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The Antifa Hysteria

Jim Kovpak

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Since 2017, American conservatives have been raging against Antifa, an organization they had never heard of until then, but which they are convinced is a dangerous domestic terrorist organization that must be criminalized. On Saturday, President Trump revealed his support for such action in a series of typically incoherent tweets.

Anti-Antifa hysteria resembles typical right-wing moral panics about secret Satanic cabals in the 70's and 80's, or the «knockout game» in the past decade. A recent episode involved claims that Antifa was putting some kind of quick-setting cement into milkshakes in order to cause concussions. An enterprising entrepreneur (i.e. grifter) came up with the idea of marketing his solid steel core «Patriot Cane» as a weapon to defend against Antifa. One imagines the typical Antifa-fearing audience, which is mostly elderly, spending their Social Security money on a steel cane out of fear that they might one day be attacked on the street by masked Antifa hunting parties for wearing an American flag shirt or something equally innocuous. Indeed one need not imagine — Twitter and other social media are rife with individuals who have never and probably will never encounter Antifa in their

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lives, and yet are labeling Antifa a terrorist group and making threats about what they'd do if Antifa ever came for them.

What is causing this panic among conservatives about Antifa in recent years? It's simple — as mainstream conservatives have moved closer to actual fascists, they have been increasingly confronted by Antifa and their sympathizers when they attempt to organize or rally in public. One perfect example of this was the so-called «Battle of York,» which took place in Pennsylvania in 2002. Several other major clashes between major neo-Nazi organizations and Antifa took place that same year. While these could be considered high profile events, mainstream conservative media didn't pay attention. In those days, especially during the administration of George W. Bush, mainstream conservatives were smart enough to reject the far-right. The animosity was mutual too, because in those days most neo-Nazi organizations hated the Bush admin for its pro-Israel, neoconservative agenda. Thus there was a period of about eight years during which there were several major clashes between Antifa and far-right organizations in streets across America but the mainstream media, including conservative media, largely ignored it.

The election of Obama in 2008 and the rise of the so-called Tea Party movement is what knocked down the barrier between the far-right and the mainstream right. Mainstream conservative media figures such as radio and TV host Glenn Beck were given a huge platform from which they spun numerous conspiracy theories about George Soros and high-ranking government officials with alleged links to the Muslim Brotherhood or «Marxism.» The pressure cooker of hate and paranoia boiled for eight years and then Trump popped the lid off. As if recognizing their moment had come, far-right organizations reciprocated the mainstream's rightward motion and reached out to the Trump movement. Some far-right figures even acknowledged that Trump wasn't actually on their side, but that his rhetoric helped mainstream their radical views, and he could at

least accomplish some of their policy goals in a limited fashion. And this is how more mainstream political figures appeared on Antifa's radar. Whereas in the past one had to do some deep digging to find neo-Nazis working with Republicans, usually making great efforts to conceal their views, after 2016 the former make little effort to hide their views and when they are exposed, it is no surprise. Rather than take a pause to reevaluate what it is about their beliefs and actions that have led them into this alliance with, in some cases, actual neo-Nazis, conservatives, famous for their inability to take responsibility for their own actions, have decided to attack Antifa instead. They insist that «Antifa calls anyone who disagrees with them fascists,» and yet they'll also say things like «Antifa are the real fascists!» Moreover, they have no explanation as to why Antifa aren't going around attacking liberals, centrists, or even mainstream conservatives who aren't engaged in a public rally alongside literal fascist organizations.

More importantly, you will not see these people, not President Trump, not Senator Ted Cruz, or any of those who call for the outlawing of Antifa, also call for the outlawing of any far-right group, be they the 3%'er militia, Identity Evropa (now known as the American Identity Movement), or the Proud Boys — all groups that have been connected to a number of criminal acts. As Antifa defenders are forced to point out again and again, the number of people killed by Antifa in the United States in decades of activity is still zero, whereas killing by far-right individuals number in the dozens in recent years alone. Even those who point this out often forget that this body count would be far higher were it not for the large quantity of planned domestic attacks that are foiled before they can be carried out. No, to the modern American right, the organization with a body count of zero should be criminalized as a «terrorist organization,» but actual terrorist organizations that have killed dozens and the propaganda they spread shouldn't be similarly characterized and outlawed

because of «free speech.» As if the universe conspired expose this hypocrisy in the most cruel way possible, the day after the president's anti-Antifa tweets, a gunman espousing far-right white nationalist views murdered three people in California, one of whom was a six year old boy and a 13 year old girl.

Getting back to the question of criminalizing Antifa, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly are crucial concepts in this discussion because as others have pointed out numerous times — Antifa is not a group or organization, it does not have membership, and actions like assault are already criminalized. Ergo, the only logical result of criminalizing «Antifa» will be censorship and the restriction of freedom of assembly for people who oppose the far-right in public. Ignorant, possibly right-wing law enforcement agencies would draw up a list of attributes they associate with «Antifa,» and then they could surveil or detain anyone they apply that label to. Strangely, the right-wing commentators who constantly accuse Antifa and the left of trying to eliminate freedom of speech haven't considered such consequences. In fact, they've been cheering the president on ever since he started tweeting about it. There is no mystery as to why — right-wingers don't believe in freedom of speech. They just want the right to say and do whatever they want without consequences.

The outlook is grim at the moment, but American leftists can take solace in the fact that time and time again, it has been shown that the ideas of the right are not truly popular in this country. The actions taken by Republicans such as embracing the far-right, voter suppression, and rigging elections are the actions of a desperate, aging party that feels its vulnerability and is attempting to defend itself by establishing a form of fascist minority rule. Their incoherent raving about Antifa without so much as a peep about America's largest and most ignored terrorist movement only proves that they are in fact fascists, or at the very least fascist sympathizers, and thus they deserve Antifa's attention. And if the left or at least progressive-

leaning people, who far outnumber the right, are criminalized for their beliefs, they will no longer be held back by the idea that must work only within the limits of the law. They will be freed from that restraint, and the oppressors will soon long for the days when all they had to fear were imaginary concrete milkshakes.