Could the Futility of Terrorism Inspire Deradicalization? Narrative Strategies Arising from Case Studies of Far-Right Lone-Actor Terrorism

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Abstract

Despite a growing body of research on deradicalization, research has not yet established which specific counter-narratives are most effective at achieving ideological or behavioral deradicalization. One potential narrative strategy concerns the futility of most terrorism—its lack of effectiveness in achieving political objectives. Previous research argues that idiosyncratic strategic thinking, or perpetrators' bizarre and extremely unrealistic expectations about the effects of their attacks, is common among terrorists, but this needs further empirical confirmation and has not been explored as a deradicalization strategy. This article thus analyzes the idiosyncratic strategic thinking behind a sample (n=8) of far-right lone-actor terrorist attacks, including the 2011 Norway and 2018 New Zealand massacres and subsequent copycat attacks, and drawing from this analysis, develops eight narrative deradicalization strategies. The article concludes by proposing a study testing the effect of various interventions, including futility-focused counter-narratives as well as others, on individuals' likelihood of engaging in extremist violence.

Keywords: Mass Shootings, Lone-Actor Terrorism, Idiosyncratic Terrorism, Effects of Terrorism

Introduction

When ideologically-motivated mass shootings occur, much of the ensuing public discussion focuses on partisan political issues, such as whether one side's rhetoric is to blame (Kanno-Youngs and Baker, 2022). After the racist mass shooting in Buffalo, New York, many blamed "replacement" rhetoric from well-known conservative figures like Tucker Carlson (Blazak, 2022). Indeed, the shooter clearly expressed the replacement ideology notion that there is a conspiracy to "replace" white Americans with non-white immigrants, making whites the minority. Such discussions, while certainly appropriate, may unintentionally convey the

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impression that the attack was a logical expression of replacement theory, reasonably calculated to prevent this so-called replacement.

Yet nothing could be further from the truth. As this article argues, it is extremely unlikely that this mass shooting, or even numerous shootings with the same goals, could somehow lead to the political changes the perpetrator desired. As indicated in their writings, mass shooters have convinced themselves that their actions will help achieve their political ends, but this is simply not feasible. In reality, the only thing these shootings accomplish, other than killing innocent people, causing anguish to their families, and ruining the perpetrators' lives as well, is to prompt further condemnations of racism, and perhaps inspire a handful of copycat shootings. Yet as this article shows, many copycat shooters commit attacks the original shooters would likely oppose.

Previous research on far-right copycat killers has largely focused on these shooters' ideologies, the nature of their attacks, and how they copy previous attackers. This article highlights an underappreciated aspect of these attacks: the highly idiosyncratic strategic thinking behind them. This is useful for both theoretical and policy reasons. First, focusing on strategic logic can help advance our understanding of how lone-actor terrorists decide to carry out and justify their attacks, developing concepts accurately depicting the cognitive processes that enable lone-actor terrorism. Second, documenting terrorists' extremely unrealistic expectations about the real-world impacts of their attacks can help dissuade potential attackers. Even those radicalized into noxious ideologies might refrain from attacks after learning that previous attacks had no real political impact and the attackers had no plausible reason to think they would. A major focus of this article is thus to employ case studies to develop several futility-focused narrative strategies that can be later tested for their efficacy in reducing the likelihood of individuals carrying out attacks.

Prior Research

While most terrorism research has focused on radical Islamists (Schuurman, 2019), a growing literature has emerged on far-right terrorism, particularly "lone wolves" (Spaaij, 2010). Lone-actor attacks account for most right-wing terrorist incidents in the US (Koehler, 2016), and

most lone-actor attacks in the West are motivated by right-wing extremism (Ellis et al., 2016). Despite right-wing terrorism's diversity and its evolution over time (Perlinger, 2020), its recent increase can be characterized as a distinct international wave of terrorism (Hart, 2023), which peaked in some countries around 2015 (Collins, 2021). There was a 320% increase in right-wing terrorism incidents between 2014 and 2018 (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2019), though very few of these incidents were fatal, due to the predominance of nonlethal tactics (Perliger, 2020).

Previous work on the same line of far-right copycats studied here (such as the attacks in El Paso and Christchurch) documented significant "intertextuality and interconnectivity" between the attackers (Kupper et al., 2022, p. 12; Furstenberg, 2022). These "copycat events become a subcultural script," with each attacker mimicking certain aspects of previous attacks while incorporating additional ideas (Kupper et al., 2022, p. 9). Their manifestos express attackers' membership in extreme-right Internet culture through various references meaningful to other members (Kupper et al., 2022). A study of three such manifestos concluded that they depicted the West as in need of urgent defense (through mass murder) from a supposed invasion of minorities (Nilsson, 2022).

These attacks are driven by anonymous posters who "cajole each other to 'get the high score' in an ongoing whirlwind of abject brutality" (Macklin, 2022, p. 232). This obsession with numbers reflects the "gamification" of white supremacist terrorism (Lakhani and Wiedlitzka, 2022; Schlegel, 2020). Racist subcultures on 4chan and other "chan" sites create a "digital home for young, white men" in which fascist beliefs are "amplified and reinforced through memetic irony and repetition," serving to "create a sense of urgency that 'race war in the real world' is necessary to preserve white, male supremacy" (Thorleifsson, 2022, p. 299). Numerous far-right Telegram channels also glorify lone-actor terrorists while urging further violence (Guhl and Davey, 2020). Hughes et al. (2022) document the romantic, mystical tendencies in the ecofascist ideology that has influenced some far-right copycats. While previous research has analyzed these aspects of copycat terrorism, attackers' beliefs about the consequences of their actions have not yet been analyzed in depth.

On the topic of strategic thinking, some research concludes that most terrorism is ineffective in reaching its goals, and that terrorists are overly optimistic about their chances of

success (Abrahms, 2006). Successful terrorism primarily involves guerilla campaigns against military targets; attacks against civilians are typically unsuccessful (Abrahms, 2012). Similarly, prominent terrorism expert Marc Sageman (2017) concludes that terrorists only achieve their objectives of regime change in rare, exceptional circumstances such as when the elite is easily-identifiable and distinct from the general population. Early terrorism researchers Martha Crenshaw (1987) and Walter Lacqueur (1976) also noted the typical futility of terrorism in achieving political objectives.

Indeed, it is very difficult to identify terrorists who have succeeded in achieving their ultimate goals. Those describing terrorists as successful tend to "move the goalposts" and define modest results such as publicity as successes, focus solely on "process" goals like organizational continuity, or misunderstand short-term trends as demonstrating success (Abrahms, 2018). For example, a journalistic account recently described the Oklahoma City Bombing as sparking a wave of right-wing terrorism (Toobin, 2023), but an examination of the scholarly literature shows that the increase in violent plots after the bombing was short-lived, nearly all the plots were thwarted by undercover operations, and the overall effect of the bombing was to undermine the Patriot movement through a government crackdown and decreased public support (Belew, 2018; Wright, 2007; Miller-Idriss, 2021). Moreover, many extremists at the time believed the bombing to be a false-flag operation by the government, negating much of the inspirational impact it might have had (Wright, 2007).

In addition, one might assume that the recent growth of right-wing terrorism can be attributed to early far-right lone actors like Breivik, but this is apparently not the case. A recent assessment of the long-term impact of Breivik's attack found that it had a smaller impact than other major attacks, and noted no effect on terrorism itself aside from the handful of lone-actor copycat attacks in 2019 (Bjørgo and Jupskås, 2021).

As one researcher summarizes in the case of left-wing extremism, "There has not ever been a successful leftist terrorist organization. Revolutions are not started by terrorist campaigns" (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2023, p. 111). The same generalization probably holds true for the far right as well. If organized terrorists cannot achieve their objectives, sporadic lone attackers are bound to be even less efficacious. Even when terrorists arise from active movements, terrorists focus on their conflict with the state and become isolated from the

movement, which often withers after moderates abandon it in reaction to the violence (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2023).

All of this said, two studies (based on German data) find right-wing extremism increases electoral support for far-right political parties (Krause and Matsunaga, 2023; Sabet et al., 2023). There is a certain logic for this effect, as the parties could frame the violence as a natural reaction to immigrant crime, or depict themselves as the only ones capable of restoring law and order (Koehler, 2016). Yet the overall significance of these findings is uncertain. For example, the effect in one study was "small to moderate in size" and limited to already right-leaning voters (Krause and Matsunaga, 2023, p. 2292). It seems unlikely that this effect would occur on a larger scale: that is, that a sufficiently high number of right-wing attacks could enable far-right parties to win elections and come into power. Moreover, another study found the opposite: that far-right violence reduces support for right-wing extremism (Pickard et al., 2023).

Since terrorists' behavior is often so contrary to the tactics rational actors would adopt to achieve political gains, Abrahms (2008) argues that terrorists appear not to fight to win, but rather to maintain internal camaraderie. Similarly, some suggest that copycat terrorists kill primarily to earn praise from anonymous Internet posters (Kupper et al., 2022). Nonetheless, terrorists often intend their actions to propel their ideologies into dominance, and some terrorists certainly choose their targets strategically (Newman and Hsu, 2012). Some studies have evaluated the success of different terrorist tactics, but little research examines terrorists' strategic logic as described in their writings.

This article builds on recent work introducing the concept of idiosyncratic strategic thinking, or bizarre ideas about the anticipated effects of terrorist attacks (Norris, 2020). Three subtypes include religious (which relies upon supernatural assistance), wishful thinking (which involves believing attacks will have effects that are extremely unlikely), or delusional (which result from psychotic delusions). This article further documents and develops the concept of idiosyncratic terrorism using the Breivik-Tarrant line of copycats.

Most research about the tendency of terrorism to fail has focused on group terrorists (Abrahms and Mroszczyk, 2022). Even so, the futility of far-right mass shootings has been occasionally noted. As one counterterrorism practitioner remarked, the Christchurch shooter

"didn't get the far right closer to any actual end; what he did was quicken the spin of a wheel with no direction" (Katz, 2022, p. 89). Yet the nature, causes and significance of terrorists' idiosyncratic strategic thinking have yet to be explored in depth. Indeed, Schmid and Forest (2018) identified terrorists' justifications for their actions as an under-researched area in terrorism studies. In particular, the deradicalization implications of idiosyncratic strategic thinking, such as the question of whether the futility of most terrorists' tactics might be effective as a deradicalization technique, have not been analyzed in detail.

