

Policy 360 Episode 77 – Pittsburgh Shooting- Transcript

- Judith Kelley: Hello, and welcome to Policy 360. I'm Judith Kelley, Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University.
- Judith Kelley: Earlier this week, a gunman opened fire shortly after services began at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. Eleven people died, and there were multiple casualties. Authorities arrested a man and recovered weapons, a Colt AR-15 rifle, and three Glock 357 handguns. Authorities say the gunman made hateful, anti-Semitic comments on social media before the attack.
- Judith Kelley: David Schanzer is the Director of the Duke Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, and Professor of the practice here at the Sanford School of Public Policy. He calls the attack an act of Trumpism inspired terrorism. Here's what he wrote:
- Judith Kelley: "Of course, President Trump had no direct responsibility for the heinous act of violence that occurred yesterday in Pittsburgh, but there can be little doubt that based on what we know so far that the shooting was an example of terrorism inspired by the ideology of Trumpism."
- Judith Kelley: David, welcome to Policy 360.
- David Schanzer: Well, thank you for having me.
- Judith Kelley: First, let's talk a bit about whether or not this was terrorism. Authorities are treating this as a hate crime rather than terrorism, so why is that?
- David Schanzer: Well, we have different ways that this word is used. When we look at it from a political science public policy perspective, terrorism is a category of political violence, and those of us who work in the field, we believe that terrorism is violence used against a civilian population to make a political point. That's about the only parts of the definition that almost everyone agrees on. There are different variations, but the key issues are violence against civilians, and it's about politics, and I see these attacks as being very much about politics.
- David Schanzer: Now, there's another way that we use that, and sometimes that's for law enforcement, and the technical charges that are brought against a perpetrator. And some crimes use the word "terrorism." In our federal laws, the crimes that deal with terrorism usually refer to what they would call international terrorism, or linkages to international terrorist organizations. And then there are some crimes called hate crimes which talk about some sort of bias motivation against religion, or sexual orientation, or race, and those are classified as hate crimes, but those are the ways the laws are.
- Judith Kelley: Right, because some can technically fall in both categories?

David Schanzer: Well, we don't have a federal law. I believe we should have a federal law that discusses what I would call domestic terrorism, but we have never passed such a law. Strangely enough, there is a provision of the US code that actually defines what domestic terrorism is, but there's no criminal statute that applies penalties for domestic terrorism. So federally, for an issue like this, your only real jurisdiction is the federal hate crime statutes, which are kind of an evolution of our civil rights criminal laws as well.

David Schanzer: Of course, this person could be tried by the state of Pennsylvania for multiple counts of murder as well.

Judith Kelley: Okay. Let's talk about the statement that you put out. You talked about Trumpism. Would you define that for us?

David Schanzer: Sure. I think Trumpism, and you could say there's Obamaism, and George W. Bushism as well. I think anybody who's in office or president captures a set of ideas that motivate him, that animate their philosophy towards governance. And, as I said in the statement, I think parts of Trumpism are the normal fare of political discourse. Debates about taxes, about what our immigration policy should be. President Trump wants to have a more isolationist foreign policy. He wants to have a more aggressive protectionist economic and trade policy. And those are all the normal fare of politics, and I think there's nothing wrong with any of them.

David Schanzer: The parts of Trumpism that I think are unique to this particular president, and I think are quite dangerous, are that he adds to those normal political issues a set of ideas that talk about blame, and try to chastise outsiders for essentially threatening the wellbeing of Americans on almost every issue. Economics, national security, law enforcement. He really uses rhetoric that otherizes minorities, immigrants, foreigners, in a way to both chastise them, and I think it pulls on some of the worst instincts of human nature, of our own populous as well. He believes, I think, it motivates them to come out and vote. Unfortunately, I believe words matter, and these words can motivate people to do many different things, many of which are quite unhealthy.

Judith Kelley: But how do you draw a line between that and violence then?

David Schanzer: Well, I don't think President Trump wants anybody to engage in violence, and I think that's very clear. There's no direct line between President Trump and the perpetrator, who's name I won't dignify. But I do think that words, while most people will interpret President Trump's use of vocabulary, his hot rhetoric, his otherizing, demonizing of his political enemies dehumanizing, I think to some extent, many people will still just interpret that as ideas. But in any population, you have a small sliver of people, because of their psychological circumstance, because of their upbringing, because of their beliefs, they hear these same words and feel so aggrieved and they feel so almost duty bound to ... They feel so personally threatened, they almost feel duty bound to take action, and that's where we get this form of political violence called terrorism.

