

Talk About Extremists, But Don't Politicize the Debate

By Sam J. Tangredi

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One of the notable attributes of national security professionals is that while working in their area of expertise, one can rarely tell their politics. That is why appointed officials in the Defense Department are often able to serve in the presidential administrations of opposing parties. Defense Secretary Bob Gates and Deputy Defense Undersecretary Bob Work are just two recent examples that come to mind, but there have been many others. As for military officers and civil servants, an apolitical yet determinedly patriotic approach is not only expected, it is required. In my own career, I saw absolutely no political issue between preparing briefings for President Reagan and drafting the first rough of speeches for President Clinton. Today in analyzing the future security environment, I would never consider examining a “right-wing” alternative future rather than a “left-wing” alternative, or even labeling them as such. Professionals examine all alternatives.

That is what is so disturbing about [P.W. Singer's call](#) for national security pros to talk about domestic right-wing extremism as if it were something different than left-wing extremism, no matter which side has hated others most effectively at the moment. Quite simply, it is argument for politicization in a profession that needs to remain above partisan politics.

Pushing aside for the moment the fact that curbing domestic violence is a law-enforcement function—albeit with some foreign security policy implications—it is extremely hard to see the value of national security professionals identifying right-wing extremism as a threat separate from left-wing extremism. Are we going to analyze them differently, have different strategies? The threat he is talking about is extremism, which—in itself—is often hard to clearly separate into right/left categories. Are radical Islamists right or left? Singer is correct that in the last few years self-identified “rightists”—a category that unfortunately links racist skin-heads with fiscal hawks—have perpetrated more murders than “leftist” groups. But that has not been necessarily true throughout American history; leftist groups have shot and bombed too. Moreover, it is hard to define historic American violence in those terms: was the U.S. Cavalry “right-wing” and Native Americans “left”? Were abolitionists “left-wing” and slaveholders “right”? Reasonable historians don't look at historical issues in those terms. Neither should national security professionals look at current issues that way.

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Singer also skews his argument by citing questionable statistics—particularly in including the recent school shooting in Florida. There is absolutely no solid evidence that school shootings—whether in Florida, Connecticut, or elsewhere—are motivated by right-wing ideology. Or left, for that matter. And his statement that right-wing extremists have killed more Americans than ISIS is thoroughly misleading. If one separates ISIS from Al Qaida, Taliban, or other brands that claim the same or similar ideology, he may be right that ISIS has been much less successful in their goal in killing Americans. Thank God their plans haven't worked well here. They sure have worked in the killing fields of Iraq and Syria.

I don't have the data to tell you how many Americans have been killed specifically by ISIS as opposed to affiliates, but it is clear that extreme Islamists have killed more than 387 Americans—need I say it—even in the U.S. And if rightists have killed “274 of 387 murdered by extremists,” does that mean the 113 dead Americans left over are not worth talking about?

Worse still, Singer well knows that the statistics he cites come from organizations that admit they have political agendas, and who identify themselves as being on the “left.”

Additionally, Singer cites no evidence to support his contention about professional risks to individuals speaking out against “right-wing” violence in either government or academia. Really? Having survived the culture wars of the 1980s as a military professional in a civilian graduate school—in which most professors categorized me as “right-wing” simply because of my profession—I find it very hard to believe that the academic world has tilted to extreme conservatism and that national security professionals in that venue invite “personal risks and annoyances” because they condemn skin-heads, racists, neo-Nazis and the like.

The fact is that I actually fear taking on Singer in this debate since it is likely that someone—likely an academic or pundit—will accuse me of supporting the radical right just because I don’t want to make a distinction between extremist violence. Well, not really *fear*—but I know how easy it is to court ideological animosity in the world of universities and think tanks.

As for elected officials, their whole world is partisan; condemnation by somebody is part of their sport. Not so for national security professionals. If you can’t see the difference, examine how the Department of Defense is operating under the current administration. How many people have been fired there lately?

But the most disturbing aspect of Singer’s call to specifically identify right-wing extremism from left-wing or any other violent ideology is that it threatens to fracture the domestically-apolitical approach that has characterized national security analysis since at least the Vietnam era. In other words, it promises to do exactly what Singer claims to deplore—tear apart the unity that characterizes our approach to examining the threats to Americans. Extremism, particularly when fueled by Russia, China or other authoritarian states that would like nothing better than prove democracy doesn’t work, is a threat worth examining, analyzing and discussing. However, we have to be careful to separate what are partisan domestic issues from what are outside-sponsored threats, what is dissent and strongly held opinion from collusion with foreign extremism preaching violence.

Fortunately, Americans have the right to condemn the right or the left, both or neither. They have the right to love President Trump, hate President Trump, or remain indifferent. But when national security professionals start picking domestic political sides within their professional sphere—no matter what they might do in their personal sphere—their sphere ceases to be a profession and becomes but yet another aspect of partisanship. We don’t need yet another venue for partisanship.

Singer is wrong. We need to talk about *extremism* if we are to solve the problem. Not right or left. That dialog—taken to extreme—becomes the problem.

Oh, by the way, are “killer robots” right or left?

The views expressed above are those of Dr. Tangredi, and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the U.S. Naval War College, U.S. Navy or Department of Defense.

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