Despite a growing literature on deradicalization, little research evaluates whether specific narrative messages are effective in inducing either cognitive or behavioral deradicalization. A systematic review of studies testing whether counter-narratives reduce radicalization found little evidence that counter-narratives can reduce "primary outcomes related to violent radicalization" like intention to commit ideological violence, largely due the lack of relevant studies (Carthy et al., 2020, p. 25). Most research in this area is instead focused on whether counter-narratives reduce abstract psychological constructs such as out-group hostility. Their systematic review also concludes that there is insufficient evidence for whether non-fiction or fictional narratives are more effective in changing attitudes related to violent extremism. Interestingly, one study found that having participants craft their own counter-narratives was more effective than reading general counter-narratives (Carthy & Sarma, 2023).

There is little scholarship providing empirically- or theoretically-informed guidance about how to construct counter-narratives. One exception, which describes itself as "merely an early step," focuses largely on the process of creating fictional narratives, involving extended descriptions of the thoughts and experiences of hypothetical individuals (Braddok and Horgan, 2016, p. 399). Braddock and Horgan (2016) identify four ways counter-narratives can reduce radicalization: pointing out contradictions in terrorist narratives and behavior, critiquing analogies used in terrorist narratives, challenging binary oppositions included in terrorist ideology, and advancing alternative views of terrorists' objects of hatred. This study's focus on critiquing terrorists' strategic logic can fall under the first category of pointing out contradictions, or alternatively, might be considered a fifth category: challenging terrorists' beliefs that their attacks are likely to advance their ideological objectives.

Beyond Braddock and Horgan's (2016) approach, scholarship on counter-narratives uses a variety of approaches, including identifying logical flaws in extremist propaganda (such as false dilemmas and unverifiable premises) (Maan, 2015), highlighting negative experiences leading former extremists to abandon terrorism (Scrivens et al., 2019; Speckhard et al., 2021), or using mainstream religious sources to counter extremist interpretations (Ghannouchi, 2020).

Most counter-narrative scholarship concerns the basic ideas of extremist ideas rather than on specific aspects of terrorist ideology, such as (as in this article) the belief that their attack will be effective in achieving their ideological objectives. Since beliefs about the efficacy of terrorism are probably necessary for extremists to be willing to risk their lives to commit violent attacks (indeed, the idea "that violence is more effective than non-violence" is "a composite part of all terrorist narratives" (Carthy & Sarma, 2023, p. 582)), devising specific counter-narratives targeting several aspects of this theme within a specific terrorist ideology may be effective in discouraging potential attackers.

Thus, this article takes the novel approach of constructing preliminary versions of several counter-narratives focused specifically on the futility of right-wing extremist attacks, capitalizing on particularly unrealistic statements and beliefs by attackers who are often idolized by would-be terrorists. This approach has a potential advantage over other types of counter-narratives because of its extreme specificity. The fact that multiple ideas from the extremists themselves are identified and refuted in reasonable-sounding way (without losing credibility by negating their underlying grievances) may enhance persuasiveness because participants may recognize these ideas and assume that detailed familiarity with them indicates a former supporter of violent extremism has upon reflection abandoned their beliefs about the efficacy of violence. This approach would be in line with Beutel et al. (2016), who suggest "reframing" rather than "confronting" the target ideology to better resonate with extremist audiences.

In his frequently-cited article on countering Islamic State (IS) ideology, Schmid (2015, p. 3) assumes that using "facts and rational reasoning" to counter specific claims by terrorist groups, in the absence of any story-like packaging, may be effective in preventing or reversing radicalization in many individuals. Schmid identifies twelve specific IS claims, and

provides counter-arguments or counter-narratives (what he calls "Argumentative Elements for possible incorporation into a Counter-Message") against each of these claims using various sources and arguments. By developing eight preliminary counter-narratives (in an argument rather than storytelling style), this article is analogous to Schmid's, except that it focuses on the ideology of far-right lone attackers, and narrows in on a particularly weak aspect of their ideology, the belief that their attacks advance their cause. Such an approach may also be effective on an emotional level by creating an anticipation of regret, by imagining what attackers might feel after realizing their attack did not have the desired effect (van Eerten et al., 2017).

Data and Methods

To further develop and apply the concept of idiosyncratic strategic thinking, this exploratory study uses a sample (n=8) of far-right lone-actor terrorists, including Anders Breivik and Brenton Tarrant and six others inspired by or one or both of them. These cases were selected because they represent some of the most important right-wing terrorist attacks in the recent history of Western countries, and because the availability of manifestos allows for an analysis of the perpetrators' strategic thinking.

The analytical strategy of this article proceeds as follows. After introducing some basic information about the eight cases (Table 1), I provide a quantitative portrait of the content of the perpetrators' manifestos (Table 2), which mainly shows how little space these terrorists spend explicating their strategic thinking. To categorize the content of their writing, each section of a perpetrators' writings was coded into one of several categories, as displayed in Table 2. This involved a mixed inductive/deductive coding procedure. As the primary purpose of coding the manifestos was to determine the extent of strategic thinking, deductive coding was performed, based on the definition of strategic thinking in previous literature (Norris, 2020). That is, whenever a manifesto discussed the real-world effects they thought their attack would achieve, or explained why they believed this would occur, this was coded as strategic thinking. Though there is room in the process of deductive coding for revising categories, or creating sub-categories (Mayring, 2000), this was not necessary in this case, as

the broad level of abstraction was appropriate for the specific research aim associated with Table 2, which was to evaluate the proportion of manifestos devoted to strategic thinking.

To identify the other main categories of content, inductive coding was performed. This involves reading through the texts, creating initial codes based on themes in the content, and merging them with one another or revising them as appropriate based on ongoing analysis of the themes during the coding process, and then completing a final round of coding using the final list of codes resulting from this process (Bingham, 2023; Mayring, 2000). While engaged in inductive coding it was immediately apparent that large proportions of most manifestos consisted of general ideological materials explaining the perpetrator's views, so this became one category. Another category, which was prominent in some manifestos, was discussions of weaponry. After coding several manifestos another code emerged regarding the plan of attack (the specifics of what they anticipated doing during the attack), which was present in some manifestos.

A final code eventually emerged: broad strategy about the wider far-right movement, which relates not to the effect of the perpetrator's attack, but is instead focused on things that may occur in the relatively far-off future or general statements about movement strategy and tactics. For example, Breivik devoted considerable space speculating about under what conditions a civil war would eventually develop, and Krajčík discussed at length the value of different kinds of targets for fellow extremists to attack. This could initially be mistaken for strategic thinking, because it involves thinking about tactics and cause-and-effect relationships between terrorists' actions and achieving movement objectives. However, this was developed into a separate inductive code, rather than subsumed under strategic thinking, because it does not pertain to the effects of the perpetrator's actions, which is the core conception of strategic thinking as used in this paper. This "broad strategy" is far-removed from "strategic thinking" in this paper's sense because broad strategizing concerns a future world quite different from the present (in which the perpetrator imagines that a wider conflict has already resulted from the individual's act of terrorism) rather than the effects of a particular attack.

As the non-strategic thinking categories were not of any great importance in this paper's analysis, this relatively high degree of abstraction was sufficient and more specific

categories within these broad codes were not developed. For example, some manifestos contained significant amounts of autobiographical content, but this was subsumed under the ideological materials category and not identified as a separate category, because the main function of these portions was to explain how the perpetrator adopted his ideology.

The calculation of proportions proceeded as follows. For shorter manifestos, such as those of Balliet and Earnest, I pasted the text in each category into a word-processing document to count the number of words and then computed the percentage against the total number of words in the document. For longer manifestos, such as those of Breivik and Gendron, I counted the number of pages devoted to each topic and computed the percentage out of the total number of pages in the document.

The next component in this article's analytic strategy includes qualitative case studies of each of the eight perpetrators, which contain this study's main findings. These case studies were constructed based on analysis of the perpetrators' writings, especially the portions relating to the practical impacts envisioned for their attacks. The feasibility of this strategic thinking is analyzed in light of evidence-informed views of how social change occurs, and instances of idiosyncratic strategic thinking as conceptualized in previous research are identified (Norris, 2020).

In addition, a total of eight narrative strategies for encouraging deradicalization (or preventing escalation to violence among extremists) were developed, arising from the main points of the case studies. Each narrative strategy is presented after a relevant case study, though many of the narratives could potentially be supported through more than one of the case studies. As in Schmid's (2015) counter-narratives article, these narratives are developed in reaction to core movement claims, and are based on various sources. The narratives are also situated in terms of Braddock and Horgan's (2016) analytical guidelines for constructing counter-narratives.

The remaining sections of the paper serve to summarize the paper's main findings (Table 3), demonstrate an additional finding that many copycats commit attacks the original attacker would likely oppose (Table 4), and discuss potential theoretical mechanisms explaining terrorists' idiosyncratic strategic thinking. This multifaceted methodological

approach serves to further document and analyze the concept of idiosyncratic strategic thinking while devising concrete policy-relevant applications of these findings.

Each of the manifestos in this study is an example of a "targeted violence manifesto:" writings composed by perpetrators prior to attacks that "justify an act of violence against a specific target by articulating self-identified grievances, homicidal intentions, and/or extreme ideologies for committing an attack," including by "express[ing] beliefs and ideas to violently promote political, religious, or social changes" (Kupper & Meloy, 2021, p. 6). This definition has been expanded to note that such statements are often meant to inspire copycat attacks (Kupper, 2022), and more generally to "share ideological motivations, operational strategies and tactical advice" with like-minded individuals and groups (Kupper et al., 2022, p. 9).

This data is a purposive sample (Palinkas et al., 2015) in that it was selected to identify examples of and further develop a theoretical concept. This research can be understood as exploratory, in that it combines several approaches to empirical analyze, theoretically evaluate, and explore the policy implications of a distinct issue—terrorists' unrealistic thinking about the effects of their attacks—that has not previously been subject to systematic examination (Stebbins, 2001). Case studies of offenders based on their written texts can be useful for advancing theoretical concepts and providing empirical insight into rare events (Harding et al., 2002). The use of case studies in this article parallels the approach of Spaaij's (2010) seminal article on lone-actor terrorism, which employed five case studies to illustrate key characteristics of lone wolves.

While some may be skeptical that manifestos represent terrorists' true motivations, suspecting that they disguise their real motives, these documents remain the best source of evidence for perpetrators' thinking. There is a tendency among some researchers and journalists to ascribe hidden motives to terrorists and disregard their stated ideologies, or assume whatever results they obtained must have been what they wanted all along (Abrahms, 2006), but evidence is often lacking to substantiate such conclusions (Dawson, 2019). Yet it is certainly possible that both personal agendas and collective political objectives drive terrorists (Khalil and Dawson, 2023), which is captured in the concept of idiosyncratic mixed motives (Norris, 2020).