David Schanzer: You can look at any other form of terrorism. You want to look at Al Qaeda. Bin Laden explicitly kept saying that west was at war with Muslims, and Muslims would be wiped out, disintegrated. That they hate our religion, they hate everything about us, and most Muslims brushed that off. They realize it's not consistent with reality. But a small sliver of people become radicalized, they take this ideology at heart, and they believe so fiercely about it that they become motivated to take action to prevent those things from coming about. And that's what opens the door to violence, and I believe very strongly that's what happened here.

Judith Kelley: So do you think that taking normal politics and linking it to this discourse of fear is very unusual? Is that uniquely Trumpish in the context of US politics?

David Schanzer: We've certainly seen demagoguery in the past. When somebody asks me, "Well, is this unique," I say the thing that comes back to me most clearly is the rhetoric of many southern governors and leaders during the segregation period, who used this kind of rhetoric to inspire violence by white people against African-Americans, and dehumanizing African-Americans, making people think that they were going to take over. That they had to fear violence from them, and so on, and that inspires the Klan, the people who engage in lynchings, to use violence to push back. Of course, that's politics. That's political motivated violence.

David Schanzer: Now, I'm not trying to link the President specifically with that form of violence, but I am saying that, yes, we have seen that in the past, but I think it's extraordinary from a president of the United States in the modern era, and really almost in any era, to so otherize even citizens within our country let alone immigrants that come in from the outside.

Judith Kelley: So the US Holocaust Memorial Museum said that the shooting reminds us that unchecked hatred and anti-Semitism must be confronted wherever they appear. So do you think that there's been a change in anti-Semitism in the US government in the recent period? Specifically, the President has actually been very pro-Israel, so how do we make sense of the anti-Semitism and the pro-Israel stance of Trump in the context here?

David Schanzer: And of course in his heart, I don't believe the President is anti-Semitic. I mean, his son-in-law's Jewish. His daughter converted to Judaism. I think he's worked with Jews in New York. You can't be a successful businessman in New York and not integrate and work very well with the Jewish community, have friends who are Jewish. And so I don't believe that at all.

David Schanzer: Anti-Semitism, of course, has been with us for centuries. It is a political ideology that has been designed over the centuries to blame Jews, to chastise Jews, to aggrandize others by the way they treat Jews as not deeming of respect, and of course, in the Holocaust, Jews were dehumanized, called vermin, cockroaches, rats and so on as a way to, again, open the door to people using the most horrific violence against them. And anti-Semitism has never disappeared from the United States. It's there. I think America has been the place really in many

hundreds of years of history, other than, of course, the state of Israel where Jews have felt the most comfortable, and where we felt that anti-Semitism was ... Even though of course we knew it was present. There were Swastikas painted on my high school, so we always know that it's an underlying current in society, but we feel like in America it's as repressed as anywhere in the world than it has ever been.

David Schanzer: So when these incidents come up, and they come up maybe more frequently than they have in the past, then we are fearful of that because we know our hundreds of years of history, and what that has led to. So our sensors are on high trigger.

Judith Kelley: So if you got a call from the government, from the White House, or some part of government saying, "David, this hatred stuff is out of control. We need to take some steps to roll back," what kind of actions would you hope that a government would, what kind of actions could a government take to try to address an emotion essentially? You can't legislate it, so what do you do to calm things?

David Schanzer: Well, I think our country relies on leaders, and our political leaders are very important, and the President is a constitutional actor. He has certain powers that are very formal, but he is also our head of state, and we look to the President for moral guidance. We look to the President for comfort at times of national tragedy. So the President plays many, many different roles, and of course this particular president dominates the media in ways that no one, I think, in history ever has. So his words really, really matter, and it has to be a consistent set of words that unify, that stop demonizing opponents, whether they be political opponents or people he believes are truly a threat to different aspects of America.

David Schanzer: And I look specifically at this particular example of this shooting in Pittsburgh, and I just think it's so closely linked. This person's been anti-Semitic for a very, very long time. History shows that. But he only crossed the threshold to violence when he became so enraged. What was he enraged at? He was enraged at the charity that people at this specific synagogue were showing for refugees, and it is the President's rhetoric and the way he's talked about this, almost as the people are going to bring disease. I understand the debate over maybe not allowing them through the borders, and that they shouldn't be able to make a claim for asylum. We can have a debate about that, but to use this fear, threat that they're carrying disease, to me that seems to be what has so enraged this person to feel that he wanted to take violence based on his longstanding anti-Semitic feelings.

