Patterns of precursor behaviors in the life span of a U.S. environmental terrorist group

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**Research Summary**

This article discusses the paucity of data available for assessing the “life span” of a terrorist group. It introduces a new methodology that allows researchers to examine when terrorist groups perform their preincident activities. The findings suggest that differences exist in the temporal patterns of terrorist groups: environmental terrorist groups engage in a relatively short planning cycle compared with right-wing and international terrorists. The article concludes by examining a case study on “the Family,” which is a unique environmental terrorist group that conducted activities over a relatively long period of time. This group provides an interesting contrast to other environmental terrorists. Despite significant organizational differences, their patterns of preparatory conduct were highly similar.

**Policy Implications**

The findings suggest that (1) temporal and spatial data about preincident terrorist activity can be collected from unclassified and open sources and (2) law-enforcement agencies that are investigating environmental groups have relatively little time to observe and infiltrate their individual cells (compared with right-wing and international terrorists). Finally, the data suggest that environmental terrorists—at least so far—have engaged in attacks that are less deadly than the comparison groups.

**Keywords**

environmental terrorism, extremism, terrorism, eco-terrorism, preincident patterns

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Although the “life cycle” of terrorist groups has been the focus of considerable recent scholarly interest (see Sageman, 2004; Smith and Picarelli, 2008; and Cronin, 2006), in particular, for a review of some of this work), this type of research remains in its infancy. There have been some estimates regarding the average life span of terrorist groups (e.g., Rapoport, 1992), but most of these estimates have been based on case studies rather than on empirical data using reliable sampling techniques. A variety of methodological obstacles are probably responsible for the lack of reliable information about the life span of these groups. Terrorist groups frequently change names for specific occasions, coalesce with other groups and then disperse again, and even disband only to emerge again with different personnel. This amoeba-like quality not only makes the study of terrorist groups challenging, but it also increases the probability that estimates regarding terrorist groups’ life courses will be limited to specific examples or, worse yet, are completely unreliable. Like the article by Freilich, Caspi, and Chermak (2009, this issue), this article explores some of these methodological issues and suggests how these problems can be overcome.

In addition, we examine variables affecting terrorist groups’ life spans. Recruitment, training, governmental response, and a host of other societal and economic issues may significantly affect whether a terrorist group remains intact over time. Although many of these factors are not easily measured, one of our goals was to identify research questions that may encourage scholars to examine the temporal patterns of terrorist activity in greater detail through the creation of empirically verified data. Finally, we selected one terrorist organization, a group of environmental extremists known as “the Family,” to serve as a case study for this analysis. The group was chosen because of its unique characteristics and the methodological opportunities it presents regarding terrorist groups’ planning cycles.

Problems with Studying the Life Span of Terrorist Groups

Rapoport (1992) and LaFree and Dugan (2008) estimated that the life span of the average terrorist group was remarkably short—usually 1 year or less. Efforts to validate these assessments, however, must confront at least three problems.

First, terrorist groups occasionally change their names prior to committing a specific act of terrorism. The May 19th Communist Organization (M19CO) led by Marilyn Buck in the early 1980s is a classic example of this technique. On January 28, 1983, the group used the name “Revolutionary Fighting Group” to claim credit for damage in the bombing of the federal building on Staten Island, New York. In three subsequent bombings in 1983, they used the name “armed Resistance unit” when they sent communiqués to the media.1 The National War College, the Washington Navy Yard, and the U.S. Capital Building were all bombing victims of the Armed Resistance Unit. In 1984, they again changed their name, this time to the “Red Guerrilla Resistance.” Three more targets were hit that year: the Israeli Aircraft Industries

1. In the terrorism literature, “communiqués” refer to communications from terrorist groups describing their motivation for the terrorist act.
Building in New York City, the Washington Navy Yard Officers’ Club, and the South African Consulate in New York were all bombed before the spree ended with the arrests of some of the group’s members in November (see Smith, 1994, for additional details). It was not until their indictment in 1988 that the public learned that all three groups were actually one and the same. M19CO was formed in 1979 and—during its 7-year life span—was responsible for several notorious crimes, including the escapes of leftist terror group leaders JoAnne Chesimard and William Morales.

Second, some terrorist groups may have been decimated by arrest only to rise again with new personnel and, sometimes, a different name. In 1987 and 1988, for example, David Foreman and a small band of his Earth First adherents vandalized power lines in northern Arizona and ski lifts at a resort in Flagstaff. Two years after his 1989 indictment, Foreman renounced his ties to the Earth First movement that he had created, claiming it had become tied to left extremism in the group’s California wing (Smith, 1994).2 The movement reemerged the following year with the name Earth Liberation Front. Although some might claim that Earth Liberation Front is a separate and distinctly different group than the Earth First movement, the origins of the latter can be traced to the former, which creates a considerable problem for scholars trying to document the life span of this extremist group.

Third, some group members affiliate with several groups over time, which makes it difficult to identify a stable membership base within a terrorist group from which to trace the group’s life course. Within the extreme right, a good example is the Order. While maintaining some affiliation with the Covenant, Sword, and Arm of the Lord (CSA), many members drifted from the CSA to the newly formed Order. Additional Order members emerged from the Aryan Nations and some participants in the Order (particularly those indicted for seditious conspiracy in the aftermath of the Order’s demise) maintained primary membership in the CSA and Aryan Nations and only loosely affiliated themselves with the Order (Hamm, 2007; Smith, 1994).