In any event, there is a strong case to be made that we should take terrorists' writings and speech seriously as expressing their ideology and motivations (Dawson, 2021). Indeed, many studies have analyzed manifestos as reflecting attackers' ideologies (Kupper & Meloy, 2021), and there is rarely if ever concrete evidence that the manifestos are not genuine expressions of perpetrators' thinking. Ultimately, however, whether perpetrators' writings accurately reflect their true thinking is irrelevant for this article's task of developing compelling deradicalization narratives. That is, even if perpetrators have hidden motives and their manifestos are mere window-dressing, this possibility can also be used to develop a counter-narrative potentially capable of dissuading some would-be attackers (see Narrative Strategy 8).

Results

This section introduces the attackers and their manifestos, and then presents eight case studies, which use perpetrators' writings to examine the strategic logic behind their attacks. Table 1 provides an overview of each attacker. The inspiration column notes their primary influence, but some copycats had other influences as well. For example, Gendron wrote Breivik's name on one of his firearms, and praised Robert Bowers, who killed 11 at a Pittsburgh synagogue in 2018.

Table 1. Far-Right Lone-Actor Terrorists in the Sample

Perpetrator	Date	Location	Inspiration	# Killed	Target
Anders Breivik	7/22/11	Oslo & Utøya, Norway	Bloggers	77	Left-wing party
Brenton Tarrant	3/15/19	Christchurch, New Zealand	Breivik	51	Muslims
John Earnest	4/27/19	San Diego, CA	Tarrant	1	Jews
Patrick Crusius	8/3/19	El Paso, TX	Tarrant	23	Hispanics
Philip Manshaus	8/10/19	Bærum, Norway	Tarrant	1	Muslims/non-whites
Stephan Balliet	10/9/19	Halle, Germany	Tarrant	2	Jews
Payton Gendron	5/14/22	Buffalo, NY	Tarrant	10	African-Americans
Juraj Krajčík	10/12/22	Bratislava, Slovakia	Tarrant	2	LGBT community

While this article is primarily focused on qualitative analysis of the contents of perpetrators' writings, I also coded the content of their writings to present basic quantitative portrait of the contents of their writings. This is useful because it serves to further underline

the way in which strategic logic is somewhat of an afterthought for most attackers, compared to the detail-oriented way they discuss weaponry and their overall ideologies.

As shown in Table 2, the killers in the sample spent miniscule proportions of their writings discussing the strategic logic of their attacks. Yet two attackers spent over half their manifesto discussing technical aspects of their weapons. Breivik, Gendron and Balliet focused so heavily on weaponry that one wonders whether, lacking normal social relationships, they bonded with objects (and fantasies about revolution) rather than people. Indeed, Gendron described himself as "quite autistic about helmets, body armor, and ballistics," and a psychiatric expert testified that Breivik likely had Aspergers (a mild form of autism) as well as narcissistic personality disorder (AFP, 2012).

Some perpetrators spent more time speaking broadly about strategies of their movement, which is ultimately speculative because it assumes the emergence of a wider violent movement after their attack. Two attackers, Gendron and Balliet, provide considerable detail about their plan of action on the day of the attack, while devoting little attention to the question of whether their killings would make any difference to their cause.

Table 2. Composition of Lone-Actor Terrorists' Manifestos

	Pages	% about weapons	% strategic thinking*	% broad strategy**	% plan of attack	% ideological materials
Breivik	1515	10%	1%	18%	0%	71%
Tarrant	87	1%	3%	11%	1%	84%
Earnest	6	2%	9%	7%	0%	82%
Crusius	4	10%	6%	3%	0%	81%
Balliet	14	53%	5%	0%	24%	16%
Gendron	180	51%	.1%	6%	3%	40%
Krajčík	65	0%	1%	43%	0%	56%

*Manshaus was excluded because his entire writings are unavailable.

Oslo and Utøya, Norway: Slaughtering Teens to Rally the White Supra-Nation?

Nature of Attack. As is well-known, Anders Breivik killed 77 people on July 22, 2011, by detonating a car bomb in Oslo and shooting teenagers at a Labor Party summer camp on Utøya island. Based on his 1500-page manifesto and other sources, Hemmingby and Bjørgo (2018) exhaustively documented Breivik's target selection process. The considerable flaws in his strategic thinking, however, have not yet been highlighted.

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Strategic Logic. Breivik chose not to attack Muslims (his primary enemy) because the murder of a half-Ghanian teen by neo-Nazis in Oslo unleashed a massive outpouring of sympathy. Thus, he saw attacking immigrants as counterproductive. It is unclear why he thought that massacring left-wing teens would somehow not have the same effect.

More generally, Breivik hoped his attack would accomplish four aims: 1) broadcast his message, 2) spread his manifesto, 3) hold accountable those responsible for multiculturalism, and 4) spark a police crackdown on conservatives, who would radicalize in response (Hemmingby and Bjørgo, 2018). Yet mass murder is not a particularly effective way of achieving such goals.

Evaluation. Regarding Breivik's first aim, most people ignore terrorists' message and focus on denouncing the violence (Abrahms, 2012). To the extent their ideologies become known, they are condemned for being associated with terrorism. While Breivik might have been somewhat successful in spreading the ideology in his manifesto, bloggers (whose work comprises most of his manifesto) had already widely publicized similar views prior to his attack. For the second point, there are more dependable ways of spreading ideas, such as gaining an Internet following and broadcasting a consistent message over an extended time. On the third point of holding people accountable, what does killing youth at a summer camp accomplish? They were not responsible for any policies. Neither were the civil servants he killed.

Regarding the final point, it is true that sometimes attacks provoke government overreach, which radicalizes the population and thus increases terrorism (McCauley, 2006). However, such effects are relatively rare, do not necessarily result in terrorists' ultimate success, and cannot be predicted in advance. This backlash effect is probably more likely in countries with authoritarian police forces and low state capacity (Blankenship, 2016). Yet Norway has one of the world's most lenient and benevolent justice systems, with the rest of Europe not far behind, and high state capacity as well. It was woefully unrealistic to expect authorities in Norway or anywhere else in Europe to drive conservatives to extremism through harsh crackdowns.

Responding to the question of why he should sacrifice himself for "something that might not end up as you project," Breivik answered that "It is essential that as many

individuals as possible contribute even if it just results in creating a small crack in the discriminating and genocidal multiculturalist system. Every effort counts, even the smallest contribution!" Here, he acknowledged his attack might not make a significant difference, but resolved to do it because countless attacks are needed. Yet why would he think numerous attacks would be forthcoming?

Breivik noted that targets need to be "selected after careful consideration" to "yield the wanted results," yet nowhere does he clarify why he is so sure that massacring teens would trigger revolution. Breivik spent thousands of words on the impossibility of triumphing peacefully, yet he does not explain why violence would work. Indeed, there has never been a successful revolution in an advanced Western democracy. Contrary to Karl Marx's predictions, they only occurred in underdeveloped nations with weak governments (Skocpol, 1994).

Breivik claimed that "Armed struggle is the only rational approach," and asserted that victory is assured within 70 years. Yet he provided no reason for such certainty. In reality, however improbable it may be that hard-core xenophobes gain ascendency across Europe through democratic means, it is still far more likely than achieving this through violent revolution. Killing civilians is inherently counterproductive because it alienates the public (Abrahms, 2012).

Breivik estimated only half of ultra-nationalists would agree with his attack, but believed that decades later it would be understood. Yet predictions about decades from now are mere speculation. Is it worth killing people and ruining one's own life for the slight chance that, decades later, the attack will have the desired effect? Indeed, such decisions violate the fundamental principles of decision-making. One should not incur heavy costs to achieve a mere slight chance of benefits. Killing people due to the infinitesimal chance it might bring about desired social changes is equivalent to selling all one's belongings to buy a lottery ticket.

Narrative Strategies. While Breivik's case could potentially inform several narrative strategies for inducing cognitive or behavioral deradicalization, the following narrative strategy can be developed in part from his example. In abbreviated form, to be translated into

more colloquial language for interventions and elaborated upon for greater persuasiveness, it could state as follows:

> ***Narrative Strategy 1: Miniscule Probability of Success***. Even unusually large attacks such as Breivik's are extremely unlikely to have any impact on the perpetrator's main goals, such as drastically reducing immigration and the Muslim population or inspiring revolution. Such attacks are not worth it because they involve heavy costs (ruining one's own life as well as others) and no realistic chance of success. This is akin to selling all one's belongings to buy a single lottery ticket. In fact, Breivik's attack did nothing to increase public support for far-right beliefs, and achieved little aside from inspiring a few copycat shootings several years later, which also had no political impact.

Aside from the factual aspects of this narrative, it also contains the lottery ticket analogy, which may impact some would-be attackers. Some cognitive scientists argue that analogies are behind most human thinking and all major decision-making (Hofstadter and Sander, 2013), and perhaps one key strategy for shifting would-be attackers' thinking is to replace one pro-violence analogy with an alternative anti-violence analogy. This follows Braddock and Horgan's (2016, p. 389) advice to "[d]isrupt analogies that equate aspects" of terrorist narratives "to real-world events," by countering terrorists' use of analogies with plausible alternative analogies.

Christchurch, New Zealand: Massacring Muslims to Trigger a White-Nationalist Revolution?

Nature of Attack. On March 15, 2019, Brenton Tarrant attacked two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing 51 people while livestreaming the attack. His 74-page manifesto, *The Great Replacement*, emphasizes the importance of increasing white birthrates, claims that mass immigration will destroy "our" nations, and advocates deporting "invaders" (immigrants). His ultimate goal is transforming European and former-European-colony states into all-white ethno-states, with the rest of the world reorganized into monoracial polities as well.

Tarrant describes himself as a fascist inspired by Oswald Mosely, as well as by Breivik and various other lone-actor terrorists. Interestingly, while Breivik wrote that he did not "oppose all aspects of multiculturalism" and did not wish to expel fully-assimilated immigrants (Breivik, 2011, p. 1384), Tarrant advocates complete ethnic purity for all "European" countries, demanding that even Roma (who arrived in Europe over 600 years ago) be deported.

Strategic Logic. In response to the question, "Why did you carry out the attack?" Tarrant provides various answers in seventeen short paragraphs. Five paragraphs relate to revenge (for various causes, from the murder of a Swedish girl by a Uzbeki Islamic State-sympathizer to the Europeans enslaved by Muslims centuries ago.) Revenge is a subjective concept and it is thus impossible to measure whether an attack "successfully" achieved revenge. Yet it is worth noting how absurd it seems to murder innocent Muslims in New Zealand to avenge an attack in Scandinavia by an Uzbeki or the enslavement of Europeans by Muslim rulers hundreds of years ago. For this reason, such revenge motives themselves can be regarded as idiosyncratic motives (though not an example of idiosyncratic strategic thinking per se).