David Schanzer: So I think it really has to start at the top, and I think all of our political leaders, that we need to, as you have said beautifully in your letter to our community ... We can have political disagreements and still love each other, and I think we want to hear that from the President as we have from every president that I can remember in my living memory. And that is where I would start.

Judith Kelley: So, thank you for those thoughts, but I want to take it just a little bit away to your broader work on terrorism, which you've been working in for years. What do you think that as a country we should be most concerned about in the realm of terrorism now?

David Schanzer: Well, first of all, I think we should think of the ways we've been successful. I think if you woke up on September 12th, 2001, and we said, "Well, we'll not have an attack," even an order of magnitude less than 9-11 in 17 years on our shore, that Al Qaeda would be a mere shadow of itself. Of course, ISIS reared its head, but it's also been successfully suppressed to some degree. It's a mixed record, but I think you would say we have done many, many things. Some of them have been on homeland security kinds of things. Some have been about law enforcement techniques and surveillance. And I believe some has been our military action, whether it be with drones, or our efforts in Afghanistan to keep these organizations on the defensive. It's been very expensive. It has been divisive. It has caused harm to many, many thousands of civilians around the world, but I think we have done a fairly good job.

David Schanzer: Domestically, I think we need to put more focus and resources on one strand of the terrorism problem that we have. We spent a lot of resources looking at the terrorism that is fomented, that is inspired by Al Qaeda, ISIS, and like minded groups, and not as much on our own domestic form of terrorism, what our former Attorney General Loretta Lynch said are our original sin of terrorism, white supremacy. And I think if we put the resources into that aspect of our counter terrorism efforts, or even a fraction of it, that we put into preventing the Al Qaeda inspired form of terrorism, maybe we'd be more successful.

David Schanzer: Now, there's a reason constitutionally why it's more difficult for us, and that's because speech and association within our own domestic political tradition is protected form of conduct. It's not just the speech, but you're allowed to form groups. You're allowed to form groups, even if the whole purpose of your group is to hate other people.

Judith Kelley: Right, and you're allowed to display that quite-

David Schanzer: Yes, you're allowed to display it. You're actually allowed to raise money. However, in the international context, we have a list of foreign terrorist organizations, and we make it a crime to send a check to any of those organizations for \$25. So if I sent \$25 to a domestic hate group, that would be a protected form of constitutional speech. If I sent the same \$25 to any organization on our foreign terrorist organization list, that would be material support for terrorism, and it would be punishable by a ten to 15 year criminal sentence.

David Schanzer: So the tools that law enforcement have to deal with this other form of terrorism are more properly constitutionally restricted, which makes it tougher. Not impossible, but tougher.

Judith Kelley: Which is why the rhetoric matters so much more, because we don't have those tools.

David Schanzer: Absolutely. Absolutely. We cannot scan the ... We can scan the internet for anybody who suggests that they are interested in promoting Al Qaeda, and possibly engaging in violence where unless you're literally inciting violence in the immediate ... If you kind of say "Death to the Jews," and unfortunately, I think we'd be fill up the time of every FBI agent there is so much vitriol on the internet. If every time we said some horrible epithets ... "Death to them," "I can't stand them," "I hate them" ... That would take up all of our resources, unfortunately, and it wouldn't be constitutionally permissible for law enforcement to open a criminal investigation based on that kind of protected speech, where we could do it in a second if we sifted through Twitter and found that stuff with respect to Al Qaeda or ISIS.

Judith Kelley: Yeah. Well, David, I'm sorry for the occasion that brought us together, but it's really valuable to hear your thoughts on the matter, so thank you for sharing them with us.

David Schanzer: Well, thank you, and it has been a hard week for many Americans, but I think a good way to close is to leave you with this. The reason that the Tree of Life Synagogue is named that is actually after a phrase in the Torah, the holy book of Judaism, and the phrase says that the Torah, our beautiful laws, are a tree of life to them who hold fast to it, and its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace. So I think we need to talk about these things to hopefully bring us to peace. That is the purpose of that phrase.

Judith Kelley: That's chilling in some ways that the name of the synagogue is such an embrace of peace, and yet this is the fate.

Judith Kelley: David Schanzer is the Director of the Duke Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security. We'll have a link to his statement about the Tree of Life Synagogue shootings at our website, policy360.org. Thanks for joining me. I'm Judith Kelley.