Peifer on Hamm and Spaaij, 'The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism'

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Lone actor or “lone wolf” terrorism has emerged as a growing security concern in recent decades. A massive pool of potential suspects leaving fewer traces of their activities than organizations or conspiracies, lone actors present the greatest challenge to counterterrorism agencies and law enforcement. Accurately predicting which individuals will commit lone wolf attacks remains an elusive goal. Prevention of any terrorist attack involves intervention in one of the necessary components of an attack: motivation, means, and opportunity. Given the general availability of firearms or other weapons in the United States as well as the abundance of soft targets, prevention measures focus on motivation and understanding the radicalization process. In The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism, authors Mark S. Hamm and Ramón Spaaij take an optimistic approach to the challenge of discerning patterns in single-actor terrorism. Retaining the more contentious term “lone wolf,” they argue that “violent radicalization is a social process involving behavior that can be observed, comprehended, and modeled in a clearly understandable diagram” (p. 9).

The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism builds upon the authors’ work for the National Institute of Justice (2012-15), which resulted in an extensive database of American lone wolf terrorism publicly accessible to scholars.[1] Their work filled a noticeable gap, making a significant contribution to the field. From the data, they constructed a model of lone wolf radicalization which this book aims to test and verify. The authors bring together expertise in multiple disciplines. Mark S. Hamm is professor emeritus of criminology at Indiana State University and has been a senior research fellow at the Terrorism Center at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City College of New York. A former prison warden himself, Hamm has written extensively on prison radicalization, terror, and hate crimes. A sociologist whose research examines the sociology of terrorism, Ramón Spaaij is based at Victoria University in Australia and the University of Amsterdam. His previous book, Understanding Lone Wolf Terror: Global Patterns, Motivations and Prevention (2012), also serves as a foundation for this study.

A lack of consensus in defining “terrorism” or “lone actor” plagues comparative research as well as effective policymaking. Therefore, the book’s introduction to issues of terminology lays a necessary foundation. While their definition of “lone actor” is clear and consistent throughout the study, the boundaries between terrorism and other acts of violence would benefit from further elaboration, a surprising omission given Hamm’s prior work on hate crimes.
Hamm and Spaaij define lone wolf terrorism as “political violence perpetrated by individuals who act alone; who do not belong to an organized terrorist group or network; who act without the direct influence of a leader or hierarchy; and whose tactics and methods are directed by the individuals without any direct outside command or direction” (pp. 23-24). This working definition limits cases to lone individuals, excluding married couples or anyone working in concert with another person, such as Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh.

The study is limited to United States, where lone wolf terrorism has been more pronounced than in other countries. The high value placed on free expression and the right to bear arms creates greater availability of both means and opportunity. The relative success of efforts by law enforcement and nongovernmental organizations such as the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) to break up extremist organizations may also contribute to higher rates for lone actor terrorism in the United States. In the period between 1940 and mid-2016, Hamm and Spaaij identified 123 cases of lone wolf terrorism across all motivational groups (religious, left-wing political, right-wing political, racist, etc.). They examined each case for 21 separate variables, generating 2,583 original data points. The research included unsuccessful plots as well as attacks. In addition to commonly analyzed variables such as lethality, personal grievance, employment status, and age, they paid closer attention to prior criminal activity, the locus of radicalization, and popular culture influences. Chapter 3 summarizes their findings. While the authors resist establishing a profile of the “typical” lone wolf terrorist, they note that American lone wolf terrorists tend to be urban, single, white men with lower educational levels. Lone wolf terrorists also tend to be older than members of terrorist organizations but are getting younger. They often have criminal records and are more likely to suffer from mental illness. Chapters 4 through 8 purport to test and verify their radicalization model. The model consists of five key aspects: 1) personal and political grievances, 2) affinity with extremist groups or online cohorts, 3) enablers (by which they mean individuals who inspire them rather than those who provide material assistance), 4) intentional broadcasting of terrorist intent, and 5) triggering events (p. 9).

Drawing from the body of existing research, biographies, memoirs, media, court documents, medical and psychiatric evaluations, and interviews with convicted perpetrators, the authors created an extensive body of empirical evidence (p. 24). Unfortunately, the quantitative aspect of the database research flattens the qualitative richness of the individual narratives. Presumably as an attempt to provide tidy, straightforward stories, the detailed case studies offer little analysis of potential bias or ulterior motives in sources. The inclusion of more source criticism would offer richer insights into not only lone wolf actors and their motivations but also the criminal justice system and public perceptions of both.