The practical impacts he envisioned for his attack included 1) to show immigrants they will never replace whites, 2) to reduce immigration by "intimidating and physically removing the invaders," 3) to cause police to "overextend their own hand and experience the eventual and inevitable backlash as a result," 4) to incite violence between Europeans and immigrants, 5) to "show the effect of direct action" to "those that wish to free their ancestors' lands from the invaders grasp," 6) "To create an atmosphere of fear and change in which drastic, powerful and revolutionary action can occur," 7) "To add momentum to the pendulum swings of history, further destabilizing and polarizing Western society" to allow individualism to be replaced by fascism, 8) to stimulate the ejection of Turkey from NATO, making it "a united European army," 9) to sow conflict between pro- and anti-gun control camps in the US, causing a civil war that will "balkanize the US along political, cultural and, most importantly, racial lines."

Evaluation. None of these goals are particularly realistic. For the first goal, few immigrants have probably even considered the idea of replacing majority populations, and

few outside of New Zealand are likely to be well-acquainted with the attack. The only effect the attack is likely to have on Western Muslims is to increase security at mosques.

Regarding the second goal, Tarrant's attack did not impact immigration levels. New Zealand immigration trends, viewed using the government's Migration Data Explorer, showed that immigration through work visas increased steadily from 2013 to 2020 with no downtick in 2019. While his victims were "physically removed," and this is a humanitarian tragedy, this is far from enough to affect demographic trends. Less than one in a thousand New Zealand Muslims were killed in his attack.

The third goal, as with Breivik, presumes that government overreaching always happens and that this always leads to a backlash favoring terrorists. The backlash phenomenon is not a universal law, but rather something that sometimes occurs. For the fourth goal, aside from a few copycat attacks, overall levels of violence between immigrants and whites are likely to remain extremely low. It is conceivable that copycat attacks might invite revenge attacks from immigrants and foster a cycle of violence. Yet it was never particularly likely that an attack in New Zealand would stimulate widespread intergroup violence throughout the West, and indeed, this has not occurred.

The fifth goal is predicated on his attack achieving his goals, which did not occur. The sixth reflects the ideology of accelerationism: the idea that isolated violent actions can sow chaos and make way for a radical transformation of society. Yet this is highly unrealistic. Any "chaos" caused by mass shootings will be quickly remedied. Modern society is not some Jenga-like construct that can be easily toppled through individual actions. The idea that fomenting chaos though killings will trigger societal breakdown, allowing extremists to emerge victorious from the wreckage, is a quasi-religious apocalyptic prophecy, not a forecast based on plausible cause-effect relationships. Indeed, right-wing accelerationism was developed by James Mason, a neo-Nazi and convicted sex offender who practically deified the serial killer Charles Manson (Norris, 2020).

Oddly, the seventh goal inexplicably assumes history has a pendulum-like quality, alternating between sharply opposed ideas rather than progressing more linearly. Moreover, even if Trump's election somehow induced a vast international swing away from

multiculturalism, it is all but impossible that Christchurch would magnify such trends. If anything, it would tend to delegitimize anti-immigration ideas.

Tarrant's eighth goal is absurd. Turkey joined NATO in 1952 and continues to be valued as member. It would take a lot more than a shooting in New Zealand to pry Turkey away from its European military allies.

The ninth goal is extremely unrealistic. It is certainly possible that Christchurch would heat up the US gun control debate, but there has never been sustained armed combat been pro- and anti-gun forces in the US, and there was no good reason to think Christchurch would bring it about. It is also unclear why Tarrant expected gun-related strife to cause racial balkanization. For example, since many whites favor gun control, it is hard to understand why they would end up in the same post-conflict nation as pro-gun whites.

Narrative Strategies. Tarrant's example, and the analysis above, can help inform several narrative strategies, including one focused on idiosyncratic strategic thinking.

> ***Narrative Strategy 2: Perpetrators' Idiosyncratic Thinking Casts Doubt on Hero Status***. Regardless of whether one believes their underlying grievances are valid, attackers' bizarre expectations for the effects of attacks, which in reality never have had the impact they hoped, shows that mass shooters are not leaders to be looked up to by fellow extremists. Even from an extremist perspective, they should be detested due to the consistent and predictable strategic failure of mass shootings as a tactic. Other strategies such as political organizing and persuasive communication are more feasible methods of achieving desired social changes.

This narrative strategy is aimed toward undermining the identification would-be attackers feel with previous lone-actor terrorists. This is important because pro-terrorist narratives, particularly among the far right, are oriented primarily toward idolizing these mass shooters, fostering a psychological process in which would-be attackers identify with and fantasize about emulating previous attackers (Braddock & Horgan, 2016). The evidentiary basis for the last sentence in this narrative strategy about the true causes of social and political

change is reviewed in somewhat more detail in the section below on why mass shootings cannot spark revolutions.

San Diego, California: Shooting Jews to Inspire a 4Chan-Based Revolution?

Nature of Attack. On April 27, 2019, John Earnest attacked a synagogue in Poway, a San Diego suburb, fatally shooting a 60-year-old Jewish woman and injuring three others. He previously set fire to a mosque, leaving Christchurch-related graffiti. His 6-page manifesto explains how Tarrant's writings spurred him into action, and praises synagogue shooter Robert Bowers. Earnest's manifesto includes both the familiar anti-Semitism blaming Jews for various imagined misdeeds, and a Christian anti-Semitism describing each Jew as responsible for killing Jesus and depicting Jews as "inspired by demons and Satan."

Strategic Thinking. Regarding Earnest's strategic thinking, he asks himself, "Surely killing a fraction of Jews will not solve any problems. Are there not better ways to save the European race?" His answer describes three roles in the revolution: 1) spreading ideas, 2) having white children, and 3) "defending the European race" (i.e., killing Jews). He says, "There has been little done when it comes to defending the European race," curiously omitting the Holocaust. If killing millions did not stop supposed Jewish conspiracies, what could killing a few more accomplish?

The answer is that he imagined his attack inspiring numerous others, eventually enabling a racist regime to take power and free him from prison. Addressing himself to "anons" (members of /pol on 4chan), he says that "Every anon reading this must attack a target while doing his best to avoid getting caught… This momentum we currently have may very well be the last chance that the European man has to spark a revolution."

Evaluation. Interestingly, Earnest bases his strategic logic on a "momentum we currently have." Yet the only attacks he was excited about were Tarrant's and Bowers'. Two is an awfully small number of attacks, surely too small to generate an unstoppable momentum hurtling the world toward total revolution. Nonetheless, Earnest was "not worried," because of his "complete trust and certainty that all of you" will "attack again, and again, and again…because you're true anons. You're White men…. the greatest race that our God has created." Yet how does he even know how many "anons" agree with him? The anonymous

format makes it impossible to tell, and the number may be rather small. Moreover, why would he be so confident that they would all attack? They had not so far, aside from Tarrant.

Indeed, anti-Semitic murders are extremely rare in the US; besides the Pittsburgh shooting, there have only been three over the last decade (in Monsey, Jersey City, and Kansas City). Like Tarrant, Earnest also thought such attacks could prompt gun confiscations, causing civil war. In reality, in the four years since Earnest's attack, four attackers have mentioned him as an influence, but none of them have killed Jews.

As with the other killers, his strategic logic was profoundly flawed. Even if he inspired hundreds of attacks, there is no way revolution would result. Fomenting revolution in the US is hopelessly impractical given the strength and stability of the US security state, with its 800,000 police officers and 10,000 FBI agents, who are more than capable of squashing attempted rebellions.

Narrative Strategies. As the first of the copycats to target Jews or to be inspired primarily by anti-Semitism, Earnest illustrates well the principle, documented in more detail in a section below (and in Narrative Strategy 5), that one-off acts like mass shootings often have unintended consequences such as inspiring attacks the original attacker would oppose.

In addition, because Earnest, like Breivik and some others, seems to promise victory by expressing his absolute confidence that countless "anons" will attack, Earnest's case suggests one narrative strategy focused on the long history of terrorists falsely predicting an inevitable victory. As one researcher observed, "revolutionary ideologies are inherently optimistic… portray[ing] victory as inevitable despite what may appear to be overwhelming odds" (Walt, 1996, p. 26). This strategy thus derives from previous research on terrorism as well as Earnest's false promises. In terms of Braddock and Horgan's (2016) guide to developing counter-narratives, this narrative strategy fulfills the function of contradicting core themes in pro-terrorist narratives—in this case, the promise of eventual victory.

Narrative Strategy 3: Terrorists' Claims of Inevitable Victory Are Ubiquitous yet Nearly Always False.

Rhetoric from mass shooters promising inevitable victory for their cause should be disregarded even by those who share their ideology. Perpetrators

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make these statements because this is typically what terrorists do, attempting to convince adherents to participate in further terrorist violence even though the odds are overwhelmingly stacked against them. Indeed, countless terrorist leaders have made claims about inevitable victory, and yet no more than a small handful have been successful in their ultimate objectives.

Providing examples of previous far-right terrorists (including but not limited to Earnest) who promised victories that never materialized could enhance the persuasiveness of this narrative.

El Paso, Texas: Gunning Down Walmart Shoppers to Reverse a Hispanic Invasion?

Nature of Attack. On August 3, 2019, Patrick Crusius opened fire at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, killing 23 people. His 5-page manifesto mainly regurgitates Tarrant's, depicting his massacre as defending the country from "cultural and ethnic replacement." Crusius's primary concern was Hispanic immigration, worrying that, as Tarrant predicted, a majority-minority Texas would cement a national Democratic majority. Crusius said he never thought of Hispanics as a target before reading Tarrant's manifesto. Crusius spent considerable space discussing automation-related job loss, though it remains unclear what his attack could accomplish in that regard. He even presents murder as a far-fetched sustainability strategy: "if we can get rid of enough people… our way of life can become more sustainable."

Strategic Thinking. Crusius wrote that "the idea of deporting or murdering all non-white Americans is horrific," preferring "a confederacy of territories with at least 1 territory for each race" instead. He ends his screed with a vague indication he believes his attack will bring about his preferred policy goals: "This is just the beginning of the fight for America and Europe. I am honored to head the fight to reclaim my country from destruction."

