

David Schanzer:

Hello, and welcome to Policy 360. I'm David Schanzer, sitting in for Dean Kelly Brownell. I'm an associate professor of the practice here at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, and I also direct our Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security. Today, we are hosting at the Sanford School scholars and advocates from the Southern Poverty Law Center. The president of the organization, Richard Cohen, and Heidi Beirich, who leads their Intelligence Project. Welcome to Richard and Heidi.

Richard Cohen:

Thank you, David.

Heidi Beirich:

Thanks for having us.

David Schanzer:

I'm going to start with Richard. For our listeners who are really not familiar with the Southern Poverty Law Center and the work, you've been, of course, there for over 30 years, could you just tell us briefly, what is the mission of your center? And then what attracted you to come and spend the bulk of your career with them?

Richard Cohen:

Yeah. The Southern Poverty Law Center is a nonprofit organization with its roots in the civil rights movement instead dedicated to fighting hate and extremism through litigation and education. We pride ourselves in representing those with no other champions. Originally when the Southern Poverty Law Center began, we were purely a small legal shop. Over time, we developed other projects. Today we really have a threefold punch. The first is our legal department where we litigate in a variety of different areas. Secondly, we have a unit called the Intelligence Project that keeps tabs on right-wing extremism in our country. And lastly, we have a program called Teaching Tolerance that provides free educational materials to every school in the nation.

We think about those things in a unified way as really furthering the purposes of the 14th amendment. The Intelligence Project goes after our most ardent foes of our democratic values. Our Teaching Tolerance program points to the future and says, "Can we raise a generation that will be better than our own?" And our legal department takes people to court and pushes public policies that we think will protect those at the bottom of the social ladder.

David Schanzer:

Well, one of the center's most high profile project is its annual census of hate groups in America. And I want to discuss the findings with you, Heidi, of this year's report. But before I do that, I want to lay the groundwork. What is a hate group? What does that word mean? And I wonder if you could help our listeners understand, how do you distinguish these groups from organizations who might simply be advocating for policies that you might perceive, someone might perceive, as being anti-immigrant or anti-LGBT rights? How do you make those distinctions?

Heidi Beirich:

Sure. So we have a definition for hate groups, obviously that the Law Center has created. It's on our website. It's not something that's hidden behind something. And it looks at organizations' ideological

positions. This is important to state because a lot of times people think we're only looking at violent groups. That is not the case. We look at the statements about what a group believes from its members, on its website, sort of everything official that they put out. And what we are looking for, does this organization treat an entire other class of people by their inherent characteristics as essentially lesser? So do they view all Jews as evil? Do they think all whites are evil? Those are the kinds of things we're looking for. And the key point here is all, right? All of that affected group as being lesser.

So there are a million organizations out there who advocate policies that might hurt the civil rights of various organizations, but I mean various people, but if they don't rise to the level of denigrating an entire population, they're not going to make it onto our hate list. So that's the basics of the description for a hate group.

David Schanzer:

Let's say there's a group that just believes their religious teachings don't believe that homosexuality is a sin. And I'm just using this as an example, and therefore, and advocate very strongly against gay marriage and are against the Supreme Court decision. Would that group qualify just based on those characteristics?

Heidi Beirich:

Absolutely not. We don't list anybody because they have a biblical view about homosexuality. We don't list anybody for being against gay marriage. The groups that we list as anti-LGBT groups are all groups that lie and defame the LGBT population. For example, a very popular thing that these groups engage in is claiming that all gay men are molesters or pedophiles. It's got a rise to the level of really lying about that organization. And frankly, if we listed every single organization or church that believes that homosexuality was a sin based on the Bible, our list would be a lot longer. So that is not the criteria, although it's frequently misunderstood to be what you just described.

David Schanzer:

So let's go to this year's survey. The center identified 917 hate groups currently operate in the US, and that is an increase from the prior year. So what are you seeing in terms of the trends and what are you pointing to as potential causes for this?

