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Mainstream Democrats are in a hawkish mood when it comes to “domestic terrorism.” That is bad news for the left.

Immediately upon taking office, President Biden “tasked the director of national intelligence, in coordination with the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security, with compiling a comprehensive threat assessment on violent domestic extremism,” according to *The Washington Post*. This request was prompted by the right-wing attack on the Capitol on January 6.

The resulting report, “Domestic Violent Extremism Poses Heightened Threat in 2021,” was submitted on March 1, and its executive summary was released publicly a few days later. While its list of findings include some obvious observations — for example, that extremists are “motivated by a range of ideologies” and use the internet “to recruit, plan and rally

support for in-person actions” – the final page of the executive summary, listing “Categories of Domestic Violent Extremists,” reveals a concerning typology. It identifies five classifications: “Racially or Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists,” “Animal Rights / Environmental Violent Extremists,” “Abortion-Related Violent Extremists,” “Anti-Government/Anti-Authority Violent Extremists” and “All Other Domestic Terrorism Threats” (“including a combination of personal grievances and beliefs with potential bias related to religion, gender, or sexual orientation”).

The most striking thing about this classification system – which seems to have been developed by the FBI during the Trump years – is its perverse refusal to divide between left and right, instead grouping opposing sides *together* under other categories. Right-wing militias, sovereign citizens and anarchists, for example, are all listed under “Anti-Government/Anti-Authority Violent Extremists.” Racist and anti-racist violence is compressed into “Racially or Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists.”

“Abortion-Related Violent Extremists” includes both those “in support of pro-life and pro-choice beliefs” – despite the fact that the FBI cannot point to *any* pro-choice violence that escalated above the level of online threats, while anti-abortion fanatics have murdered 11 people and attempted to kill 26 more since 1993.

The classification system obscures a profound asymmetry in the distribution of violence as it is employed across the political spectrum, implying an equivalency between left and right. That presumption is contradicted by the evidence.

Those on the right resort to violence far more often, and with more deadly effect. According to a report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, “Between 1994 and 2020, there were 893 terrorist attacks and plots in the United States. Overall, right-wing terrorists perpetrated the majority

— 57 percent — of all attacks and plots during this period, compared to 25 percent committed by left-wing terrorists, 15 percent by religious terrorists, 3 percent by ethnonationalists, and .7 percent by terrorists with other motives.” It should be noted that even this assessment overestimates the left’s share of terrorist violence, since it includes the Earth Liberation Front’s purposefully non-injurious destruction of property; and it underestimates the right’s violence, as it separates out “extremists with other motivations (such as supporters of the Boogaloo movement) and Salafi-jihadists,” which each committed 7 percent.

In a separate report, CSIS calculates that “white supremacists and other like-minded extremists conducted 67 percent of terrorist plots and attacks in the United States in 2020,” as opposed to “20 percent of terrorist incidents” involving “anarchist, anti-fascist, and other like-minded” leftist groups.

Conflating antagonists does not just wrongly suggest comparable levels of violence but implies a shared culpability, displacing responsibility for right-wing violence onto the left. It also reinforces existing police biases, thus legitimizing the cops’ heretofore lax attitude about racist violence and their hypervigilance with regard to all variety of left-wing activism. Unfortunately, this bias does not disappear when the police begin cracking down on right-wing militants.

We have to expect that the authorities will take the present opportunity to escalate their attack on the left as well as the right. History has shown that when repression intensifies, even when precipitated by an attack from the right, it tends to fall disproportionately on the left, and on people of color regardless of their politics. Most obviously, the U.S. government responded to the terror attack of September 11, 2001 — another instance of right-wing violence, albeit originating overseas — with not only a set of endless wars, but also a crackdown on immigration and a racist campaign against Muslims. The U.S. also used 9/11 to justify the expansion of the FBI’s Joint Terror-

ism Task Forces, thus building the infrastructure for the years-long crackdown against environmental activists, and the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, which nearly two decades later would be mobilized to brutally attack racial justice protesters. Likewise, the main legislative response to the 1994 Oklahoma City bombing — when white supremacists killed 168 people — was the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act. That law expanded capital punishment, limited appeals, reduced prisoners' access to the courts and laid the groundwork to undermine *habeas corpus* — all measures that disproportionately harmed people of color.

This is a longstanding pattern: Within months of its passage, the 1968 Civil Rights Act was used to prosecute antiwar organizers, including Tom Hayden, Abbie Hoffman, the pacifist Dave Dellinger and Black Panther Party Chairman Bobby Seale. Even laws against lynching — enacted after decades of agitation from the Black community — are now sometimes used to prosecute people caught trying to help others escape from police custody.

This dual effect makes perfect sense, given the liberal tendency to frame right-wing violence as a problem with “extremism.” Implicit in an anti-extremist approach is an identification of the extremes: The militancy of the left and that of the right are not only treated as equivalent, but as essentially *the same thing*. We've seen that that is wrong empirically, but it is wrong morally as well: For the evaluation of violence cannot be separated from the intent behind it. (Even the law recognizes this, with important exceptions to the general prohibition on violence, for reasons such as necessity and self-defense.) The project of the left, in principle, is the pursuit of human equality; the project of the right is the defense of inequality. That does not mean that left-wing violence is always tactically sound, strategically wise or morally justified, but it does mean that even at its worst it must be judged differently than right-wing violence. There can be no equivalency between the violence

of a slave revolt and the violence of a slave master, between the violence of anti-fascists and that of the Atomwaffen Division. Even if we accept the pacifist line that violence always represents a bad means, in the case of right-wing violence, it additionally pursues bad ends. By obscuring the differences in the scale and the purpose of violence, anti-extremist rhetoric uses the violence of the right to justify repression against the left.

That is not an accident; it is inherent to the “anti-extremism” framework. As Jane Kinninmont put it, “states usually define extremism in relation to their own existing political system.” In liberal democracies, then, “extremism is in effect defined as ideology opposed to liberal democratic values.” Political Research Associates’ Chip Berlet put it more simply: “Extremists are people that folks in the center don’t like.” Anti-extremism is simply centrism in battle dress.

For the last half century liberalism — politically, if not always philosophically — has demonstrated a bias toward centrism; centrism, in turn, develops its own *illiberal* biases, resorting to authoritarian measures and seeking to stifle dissent. The *point* of anti-extremism is to narrow the range of political discourse, to foreclose on radical ideas in advance of their consideration.

The lesson for the left — and the challenge — is that we cannot rely on the state to neutralize the right, and that we must resist the expansion of the state’s repressive apparatus, even at moments when it is targeting our enemies. At the same time, we must not be drawn into alliance with the insurgent right, though we may on occasion find ourselves facing similar assaults at the hands of the same government agents. This is not a matter of choosing lesser evils or balancing competing needs. Instead, we must recognize that we are fighting a war on two fronts.