Crusius seemed to think mass shootings were all-important. As he said, "I figured that an under-prepared attack and a meh manifesto is better than no attack and no manifesto." But he never clarifies why mass shootings are the key to social change. He also cautions attackers to favor soft targets like civilians rather than risking unsuccessful attacks on hard targets.

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Perhaps he thinks the greater the body count, the more likely the attack will ignite revolutionary change, but this is left to the reader to decipher.

He envisioned his shooting as prompting Hispanic migrants to leave the US, thus "remov[ing] the threat of the Hispanic voting bloc." Crusius also seemed to believe his attack will cause "elites that run corporations" to "realize that it's not in their interest to continue to piss off Americans" by supporting immigration.

Evaluation. Several of Crusius's statements were highly unrealistic and thus serve as further examples of idiosyncratic strategic thinking. It is extremely difficult to imagine a causal pathway from an anti-Hispanic shooting to America's division into ethno-states. Moreover, it is impossible for mass shootings to reverse major demographic trends. Texas is already about 40% Hispanic, and the Hispanic population share has increased steadily for decades. Similarly, his idea that one shooting will transform the political preferences of the entire economic elite is clearly not within the realm of possibility.

Narrative Strategies. Crusius's case can be used to formulate a narrative strategy focused on countering the extreme-right's obsession with achieving high "body counts" in mass shootings. This follows the observations of Byman (2023, p. 255), who notes that lone actors' targets are "based on personal preferences and local convenience as well as ideology, and there is rarely any follow-up." Despite the "high body counts" of some attacks, "they were focused on different enemies and were not enmeshed in a coordinated propaganda effort that would give the attack more influence" (Byman, 2023, p. 255). This counter-narrative fulfills the function of contradicting a key aspect of pro-terrorist narratives (Braddock & Horgan, 2016): the glorification of previous attackers who killed numerous victims.

> ***Narrative Strategy 4: High "Body-Counts" Give Only the Illusion of Success***. Terrorists seem to believe that large numbers of civilian casualties constitute a successful attack, but the history of terrorism shows that this is not the case. In fact, exhaustive research demonstrates that terrorists who target civilians are virtually never successful in achieving their political objectives (Abrahms, 2018). The few terrorist groups who achieved success focused on attacking military targets. A large "body-

count" thus only gives the mirage of success and actually makes real success less likely.

This strategy could potentially impact would-be terrorists' thinking because it shows that the obsession with high-casualty attacks is counter-productive. Perhaps pointing out that some people have been misled into thinking that reality works like a video game could help in deradicalization some adherents. This case is a good example for this strategy because despite the relatively large number of victims in Crusius's case, his attack has not had any notable impact, either on immigration trends or on subsequent terrorism. Some copycats have mentioned him as one of several influences, but none have carried out similar anti-Hispanic attacks or cited him as their primary inspiration.

Baerum, Norway: Elected as a Disciple of Saint Tarrant to Spark a Race War?

Nature of Attack. On August 10, 2019, Philip Manshaus, a 21-year old Norwegian, opened fire inside a Baerum mosque, but was quickly subdued by worshippers before harming anyone. Police found his Chinese-born adopted step-sister dead; he had murdered her before attacking the mosque. Manshaus's writings are scarce, and some have not been released to the public, but he is nonetheless an interesting example of a disturbed individual who idolized far-right murderers in quasi-religious terms.

Strategic Thinking. Manshaus claimed to be "elected by saint Tarrant," described himself as Tarrant's "third disciple" after Crusius and Earnest, and said, "Valhalla awaits." He says anyone reading his message has been "elected by me."

The main indication he thought his attack would have any practical impact is his statement that he was going to "bump the race war thread irl" (in real life). Given how the term "race war" is used among racists, he presumably believed that his attack would ignite an all-out war between whites and non-whites in which many non-whites would be killed and racists would emerge victorious.

Evaluation. Assuming he believes that many of those who read his message will consider themselves "elected" and commit similar attacks, this would be an example of idiosyncratic strategic thinking, since he had no reason to think such a ploy would work. In

addition, the chain of events he seems to envision, in which a single mosque attack would trigger a massive race war, is highly implausible and has no historical precedent.

Narrative Strategies. Manshaus's killing of his Chinese-born adopted sister is puzzling from the point of view of Breivik/Tarrant ideology. Both were concerned primarily about Muslims and did not advocate slaughtering all non-whites. Breivik specifically said that he did not advocate expelling fully-assimilated minorities, and Tarrant made no mention of Asians, except to praise the government of China. This case thus illustrates one potential narrative strategy focused on the likelihood of inadvertently inspiring copycats with contrary views, which is also exemplified by several other cases, as described below.

This narrative strategy also relates to Abrahms' findings about the rare cases in which violent rebels successfully achieved their political aims. Abrahms (2018) demonstrates the importance of rebel leaders restraining the violence of subordinates and dissociating their group from atrocities that occur against their orders, such as attacks on civilians. Abrahms' work has not been systematically applied to lone-actor terrorism but it appears highly relevant. Indeed, the leadership problem is even more vexing because "leaders" like Breivik or Tarrant who commit large solo attacks are unable to subsequently influence their followers in any predictable way. Unlike leaders of organizations, they cannot enforce ideological or strategic goals on followers, leading to unpredictable results that often fail to advance the original perpetrators' agenda. In terms of the functions of counter-narratives, this narrative strategy serves to contradict a critical component of pro-terrorist narratives: that mass shootings can enable the success of a movement (Braddock & Horgan, 2016).

> ***Narrative Strategy 5: High Probability of Unintended Consequences Such as Inspiring Copycats with Incompatible Views.*** Even "successful" attacks are likely to inspire copycat attacks that are contrary to the original attacker's philosophy. For example, 4 of the 7 (57%) copycats inspired directly or indirectly by Breivik were motivated primarily by anti-Semitism even though Breivik explicitly and vehemently opposed anti-Semitism in his writings. The effects of non-violent organizing are far easier to control because they are based on repeated social interactions, persuasion, and strategic group decision-making over time rather than on dramatic, one-off

individual actions. Individual acts such as mass shootings cannot reliably influence future events because the act itself is emulated more than its underlying rationale.

The advantage of this narrative is that it can be easily demonstrated from the history of far-right lone wolves, using several examples (as shown in the sub-section on Unintended Consequences below). The fact that social and political change results from countless repeated communications and strategic decisions over time rather than from dramatic single events is also very well-supported empirically and may be persuasive for that reason.

Buffalo, New York: Killing Elderly Shoppers to Save the White Race?

Nature of Attack. On May 14, 2022, 18-year old Payton Gendron killed 10 African-Americans at a Buffalo supermarket. Much of his 180-page manifesto was copied directly from Tarrant's or from various hate sites (Peterka-Benton and Benton, 2023). Gendron's manifesto focuses overwhelmingly on the supposed evils of Jews and Blacks.

Strategic Thinking. Interestingly, Gendron recognized that attacking "without any real thought or planning will only damage your chances of being successful," yet his stated goals were rather simplistic: "Kill as many blacks as possible -Avoid dying -Spread ideals." One of the only passages in which he explains his strategic logic reads as follows: "Most of all it was to spread awareness to my fellow Whites about the real problems the West is facing, and to encourage further attacks that will eventually start the war that will save the Western world" and "save the White race." Gendron also cut-and-pasted Tarrant's views about accelerationism into his manifesto, so he was influenced by this near-magical view of the power of violence. He also added his own sentence: "Violence is the only way to make real change in the world."

Evaluation. Like others, he meant to kick-start a race war. But it had already been three years since Christchurch, and there had only been four copycats (Crusius, Earnest, Balliet, and Manshaus). He also mentioned five other attackers aside from Tarrant and Breivik. These include perpetrators who attacked immigrants in Europe, and also Robert Bowers and Dylann Roof. This is a total of 10 attackers over 11 years (2011-2022), which hardly seems enough to forcibly sort humanity into pure ethno-states. There was no reason to

think a supermarket shooting would stimulate an avalanche of attacks. Furthermore, Gendron's view that only violence can change the world is mistaken, since no amount of violence could propel an extremely unpopular ideology into widespread acceptance; in fact, it is almost guaranteed to further stigmatize such views.[2]

His strategic logic also includes the notion that non-whites have higher fertility and are invaders who need to be killed to avoid white genocide. Yet as he could have easily documented, Black fertility rates only slightly exceed those of whites. Moreover, most of his anti-Black racism concerned fertility and crime rates, and yet his victims were primarily elderly people past the age of childbearing and unlikely to be committing crimes. Gendron believed his attack would discourage non-white immigration to the US. Yet potential immigrants would be unlikely to know about this shooting, much less make major life decisions based on it.

Gendron spent thousands of words on the minute details of firearms and helmets, yet devoted almost no thought to whether killing people was worth the slight effects in terms of awareness-raising or inspiring copycats. He asked himself whether the attack would do more harm than good, but his answer only acknowledged potential harms to racist movements, not the harms involved in murder. In truth, there was a near-certainty that his attack would ruin others' lives and his own, and a more-or-less zero chance his attack would further his ideals.[3]

Narrative Strategies. Since the practical impact of Gendron's attack was further denunciation of racism and "replacement" rhetoric among the far right, his case illustrates well one potential narrative strategy for reducing deradicalization or preventing escalation to violence, focused on the high likelihood of undermining one's cause. While this narrative strategy is related to strategy number four, it has a distinct emphasis on the overall cause

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[2] Though "screw your optics," Robert Bower's pithy dismissal of worries about violence harming his cause, was absent from the manifestos studied here, it is possible, as Katz (2022, p. 47) believes, that this phrase triggered a "paradigm shift" influencing other far-right extremists to believe mass shootings were key to advancing their views and would not backfire.

[3] Intriguingly, Gendron's diary on a Discord server displayed his tortured musings about whether he had free will, lamented that he had forced himself into this and had no choice but to continue (other than suicide, he noted), and wondered whether his insomnia was "a sign" that he should cancel the attack. Of course, he could have changed his mind; the fact that he thought otherwise may be a peculiar example of the sunk cost fallacy (the reluctance to cease investing in an activity because so much time or money has already been invested). In any case, such doubts suggest that even those in the advanced planning stages of attacks could potentially be dissuaded from going through with attacks through exposure to effective counter-narratives. Interestingly, his manifesto also mentions considering suicide after learning of the coming "white genocide."

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rather than on "body counts." This narrative contradicts pro-terrorist messages about the efficacy of terrorism (Braddock & Horgan, 2016), pointing out that undermining the cause is a more likely result.