Heidi Beirich:

Well, the larger trend since 2000 has been about a doubling of the number of hate groups in this country. The largest thing propelling this has been a backlash of reaction to demographic change. We also had the economic crisis in 2008. I think the election of an African-American president is something that added to this backlash and the growing numbers of hate groups in the country. This year's numbers are darn near a historic high for the years that we at the Southern Poverty Law Center have been counting these groups, which goes back about 30 years. But the broad trends driving it are really people who are opposed to these kinds of changes in the ethnic and religious, and so on, makeup of the United States.

Now that said, the last year, white supremacists were extremely energized by the campaign and by the Trump candidacy, which they saw as something that was going to bring to fruition the things that they'd like to see. An end to all immigration, a border wall, some of these ideas actually originated in the radical right, and then moved to the mainstream. And the groups that saw the largest jumps in their size

between 2015 and 2016 were groups that were specifically pushing the Trump message. So that's something interesting about the last year.

We also saw basically a tripling in the number of anti-Muslim groups over the course of the last year. And this is partly to do with reactions to terrorist attacks, like in San Bernardino. But I think also the tenor of the campaign in terms of how Muslims were described and xenophobic rhetoric and so on. And a reaction to the refugee crisis, obviously, there are some people who don't believe that those refugees should be here in the United States, and they've become more active over the last 12 months.

David Schanzer:

This anti-Muslim hate and bigotry that we're definitely seeing in a more overt fashion, I guess I wanted to ask Richard, is this marking an evolution in some of the work of the Southern Poverty Law Center? Obviously in the sixties and seventies, this was not really an issue on the top of the national agenda. And how do you see this trend and how does it affect your work?

Richard Cohen:

Well, really our focus on this aspect of the hate movement started after 9/11. Immediate aftermath of 9/11, there were a tremendous increase in anti-Muslim hate crimes, for example. Some people killed simply because they were perceived to be Muslim, the Sikh community in particular being victimized in that way. And it was really after 9/11 that we saw the growth of some of these very hard-line, radical anti-Muslim groups. It accelerated at a few points over, for example, the controversy over the so-called Ground Zero Mosque. And now we have another spurt in the movement driven in part by events in international and the international sphere, Paris, Belgium, and partly by, of course, terrorist events in our country, but exacerbated, I would say, at the rhetoric during the political campaign. And not just the Trump campaign, but the Cruz campaign as well, where there were thoughts of patrolling Muslim neighborhoods that fed into that narrative.

David Schanzer:

So do the techniques that you and the center have been using to deal with white supremacist groups and black nationalist groups that have been going on for quite some time, can they be applied to this new phenomenon? Or do you see them as a different nature and have to have different tactics for addressing them?

Richard Cohen:

We've had three major strategies dealing with hate groups in our country. First, we've had a litigation strategy where we've sued groups for the violent actions of their members. Now we've never had an occasion, quite frankly, to sue what we would call a black hate group or an anti-Muslim hate group at this point. Secondly, we have a law enforcement assistance strategy where we try to train law enforcement officials to deal with the criminal manifestations of hate. And in our training, we will include the topic of those groups that are virulently anti-Muslim.

The main strategy that we've used is public education. We try to expose these groups for the anti-democratic values that they hold in the hope that we will inoculate the general public from them and diminish their influence. It's not against the law in our country to hate, that's your God given right. But it's also, I think, our role to try to call out the haters. And so, our main strategy has been to publicly shame them and expose them for what they are in the hopes that the general public will turn away from them.

David Schanzer:

Heidi, been looking kind of your survey or work over the years. Was very interesting to note a real reduction during the Bush presidency in the numbers of these groups. And I think you attributed that to the idea that while the Bush administration was maybe pushing less gun control than the Clinton administration had been, or that people felt that maybe the political process was working for them, and therefore we're not going to resort as much to these hate groups. Now we have a new Republican administration, would that be your expectation to see a further decline because the politics in some ways, they would see as working for them? Or do you think we're maybe in a different era and that's not the trends that we're going to see?

