This tendency to restrain from physical violence seems to go against what we have been told about the aim of terrorism, that violence is a critical component of any terrorist organisation. However, Mason's ideology indicates prioritising long-term goals, thus steering away from violence. So far, it seems that this strategy is succeeding. Group member Ryan AW explains:

> What did we accomplish? All in all, we accomplished not nearly as much as we'd have liked, but we accomplished a hell of a lot more than the kikes and white traitors would've preferred. We, so far, have been the most influential National Socialist group of the 21st century. We spread the message further than almost anyone post-Rockwell, and we created an aesthetic that has been copied many times but has never been bested. (Mason, 2021, p 619)

Indeed, a simple Google search of 'Atomwaffen' returns over 2.7 million entries, the 'National Socialist Resistance Front' gets over 8 million hits, and 'James Mason AWD' gets over

5 million hits. Consequently, saturation coverage by media, academia and government amplifies the threat and diffuses fear across a wider audience without the AWD lifting a finger.

To conclude, it is worth copying this lengthy quote from Mason's 1985 entry to his newsletter *Siege* in response to a letter from a 'fan':

> [The letter] was 'standard' all the way except that at the close it had 'READY TO FIGHT!' above the author's signature. It was too much for me. I didn't gag, but I did get steamed and still do whenever I stop to consider it. 'Ready to fight.' 'Ready to fight.' 'Ready to fight.' Kick it around in your mind and roll it over your tongue a few times. I'll bet I could draw you a picture, complete with personal background and history, of that individual … but I won't because that would make me sick for sure.
>
> 'Ready to fight'? Yes, I sent a copy of SIEGE in response – which probably scared the hell out of him if it didn't entirely confuse him – and, no, there wasn't any further communication. … I have vowed to cut waste.
>
> Not everyone is a fighter. That's understood around here. But don't come on like a fool and don't use that term to hide behind. I will show respect for anyone who approaches me in seriousness and who is willing to apply themselves seriously. And a serious approach in this case would have been something like, 'Ready to work.' Or 'Ready to serve.' As it was, this person wasn't even ready to subscribe! This is an insult to all who DO work and serve, in quiet, without fanfare. (Mason, 2021, p 184)

Summary

- Although the AWD has dominated headlines for several years, the group has not committed any indiscriminate terrorist attacks. The few acts of violence initially attributed to being driven by its ideology were proven otherwise. Moreover, no

AWD group members' criminal actions and behaviour have ever been prosecuted using American anti-terrorism legislation; local and federal law enforcement have resorted to employing regular statutes and laws when pursuing the group and its membership.

- The AWD group engages widely with social media and other non-violent forms of political propaganda. Following Busher et al's (2019) perspective on terrorist groups' strategic brakes, this modus operandi seems to reflect the need for safeguarding the group's survival, where the AWD chief advisors systematically discourage members from engaging in acts of violence.
- However, the AWD has featured more widely in the media than any other far-right group. This has led to a misleading amplification of a risk narrative. Subsequently, by paying lip service to the duty of public protection and national security, policies are used to contextualise acts under the umbrella of terrorism.
- Moreover, the drive to expand domestic terrorism legislation has not disappeared. This has raised concerns among minority and marginalised communities and non-violent activist groups that have nothing to do with terrorism. Evidence demonstrates how current domestic terrorism laws have been applied against protected First Amendment rights to safeguard constructed threats. It is arguable whether this extensive legal framework is justifiable on legitimate grounds.
- This, in turn, has several implications: it unnecessarily enhances public anxiety; it incentivises attention-seeking lone wolves to carry out acts of violence; it limits rights and liberties; it antagonises causes worthy of public debate and attention.
- Therefore, it is argued in this chapter that for all the attention terrorism garners, while acknowledging that the threat and potential harm posed by the AWD exists, it is essential to recognise that it has been vastly overstated. The direct attention generated by the media, thus driving the government's policy, appears more damaging than beneficial.
- Instead, the government should carry out realistic threat assessments; it should divert resources back to other areas of social life that are far more tangible, such as high crime rates,

poor socioeconomic conditions, inadequate health services and education.

Suggested directions for future research

The following questions can orient further research and discussion in the area:

- What are some key characteristics of modern societal risk according to Beck's concept of the 'risk society', and how do these characteristics influence governmental responses to threats such as terrorism?
- How does the media's portrayal of terrorism, driven by sensationalism and fearmongering, influence public perception of the threat, and what are the potential consequences of this distorted perception, particularly in relation to far-right extremist groups like the AWD?
- What is the current status of the AWD and its subsequent iterations, such as the NSO and the National Socialist Resistance Front, as of September 2022?
- Is the AWD considered a significant domestic terrorism threat, and how has the application of anti-terrorism legislation been used in pursuing the group's members?
- How does the AWD utilise violence and propaganda according to James Mason's ideology, and how does this contrast with traditional perceptions of terrorism as a communication strategy?

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