> *Narrative Strategy 6: High Probability of Undermining Cause*. The most likely result of ideological mass shootings is to further stigmatize the ideology motivating mass murder, making it even less popular among the public and less likely to succeed in its ultimate aims. Such effects are far more likely than any anticipated positive impact on the cause such as destabilizing society, triggering numerous other attacks, or inspiring a revolution, which are speculative and based on wishful thinking and probability neglect (overestimating the likelihood of extremely unlikely events) (Sunstein, 2003). Terrorists who attack civilian targets virtually never achieve their political objectives because the public and government react harshly to such murders.

Several studies by Abrahms and collaborators, among other researchers cited earlier, support these conclusions, and might be summarized in plain English as part of a lengthier version of this narrative. This is perhaps the most general of the narratives, and one of the most important, because it shows that these attacks hurt rather than help their cause.

Halle, Germany: Killing one Jew to Decapitate the "ZOG"?

Nature of Attack. Stephan Balliet attempted to attack a synagogue in Halle, Germany, on October 9, 2019, on the holiday of Yom Kippur, firing multiple rounds from a homemade firearm. His entry was repelled by the synagogue's security system, and he subsequently killed two nearby non-Jewish individuals. Like Tarrant, he livestreamed his attack, and like Earnest, he blamed Jews for feminism, low white birth-rates, and immigration.

Strategic Thinking. Balliet released three relatively brief documents on an anime site, which give insight into his reasons for the attack. He said his goal was to "Kill as many anti-Whites as possible, Jews preferred," as well as to demonstrate the viability of improvised weapons. His manifesto provides little information about what he thought his attack would achieve. He considered targeting Muslims, but deemed this pointless since even if he killed

100, this would make no difference, because more immigrants were arriving daily. This is a rare example of reality-based strategic reasoning, which if followed to its conclusion could prevent many attacks. Yet unfortunately, he did not stop there, and continued: "The only way to win is to cut of [sic] the head of ZOG, which are the kikes. If I fail and die but kill a single jew, it was worth it. After all, if every White Man kills just one, we win."

Evaluation. Balliet failed in his goals to kill non-whites and successfully use homemade weapons; he killed only whites and his firearms jammed. He switched to English during his livestream to apologize for his failures; he was later mocked mercilessly by anonymous posters.

Aside from this failure, Balliet's strategic thinking is highly idiosyncratic. Even if Balliet is a Holocaust denier, he presumably understands that many Jews were killed during World War II. Yet in his view, Jewish conspiracies are as all-powerful as ever, showing that these murders were pointless. If Hitler's eighteen million troops could not solve "the Jewish problem," then why would Balliet think he can end all Jewish conspiracies by killing a single Jew and inspiring some copycats? Moreover, the notion of millions of white men dying while killing a single Jew each, and thus exterminating Jews, is preposterous. No killer has ever inspired so many copycats.

Another idiosyncratic feature of his strategic thinking was his promise of a "cat-girl" (or other "waifu," female anime characters male fans are infatuated with) to anyone who kills at least one Jew. Why he thought this would inspire further attacks is a mystery.

Narrative Strategies. Because the Balliet's attack was a self-described "failure," called himself as a "loser," and was mocked by fellow extremists, his case serves to illustrate another narrative strategy focused on the high likelihood of failure to achieve even the modest aim of self-glorification.

Narrative Strategy 7: High Probability of Failure To Achieve Fame and Admiration. Although murdering large numbers of victims may gain the perpetrator fame and glory, particularly among fellow extremists, many attackers are not successful and kill none or a very small number. Failures are mocked rather than

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praised by fellow extremists. Thus, every attacker has a very high chance of failing to achieve either substantive political objectives or personal goals.

Other examples of attacks that can be described as failures because of a low "body count," perhaps including the Bratislava, Baerum, and San Diego attacks, might be used to support this narrative. Anticipating an intense feeling of regret, as mentioned earlier (van Eerten et al., 2017), has been noted as one method for inducing deradicalization. This narrative strategy may be particularly well-suited to trigger such feelings, as in a sample narrative created by Braddock and Horgan (2016, p. 398).

Bratislava, Slovakia: A Murder-Suicide to Inspire Thousands of Other Attacks?

Nature of Attack. On October 12, 2022, Juraj Krajčík fatally shot two people outside a Bratislava gay bar, and later committed suicide. Like Gendron, who gave him the final "nudge," as he put it, he was motivated most of all by anti-Semitism, yet instead of attacking Jews settled on another target. He was radicalized by 8chan and the accelerationist Telegram channel Terrorgram, which also features apocalyptic neo-Nazi Satanism and other odd forms of extremism (Koch, 2022). Interestingly, a linguistic analysis of his 65-page manifesto concluded that someone else was involved in its authorship (Kupper et al., 2023a).

Strategic Thinking. His manifesto, which refers to Gendron, Tarrant, Crusius and Earnest as "saints," extolled the almost magical power of violence. He included materials about how the pen is not mightier than the sword, extended descriptions of how an assassination supposedly made a crucial difference in Japanese history, and a quote from a white supremacist novel extolling terrorism's effectiveness. While he believed high-value targets would be most impactful, he also wrote, "people underestimate what seemingly 'random' violence can achieve," noting the fear generated by Gendron's attack. He quoted a Ukrainian neo-Nazi for the patently false proposition that "The less time costs for the action, the longer it takes effect."

Though he recognized a gay bar is a "low value" target and attacking it will "have a small impact," that is the type of attack he chose to commit. For unclear reasons, he thought his attack would stimulate many more: "After me, many more will come," starting with

individuals, "[t]hen in the dozens," "[t]hen by the hundreds," and "[t]hen thousands." At the same time, Krajčík says it "doesn't matter" if the "current racial struggle takes" 80, 800 or even 8,000 years, because "As long as we fight, there is always an opportunity for victory."

Evaluation. His strategic thinking contains three highly idiosyncratic elements. First, his belief that quick, unplanned violent attacks have long-lasting effects on society (while long-term strategic campaigns have miniscule effects) is the opposite of the truth. Second, he expected his attack to trigger a cascade of copycats, resulting in thousands of attacks. Yet the low frequency of Tarrant copycats, a small handful per year (and none in 2020 or 2021), is hardly a harbinger of exponential growth, and he had no reason to think his attack would inspire more than prior attackers. Third, he advocates committing violent attacks now even if the revolution takes 8,000 years to succeed, because fighting means there is an opportunity of victory. This is a rather weak rationale for murder-suicide, as it presents a mere chance of victory as sufficient.

Narrative Strategies. As stated earlier, it makes sense to take perpetrators' writings seriously as indications of their motives and expectations for the effects of their attacks, since for one thing this is useful for formulating counter-narratives. Yet it may also be useful to entertain the possibility that attackers had other, less idealistic underlying motives, since this can help cast them in a less appealing light to potential copycats. Indeed, Krajčík's case can be used to develop a narrative strategy focused on undermining perpetrators' claims to be acting selflessly on behalf of a cause, by noting that they may have other true motives such as fame or self-destruction.

> ***Narrative Strategy 8: Terrorists' Objectives Are So Unrealistic that Less-Noble Personal Motives Should be Suspected.*** Since it is so unlikely the mass-shooting tactic will lead to terrorists' stated objectives of political transformation, it is likely that some other motives, such as the desire for self-glorification, narcissistic or paranoid personality traits, or suicide, are driving their decision-making process. Even fellow extremists should thus view lone attackers primarily as vain attention-seekers or as self-destructive, not as heroes sacrificing themselves to stimulate social change.

Even for potential attackers seeking fame for themselves, this narrative strategy might help dissuade them, because they may realize that many will view them not as self-sacrificing heroes but as disturbed, self-destructive or attention-seeking. They may also reconsider their identification with prior attackers after viewing them in this light. This narrative strategy thus contradicts the pro-terrorist theme of heroic, idealistic attackers, and undermines the psychological process of identification (Braddock & Horgan, 2016). While lone-actor terrorists often have a mixture of personal and political motives (Spaaij, 2010), the point of this narrative strategy is to emphasize the relatively ignoble personal motives, perhaps by using examples such as Krajčík, to shift radicalized individuals' positive evaluations of previous attackers.

It is useful to briefly summarize the relationship of these eight narrative strategies with some of the core themes of far-right lone-actor terrorism, since counter-narratives should be formulated to contradict the main beliefs of terrorist groups (Braddock & Horgan, 2016). Far-right lone-actor terrorist narratives present mass shootings by individuals as effective in achieving political change (countered by Narrative Strategies 1 and 6), understand high-casualty attacks on civilians as most effective (countered by Narrative Strategy 4), depict perpetrators as heroic individuals who rationally planned their attacks to have certain outcomes (countered by Narrative Strategy 2), portray victory for their cause as inevitable if individuals continue attacks (countered by Narrative Strategy 3), believe that lone-actor attacks will inspire legions of likeminded copycats (countered by Narrative Strategy 5) and lead to fame and even a saint-like status among fellow adherents (countered by Narrative Strategy 7), and that these attacks are motivated by altruistic, idealistic goals of triggering social change (countered by Narrative Strategy 8).

Why Mass Shootings Cannot Spark Revolutions

As a way of summarizing the findings of the case studies, Table 3 provides some of the main examples of the idiosyncratic strategic thinking displayed by the perpetrators. In addition, this sub-section briefly expands on the flaws underlying the attackers' strategic thinking, and in particular their shared but mistaken notion that mass shootings by individuals are a feasible way of sparking revolution, civil war, or social transformation.

The belief that mass shootings could spark a race war is common among far-right terrorists, similar to anarchists' belief 100 years ago that assassinating heads of state would foment revolution (Jensen, 2014). Terrorists tend to overestimate the odds of victory through misleading analogies, supposing that since guerilla campaigns succeeded then their very different terrorist campaigns would also succeed (Abrahms and Lula, 2012). Similarly, far-right accelerationists appear to believe that because violence played important roles in history, such as in major revolutions, their violence will necessarily also have major impacts.