Heidi Beirich:

So we had the Southern Poverty Law Center collect information on two kinds of groups. One are the hate groups that we discussed a minute ago, and then the other are extreme anti-government groups, which is what you're referring to here. These are organizations. They're not people who are concerned about tax and spending policies, right? These are groups that believe, for example, the United Nations is bringing in black helicopters and going to round people up, or the Obama administration has come to take all your guns and put you in FEMA camps, some pretty extreme views.

And they do indeed, as you say, follow a very different pattern in terms of politics influencing them. In other words, we saw the rise of this militia movement, antigovernment movement under Bill Clinton, under Democrats, when Democrats are in office. They tend to collapse significantly when Republicans take office. So for example, in 1996, we counted 858 of these groups under Clinton. And then when Bush came into office, the number dropped down to around 140. And then when Obama came into office, we saw a rise again. So the pattern is very different than the hate groups, right? They tend to rise and fall depending on who is in the Oval Office, which party they represent.

And yes, I would argue in the past, the reason we saw collapse in these types of groups was because they felt safe under Republican administrations. In other words, they didn't expect gun control or enforcement of laws against guns and those kinds of things. So they felt good about Republicans. You don't feel like you have to organize and be out there. I do have to wonder though, and you hinted at this in your question, is that going to be a little bit different now with the Trump administration? He's different in some ways than past conservatives. Obviously conservatives themselves pointed that out. But of course he's solid on guns, right? Very close ally of the NRA and so on. And this is a motivating factor for these organizations. We already saw a drop in them over the last year, which I would attribute to some feeling of safety around Trump, but also two major prosecutions that came out of the Bundy Ranch standoff in 2014 and the takeover of the Malheur facility in early 2016, which drove some people out of the movement.

So I'm a little bit on the fence if we're going to see this exact same pattern going forward. If history pre-stages it, that's what we'll see a drop-off.

David Schanzer:

So I want to wrap up by asking both of you, looking at this problem of hate, extremism from whatever source, and you had a chance to advise the government and say, of course, if you want to represent all Americans, as the president has said he wants to do, this is an important problem, what kind of advice would you give to the president in terms of actions? Whether it be at the policy level or in terms of rhetoric, what kinds of advice would you give to him?

Heidi Beirich:

Well, the advice that I've been giving for the last several weeks as we saw this outbreak of hate crimes and hate incidents since the election was that he could do one thing, which George Bush did well after 9/11, which is he could come out and forcefully denounce these ideas, these kinds of attacks, these kinds of crimes. It seems to me that there's no political price to be paid for that and the public would be very thankful. When George Bush did that after 9/11 and basically said Muslims are not our enemies, right? It put an end to an outbreak of hate violence. So that was sort of be my first thing to say to Donald Trump,

Richard Cohen:

I guess, just to start, as Heidi said, our changing demographics have propelled the growth of hate in our country, both formally with these groups and kind of the hate that we see online. And that trend's going to continue. The country's predicted sometime in the 2040s to be a majority minority country. And we're going to have growing pains and there's going to continue to be a backlash. And what I would suggest to the president, and really to public policy people at all levels, is to invest in programs that create bridging social capital to bring different groups together so people are seen as friends and not as strangers, whether that's a greater investment in public parks and greater investment in public places. I just think the whole gamut of things that can create more bridging social capital in our country, that's going to be the key to preserving a vibrant democracy, it seems to me.

David Schanzer:

Well, Richard Cohen and Heidi Beirich, we're honored to have you with us on the podcast and visiting the Sanford School. So thank you for joining me today and thank you so much for all the work that you're doing to make our country both safer and more harmonious.

Richard Cohen:

Thank you.

Heidi Beirich:

Thank you.

David Schanzer:

Well, until next time, this is Policy 360.