Scholars working in this field will sympathize with the dilemma faced by the writers in trying to advance a coherent and cohesive model of radicalization while also providing thick detail from a broad range of individual case studies that are likely unfamiliar to readers. In their introduction, they argue that they “must describe the trees to explain the forest” (p. 11). The resulting monograph, however, resembles more a collection of harvested or unplanted trees, not rooted in sociopolitical context and disconnected from the larger explanatory model. Short case studies are presented without adequate transitions to connect them, and their subheadings describe the events but not how they relate to the theme of the chapter. Chapters conclude without summing up the main points or how the section supports the overall thesis and model. Thus, the view of the “forest” gets lost. In contrast to the author’s stated claims, the book often reads more like a collection of lone actor
vignettes than proof of a model of radicalization.

Uneven coverage of cases and ineffective international comparisons further obscure the theoretical argument. Most chapters include a selection of two-to-four-page case summaries, but chapter 7 inexplicably devotes fifteen pages to extended background on Gabbie Gifford and Jared Loughner's attack on her. The book also includes three chapter-length "paradigmatic" case studies on Carlos Bledsoe, Richard Poplawski, and Sami Hassoun, with unconvincing justification of why they are "paradigmatic." At various points and with varying degrees of effectiveness, the authors also introduce comparisons with international lone wolf terrorists, but often without relevant or sufficient background. For example, in chapter 7 Norwegian lone wolf Anders Breivik is offered as an example of the growth of antifeminism as a motivational factor. As evidence of his issues with women, the authors note that thirty of his seventy-seven victims were female (p. 129). The fact that over 60 percent of his victims were male seems to contradict their intended point. His targeting of the government offices of the ruling Labour Party and their summer youth camp because he opposed their pro-feminist and multicultural policies would be more pertinent to the analysis, but that information was not provided.

The book also avoids a clear chronological definition for the "age" of lone wolf terrorism. The book covers the period 1940-2016, but the significance of the year 1940 is a mystery. Likewise, much of the analysis is divided into pre-9/11 and post-9/11 discussions, but the authors provide no justification for this framework. While the attacks of 2001 generated new and widespread interest in the question of terrorism, the impact of this coordinated attack by a foreign terrorist organization on trends in lone wolf terrorist activity is unclear.

Recognizing lone actor threats and preventing violent attacks is a laudable goal, but the authors underestimate the challenge. Patterns appear much clearer in hindsight. Narratives of each lone wolf’s life are pieced together in the aftermath of a violent attack or foiled plot, and then mined for data points. Employing these markers as predictive tools raises numerous concerns. While their model avoids the pitfalls of demonizing particular religious or ideological groups, they oversimplify the ease with which authorities can legally intervene, particularly when the suspect is a US citizen acting alone. While the authors acknowledge the difficulties presented by the availability of firearms and protection under the Second Amendment, there is no meaningful discussion of First Amendment rights. Within their model, the key to prevention is combating the "bystander effect" to intervene when potential perpetrators broadcast their intent. As their own case studies indicate, intervention can often trigger violent action or further radicalization. Moreover, (with a few exceptions) investigative and prosecutorial powers are limited to actions, not thoughts. Everyday speech often incorporates hyperbole, dark humor, and inappropriate and offensive language. When is it "just talk," and when should it be taken as a serious threat? As the authors note, lone wolf terrorists find encouragement and inspiration increasingly online. Since the publication of the book, debates on free speech and social media have intensified. The trade-offs between free speech and terrorism prevention pose challenging questions for a democratic republic, and not addressing these complexities represents a failure of the book. On the other hand, the final chapters explore with candor and finesse another controversial area of terrorism prevention: FBI sting operations. These sections raise thought-provoking questions about the morality and effectiveness of strategies that encourage and enable radicalization to capture "would-be" terrorists. Related case studies add depth to the discussion and assigning excerpts from these chapters will stimulate lively classroom
discussions.

Since the publication of the book, research into extremism in the online sphere has advanced considerably. The emergence of phenomena such as the Boogaloo Bois, a self-generating leaderless group communicating online but acting individually and in small cells, also introduces new complexities in defining “lone actors” and “group affinity.” Nevertheless, the book provides perhaps the broadest compilation of case studies of lone wolf terrorists in the United States from World War II to 2016, providing details typically lacking in other works and searchable through the book’s index. In this sense it also offers insight for scholars using the publicly accessible American lone wolf terror database for their own research. Hamm and Spaaij correctly predicted the expansion of lone wolf terrorism and the need for deeper research into differences between individual motivation and group dynamics in the radicalization process. Although current research has eclipsed some of their observations, the book continues to provide a useful introduction into the history of lone wolf terrorism in the United States.

The views expressed here are those of the author and do not represent the official positions of the Air Force Culture and Language Center, the Air University, the United States Air Force, or the United States Government.

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