Table 3. Idiosyncratic Aspects of Far-Right Terrorists' Strategic Thinking

Perpetrator	Idiosyncratic Aspects of Strategic Thinking
Breivik	• Bizarre belief that killing white children, but not Muslims, would cause less backlash • Belief that murder was a realistic way of advancing his beliefs, when it is inherently self-defeating as a persuasion strategy • Expected to prompt a government crackdown that would radicalize conservatives; this was never a likely outcome
Tarrant	• Even numerous mass shootings could never achieve his goal ("pure" white nations) • Sowing change through chaos (accelerationism) not a possible way to transform society
Earnest	• Believed that numerous 4chan users would be inspired to commit attacks, but no reason to think this would occur
Crusius	• Texas is already 40% Hispanic and the Hispanic population has been growing for decades; mass shootings cannot realistically impact demographic trends
Manshaus	• Promoted quasi-religion based on Tarrant copycats and thought that readers would consider themselves "elected" to commit similar attacks
Balliet	• Thought dying to kill one Jew would be worth it because if "every White Man kills just one, we win," yet no reason to think millions would do so • Believed that spreading "combat footage" would improve racists' morale but Tarrant did this and its only effect was a few copycats • Posted bizarre statement promising anime wife ("waifu") to anyone who kills Jews
Gendron	• Impossible for a mass shooting (or even many of them) to bring about his goals • Implausible that killing African-Americans would discourage immigration • Attack predicated on erroneous belief that Black birthrates are much higher than whites'
Krajčík	• Believed "random" violence could have major impacts • Chose target he admitted had little impact on cause • Envisioned thousands of attackers following his lead but had no reason to believe this

Yet it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to find examples of major social or political changes resulting from a handful of isolated homicides. While the French and Russian Revolutions and the fall of Apartheid certainly involved violence (Seidman, 2001), these involved emerging worldviews held by large swathes of citizens, not fringe ideologies discredited by history, and were accomplished through years of strategic collective action, much of it nonviolent. The mere fact of having accomplished violence, such as assassinating a

head of state, may on the surface appear to constitute a substantive accomplishment. In reality, though, assassinated leaders are typically replaced with similar ones and the social order remains intact.

However, since single acts of violence occasionally spark larger conflicts, this might cause some to believe that this is a realistic way of triggering widespread violence or social change. Most commonly, this involves a social movement's extended response to a single outrageous act of government aggression (Sageman, 2016), such as the Bloody Sunday massacre by British soldiers in Northern Ireland or the US police killing of George Floyd. Yet the fact remains that isolated violent attacks by non-state actors are rarely if ever successful in achieving their political goals. Admittedly, by triggering World War I, Franz Ferdinand's assassination did indirectly lead to the killer's goal of a pan-Slavic country independent of Austria. However, this was a unique historical outlier with no clear parallel, the war would probably have begun even if the assassination had not taken place, and a million Serbs (a quarter of the population) died in the process, casting a shadow over this ostensible success.

While some evidence suggests primarily peaceful movements with limited violence are sometimes successful, other research concludes that mass nonviolence rarely if ever succeeds due to the presence of a violent flank, since violence has such unpredictable and often negative consequences for movements (Chenoweth and Schock, 2015). Successful movements, aside from remaining nonviolent, achieve gains through well-funded mobilization, grassroots organizing, strategic litigation, lobbying decision-makers at all levels, framing issues to appeal to the public, taking advantage of political opportunities, and forming coalitions with likeminded groups (Crutchfield, 2018; Nardini et al., 2021; Skocpol, 2004; Htun & Weldon, 2012).

A handful of isolated attacks by lone attackers—such as far-right mass shooters and their few copycats—is simply not capable of inspiring major social changes like revolutions or dramatic shifts in immigration policy. Interestingly, revolutionary Leon Trotsky (1909, 1911) made similar arguments against "individual terrorism" during the era of Russian Revolution: not only did it make no difference, but the oversized attention it received made people think that individual violence, rather than concerted organized efforts by social groups, were what drove history.

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The only realistic way to achieve far-right political objectives, such as drastically curtailing immigration, is for far-right politicians to gain ascendency through effective organizing and persuasive mass messaging. Such politicians would be extremely unlikely to gain power as the direct or indirect result of racist mass shootings, which typically reinforce public opposition to racism. Similarly, no plausible causal mechanism connects mass shootings and revolution. In any event, scholars of revolution agree that revolutions are unlikely to occur in any Western country in the coming decades (Goldstone et al., 2022).

Discussion

The previous section outlined the highly unrealistic and idiosyncratic strategic thinking of far-right lone-actor terrorists, proposed several narrative deradicalization strategies based on these examples, and explained why their attacks have little or no realistic chance of bringing about their policy preferences. This section first highlights an additional reason why these attacks cannot succeed in their ultimate aims: copycat killings are so unpredictable that many would be condemned by the killer they copied. Next, it discusses several potential explanations for why these terrorists commit attacks despite the lack of any plausible causal connection between their attacks and the world they hope to achieve.

Unintended Consequences: A Fatal Flaw in the Strategic Logic of Lone-Actor Terrorists

One reason why mass shootings cannot spark a race war is that all they do is inspire a few copycats, and the motives, ideas and targets of these copycats cannot be controlled and often morph into something the original attacker would oppose. This is illustrated in Table 4, which includes all the post-Breivik attackers.

Tarrant's attack was a logical extension of Breivik's fixation on Muslims, but anti-Semitic and anti-Black themes would not have met Breivik's approval. Breivik opposed neo-Nazism and anti-Semitism, and saw Jews as individuals, some of whom supported multiculturalism and some of whom did not (Breivik, 2011, pp. 1242, 1355, 1372). While Breivik's manifesto includes disparaging remarks about Africans, it also bemoans the oppression of Black Africans by Arabs (Breivik, 2011, pp. 402, 472, 428, 1206).

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Although Tarrant's manifesto does not contain explicit anti-Semitism, there are indications he supports or at least tolerates it; for example, he used a 14-word slogan associated with neo-Nazism (Nilsson, 2022). It is notable, however, that he praised anti-Black mass killer Dylann Roof but not a more recent anti-Semitic attacker, Robert Bowers. This suggests Tarrant did not wish to promote Jews as a target. Nevertheless, by flirting with anti-Semitism in several ways, Tarrant may have (intentionally or not) given the green light for copycats to attack Jews, which happened in the cases of Earnest and Balliet. By praising Roof, he signaled approval of further anti-Black violence, which Gendron provided in Buffalo.

Table 4. Unintended Consequences in Copycat Attacks Inspired by Tarrant and/or Breivik

Copycats	Expected/Unexpected Aspects
Tarrant	**Expected**. • Massacring Muslim immigrants was a natural extension of Breivik's philosophy **Unexpected**. • Tarrant praised Roof, an anti-Black mass shooter, whom Breivik would likely oppose • Says he is not a neo-Nazi, but quotes 14-word "white children" slogan invented by neo-Nazis; Breivik denounced Nazis and the 14-word slogan
Earnest	**Unexpected** • Tarrant seemed uninterested in targeting Jews and did not express explicit anti-Semitism; neither did Breivik • Earnest's attack was driven by Christian anti-Semitism but neither Breivik nor Tarrant were religious Christians
Crusius	**Expected** • Tarrant claimed that Texas becoming majority-minority means that the electoral college will favor Democrats, making every election "a certainty" **Unexpected** • Tarrant said nothing about Hispanics; it is unclear if he would endorse killing Christian Hispanic immigrants since his main concern is Muslims • Breivik would likely oppose attacks on Hispanics, which he did not consider an enemy
Manshaus	**Expected** • Tried to attack a mosque, which is consistent with Breivik and Tarrant **Unexpected** • Killed adopted Chinese-born sister, which makes no sense in a Breivik/Tarrant worldview
Balliet	**Expected** • Advocated the murder of all Muslims and considered attacking them **Unexpected** • Considered Jews the main enemy, contrary to Breivik and Tarrant • Advocated killing Christians as well, contradicting Breivik and Tarrant's views
Gendron	**Unexpected** • Besides mentioning Roof, Tarrant said nothing about African-Americans; since most are neither immigrants nor Muslims, this attack does not correspond to Tarrant's priorities • Given Breivik's comments about African-Americans he would likely oppose this attack • Gendron and Tarrant focused on birthrates but victims were nearly all elderly
Krajčík	**Unexpected**

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	• Breivik, Tarrant and Gendron did not advocate attacks on the LGBT community

Overall, based on Breivik's views as clearly expressed in his manifesto, of the seven copycats Breivik inspired directly or indirectly, he would have only approved of one or two of them: Tarrant and possibly Manshaus. Breivik would support Manshaus's mosque attack, but most likely would disapprove of him killing his stepsister, since Breivik tolerated fully assimilated non-whites. Thus, over 2/3rds the fatal shootings Breivik inspired were inconsistent with his ideology. Moreover, as noted above, over half of the attacks Breivik directly or indirectly inspired were motivated mainly by anti-Semitism, an ideology Breivik repeatedly denounced in his writings. These findings illustrate well the law of unintended consequences. Killing people often has the opposite effect of what the perpetrators intended, and since murder cannot be undone and causes extreme harm, it seems to be the worst possible tool for stimulating social change (Jackson, 2017).

If These Attacks Are Doomed to Failure, Why Commit Them?

Why do perpetrators commit these atrocities despite lacking any plausible reason to think the attacks will further their ideological aims? Several explanations are possible. First, perhaps the "subcultural idolization" (Koehler, 2022, p. 136) of Tarrant and Breivik as self-sacrificing heroes stimulates relatively blind mimicry by copycats who allow their idols do their thinking for them, simply assuming their strategic logic must be sound.

Second, some attackers seem to realize success is not guaranteed but are so full of hatred, so free from empathy, and place so little value on their own lives, that they are willing to kill on the off chance it might help in achieving their policy preferences. The fact that Gendron once contemplated suicide to avoid the dystopic future predicted by racists shows that racist ideology paints such a dark picture of reality that it prompts suicidal ideation. When this occurs, the lack of any plausible strategic logic may be irrelevant and self-destruction through murder and the promise of ingroup fame could become ends in themselves. Previous research has also noted that extreme-right milieus take a toll on members' mental health (Koehler, 2020).

Third, the "identity fusion" described in some radicalization theories, including the devoted-actor model and quest-for-significance theory, describes how individuals can come to

meld their own identity with a group, so that they are willing to fight and die for it (Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2018; Swann et al., 2012). These theories tend to presume that the self-sacrifice of the individual actually benefits the group, but even if it does not and this is merely a perception created by distorted strategic thinking, the effect on the perpetrators willingness to kill is the same. More specifically, perceptions of dire outgroup threats can trigger a willingness to engage in high-risk actions on behalf of the group (Whitehouse, 2018), a process that presumably occurs whether or not the risky actions in fact benefit the group.

Fourth, others may simply have been convinced by beliefs about random violence igniting revolutionary change—that is, accelerationism. The fact that some perpetrators (including Tarrant, Roof, Earnest and Gendron) expected fellow revolutionaries to free them from prison suggests this belief in accelerationism is genuine. Fifth, some may have convinced themselves that their attack would have an impact because they had already committed to carrying out the attack and were simply searching for ways to justify it.

Sixth, certain mental conditions or personality disorders may predispose offenders to believe their actions will have the desired effect despite having no rational reason for thinking this. Schizophrenia, schizotypal personality disorder, and sub-clinical schizotypal traits involve odd beliefs about the world, making this a potential explanation (Međedović and Knežević, 2019). Indeed, one ideological mass shooter, who killed 10 in Hanau, Germany, in 2020, was driven largely by schizophrenia (Kupper et al., 2023b). The delusions of grandeur found among narcissists could also influence some attackers.

Finally, various cognitive biases could play a role. For example, affected by the "majority illusion" identified in social media contexts (Lerman et al., 2016), some shooters may assume that most people share their views, due to repeated interactions with extremists online. Prospect theory from behavioral economics may apply as well. When faced with (what is framed as) a large potential loss, like the "white genocide" feared by racists, people tend to engage in risky, unlikely-to-succeed methods for preventing the loss (Verma et al., 2021).

Magical thinking also appears relevant. This psychological concept refers to beliefs that violate accepted laws of causality, such as beliefs about controlling others with one's thoughts (Rosengren and French, 2013). When used more broadly to describe highly unrealistic beliefs, the term is appropriate for copycat terrorists, who believe their actions will

bring about results that, given the way the world normally operates, are vanishingly unlikely or impossible.

Among radicalized individuals, desirability bias ("the tendency to overpredict desirable outcomes and under-predict unwanted results") could easily stimulate magical thinking about the effects of one's attack (Budescu et al., 1995, p. 109). For those viewing the world as a dystopic nightmare that requires drastic transformation, it would be distressing to believe that nothing can be done, or that one must simply be patient and gradually spread one's ideas. It is tempting to believe that a single act of violence could somehow unleash a chain of events that will rectify the world. This is related to wishful thinking—believing something to be true because it would be nice if it were (Aue et al., 2012).

The illusion of control (or "the tendency to believe that… one can skillfully influence and control outcomes of chance events") could also apply (Budescu et al., 1995, p. 109). Though social change does not occur through pure chance, the question of whether individual action affects society as a whole is highly probabilistic. With optimism bias and perhaps a narcissistic personality, it is easy to see how some might believe that they have figured out just the thing to set into motion a series of events ultimately transforming society.

Some far-right terrorists believe supernatural forces will ensure their success (Norris, 2020), and occult-oriented accelerationists populate the Telegram channel that inspired Krajčík. However, because neither religion nor psychosis appears to explain the thinking of the Breivik/Tarrant copycats, this article serves to elaborate upon the "wishful thinking" category of idiosyncratic strategic thinking (Norris, 2020), showing that 1) it is found among all attackers in this study, and 2) it has various manifestations, and 3) certain themes reoccur, including unrealistic expectations about inspiring numerous other attacks, crackdowns helping their cause, and the power of solo attacks to enable revolutionary change or trigger civil war.

Implications for Deradicalization Research and Practice

Aside from having noxious ideologies, the far-right lone-actor terrorists analyzed in this article also have idiosyncratic, unrealistic, and often rather preposterous expectations about the real-world impacts of their attacks. In reality, the only somewhat likely effect of such

shootings is to inspire, at most, a handful of copycats, who often have drastically different ideologies than the original perpetrator. Indeed, based on his ideology as clearly expressed in his manifesto, Breivik would have likely opposed all but one or two of the seven fatal attacks that he directly or indirectly inspired. Mass shootings of civilians are not a plausible way of triggering revolutions or social transformations. These killings are thus cruel and pointless acts of self-destruction enabled by incredible feats of self-delusion. Future research can build on these results by identifying idiosyncratic strategic thinking among other terrorists, and employing case studies to generate further insight into the psychological and sociological mechanisms leading to such disordered thinking and decision-making.

These findings can also be put to practical use. For white supremacists who cannot be deradicalized, the key is to prevent them from transitioning from passive supporters to violent terrorists (Schuurman, 2020). Spreading awareness about the fact that a mass shooting is the last thing they should ever do if they want to advance their agenda might help prevent some attacks. Indeed, Busher et al. (2019) found that extremists' skepticism about their ability to triumph in a violent struggle and concern about alienating potential supporters were among the most common brakes on violent escalation.

Pointing out the utter futility of these attacks may be effective in convincing some would-be shooters to refrain from violence, and it is worth trying as a general method of behavioral deradicalization (and perhaps cognitive deradicalization as well). As a first step, a pilot study could use online survey methods to test whether information about the uselessness of attacks reduces extremists' support for terrorism.

A recent "megastudy" on partisan violence and anti-democratic attitudes (Voelkel et al., 2023) might provide a model for a study that could compare the effect of futility-focused interventions to other deradicalization strategies. The megastudy surveyed over 30,000 Americans, testing 25 interventions to reduce partisan animosity and support for political violence. This allowed them not only to determine whether each intervention had a statistically significant effect, but also to compare the interventions' effect sizes.

While a small percentage of people support far-right terrorism, a survey with a large enough sample could identify supporters and then interventions could be tested on them. Interventions could involve having each participant read one passage. Some of these could be

expanded versions of the eight narrative strategies developed above, presented with several compelling examples. Follow-up questions could then determine whether their initial levels of support for far-right terrorism, or their likelihood in engaging it personally, had dropped after reading the passage.

Such a study might proceed in two stages. First, different versions of futility-focused interventions would be tested on online survey participants. Each of the eight narrative strategies proposed above could be tested separately. Additional strategies, perhaps focused on particular examples of unrealistic strategic thinking by terrorists like Breivik or Tarrant, or emphasizing the low frequency of attacks and their lack of political impact, could also be tested. If one of these approaches, or a combination of them, has a stronger effect on participants, then that approach would be used in the second stage.

The second stage would involve a study surveying large numbers of people, perhaps through the economical yet empirically-validated platform Amazon Mechanical Turk (Mullinex et al., 2015), identifying those potentially supportive of far-right terrorism, and then testing various deradicalization strategies, in order to compare the efficacy of futility-focused intervention to other approaches. Non-futility strategies that could be tested might include, among others, focusing on attacks' innocent victims, debunking misinformation about "white genocide" or "Black-on-white crime," or demonstrating the efficacy of nonviolent resistance and organizing. Other potential strategies could draw on typologies of mechanisms of deradicalization or brakes on violent escalation (Busher et al., 2019). Since researchers have not yet systematically compared the efficacy of different deradicalization mechanisms (Pistone et al., 2019), such a study could help advance deradicalization and P/CVE studies. A multi-pronged intervention combining several strategies could be tested as well.

Once effective text-based interventions have been developed through such surveys, recruiting "anons" from chan sites or extremist Telegram channels to take the surveys might function as a double-pronged strategy, both advancing our understanding of what decreases support for terrorism while also serving as an evidence-based deradicalization technique targeting those most at risk for committing racist violence. To overcome extremists' reluctance to take such surveys, participants should be paid, as recommended in P/CVE evaluation design to minimize selection bias (Williams, 2022).

Online survey-based interventions might prove capable of impacting hard-to-reach, high-risk individuals, perhaps partially overcoming the form of selection bias in which participants gravitate toward programs because they were already somewhat deradicalized (Morton and Silber, 2018). Since the vast majority of deradicalization and P/CVE programs are in-person—to illustrate, only 4% of German programs are online (Koehler, 2021)—such online methods could be an important complement to in-person approaches. If performed regularly, such survey interventions could reach numerous extremists for relatively little cost, and some participants might eventually be recruited into in-person programs. If shown to be effective in the online context, these narratives could also be used in face-to-face deradicalization programs or in schools as a preventative measure. While this proposed program of research and interventions is geared toward preventing far-right terrorism, similar counter-narratives could be developed to dissuade potential jihadi terrorists as well, drawing on the work of Abrahms (2018) among others, to develop futility-focused narratives, and non-futility counter-narratives as well, relevant to those with jihadi sympathies.

Some researchers advocate using fictionalized counter-narratives, based on research suggesting they may be more effective (Schlegel, 2021). This article's approach of building non-fictional counter-narratives, including examples from real terrorists whose attacks were futile in terms of achieving their political objectives, can be seen as an alternative model that could be tested against fictional narratives. The counter-narratives developed here could also be adapted into fictional narratives, of the kind Braddock and Horgan (2016) discuss extensively, and their effectiveness could be compared with non-fictional narratives. A potential way to test various specific counter-narratives while also including a participatory element, as some research found is effective (Carthy & Sarma, 2023), would be to have participants choose which one of the futility-focused narratives was most persuasive and write a paragraph describing why it is likely to convince people. In addition, if the counter-narratives developed here were to be used to prevent future radicalization rather than to reverse radicalization, they could be adapted into an "inoculation" form, in which participants are first exposed to "weakened" versions of terrorist narratives, and then are exposed to strong counter-narratives (Mason et al., 2023). This could represent another way of implementing the

inoculation approach to preventing radicalication, by focusing specifically on right-wing violence and the question of its efficacy.

Although such approaches are worth trying, there are limits to futility-focused strategies. Humans are mimetic creatures above all, impulsively copying others within our in-groups, and interventions from outsiders cannot always reverse such processes. For this reason, limiting access to pro-violence materials should be prioritized. Arguably, it should be illegal in the US to advocate terrorism, as in many Western countries (Norris, 2021), or to praise or glorify mass shooters. Websites featuring such content should promptly be shut down by the government. Unlike hate speech regulation, which tends to be found unconstitutional (Camp, 2023), there may be a more realistic chance that such speech restrictions would be upheld by US courts. If the New York state government would have blocked users' access to 4chan, this would most likely have prevented the Buffalo shooting. Moreover, if Telegram had consistently removed channels advocating violence (Katz, 2022), this may well have prevented the Bratislava attack.

Consistently removing pro-violence material has the potential to stop impressionable young men from destroying themselves and others, fueled by odious ideas and enabled by bizarre and implausible strategic thinking, all out of a desire to impress a few half-serious Internet trolls they will never meet. Yet uncertainty remains about the legality and effectiveness of such measures, including the possibility of backlash (Peterka-Benton and Benton, 2023). A variety of strategies are thus necessary, from increasing media literacy to pressuring technology companies to remove pro-violence content.

On a larger scale, providing young people, including those with poor social skills or odd personalities, with regular opportunities for in-person socializing could reduce radicalization by preventing unchecked immersion in violent online subcultures and giving isolated youth something tangible to live for. This would be consistent with disengagement models showing that in-person relationships often serve as catalysts for disengagement and deradicalization (Silke et al., 2021), and studies suggesting that those with autism (and thus difficulty maintaining social bonds) may be at higher risk for committing terrorism offenses (Thijssen et al., 2021).

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