Leftist terrorists in the United States may provide an even better example of this problem. Marilyn Buck is a good example. She was the leader of M19CO, had been a member of the Weather Underground and the Black Liberation Army, and she had ties to the Black Panthers and the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional—which is a violent Puerto Rican independence group. Sometimes her affiliation with these groups led them to coalesce for specific incidents (such as they did for the 1981 Nyack, New York, armored truck robbery), only to dissipate once the attack was completed. Such behaviors were so confusing to law-enforcement authorities that U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director William Webster testified before Congress after the Nyack robbery that, “there is no known coalescing of an ideological synthesis among (domestic terrorist) groups, nor do we have any sense that they have become effective” (Hearings on FBI Oversight before the Subcommittee on Security and Terrorism of the Committee on the Judiciary, 1982).

2. Mike Roselle, who was a leader in the California wing of Earth First, referred to Foreman as an “unrepentant right-wing thug” when he heard of Foreman’s resignation (Sidener, 1990).
Factors Affecting the Life Span of American Terrorist Groups

Despite these problems, we have learned a great deal about the factors that affect the longevity of terrorist groups. Several important works examining this issue have been published in recent years, most of which have focused on the desistance of terrorist groups. Most notable are works by Crenshaw (1991) and Cronin (2006). Crenshaw’s 1991 piece on “how terrorism declines” and her subsequent identification of variables and situations potentially linked to the demise of terrorist groups in a special report by the U.S. Institute of Peace (1999) provided a framework from which much of the research on this subject has evolved. In the 1999 report, Crenshaw suggested that both internal and external factors could effectuate a group’s desistance from terrorism: (1) success in meeting group goals, (2) partial success by raising public awareness about issues the group considered important, (3) failure in funding or recruitment resulting in organizational breakdown, (4) loss of support from broader constituents, and (5) identification of alternatives to political violence as a means of conflict resolution.

Second, Cronin’s (2006) review of the literature on how terrorism ends constitutes an excellent summary of the current status of research on the subject and provides a model for analyzing desistance from terrorism. Drawing from the conclusions of previous work (see, for example, Crenshaw, 1995; Rapoport, 2004; Ross and Gurr, 1989; Silke, 2004; Sprinzak, 1995), Cronin (2006) contended that the demise of most terrorist groups results from one or more of the following factors: (1) removal of group leadership, (2) unsuccessful transition to the next generation of militants, (3) success, (4) transition to legitimate political means, (5) loss of popular support, (6) repression, and (7) a shift from either terrorism to criminality or full insurgency. She cited numerous examples of international and U.S. domestic groups whose ends were caused by these factors.

Here in the United States, some of these factors have been more relevant than others (Smith, Damphousse, and Roberts, 2006). Although factors affecting desistance from terrorism lack empirical validation, many have manifested themselves in case studies of U.S. terrorist groups. Furthermore, in-depth mining of court records and open-source materials in the United States allows us to assess how some of these factors identified by Crenshaw (1995) and Cronin (2006) have influenced U.S. terrorists. In particular, the following contingencies seem to be crucially important to the life span of U.S. terrorist groups during the last few decades: (1) whether the group continues to recruit after going underground, (2) the quality of the group’s security measures and training, (3) whether the group’s ideological foundation remains germane, and (4) how the polity responds to the group’s activities. Each of these contingencies is discussed in the following subsections.
Recruitment
From the time an extremist group commits to acts of terrorism, it is faced with the ultimate dilemma: Does it continue to recruit to enlarge its membership and thereby run the risk of infiltration by the authorities or does it cease recruiting and hope that its communiqués and terrorist acts will attract converts to the movement—despite not having direct contact with members of the organization? Some leaders of terrorist groups have apparently given this dilemma a great deal of thought. The leadership of the United Freedom Front, which was a leftist terrorist group during the 1970s and 1980s, chose not to recruit because of its fear of infiltration. With only eight members, the group engaged in more than 30 bank robberies and bombings in its anticapitalist and antiwar violence spree from 1975 to 1984, earning itself the distinction of being the United States’ most prolific domestic terrorist group. In contrast, some right-wing groups like the Order and the Arizona Patriots continued to recruit after beginning to engage in terrorism. The Order’s demise resulted from the defection of a peripheral member, whereas the Arizona Patriots’ downfall was from heavy law-enforcement infiltration (Hamm, 2007; Martinez, 1988; Smith, 1994). In contrast to the United Freedom Front, neither of these groups lasted more than 18 months. Solving this dilemma is so essential to group survival that many extremist groups in the United States began experimenting with alternative sustainability strategies in the early 1990s.4

Security Measures
U.S. terrorist groups that sustained themselves for any length of time invariably had fairly sophisticated techniques for internal communication. The United Freedom Front, for example, perfected the use of “mail drops,” the meeting “sets,” and the extensive use of safe houses, thereby sustaining itself for a decade. The Family, which is an environmental group to be discussed at length later in this article, had a central core membership known as the “Book Club.” The Book Club provided an opportunity for members to receive instruction in secure communication through computer technology. This training resulted in the members using “draft” e-mail messaging and encryption technology to communicate safely with each other. Were it not for the arrest and cooperation with law enforcement by one of its members, the Family’s arson spree might have continued beyond the 6 years it existed. Other terrorists who remained active for several years (such as Eric Rudolph and Ted Kaczynski) precluded such communication problems by avoiding contact with others and employing “lone wolf” tactics (Arnold, 1997; Vollers, 2006). More careless individuals and groups have succumbed to early interdiction. Many of the militia groups of the late 1990s, such as the Mountaineer Militia, readily found that loose lips do indeed sink ships.

3. This is essentially synonymous with Cronin’s (2006) notion of “failure to transition to the next generation.”
4. The use of “uncoordinated violence” approaches such as “leaderless resistance,” the use of “hit lists” on Internet postings by environmental and antiabortion extremist groups, and the use of “fatwahs” by Islamic extremists are examples of alternative strategies.
Ideological Relevance
When the “cause” that motivates the terrorist group disappears, the group has two options. Some groups have turned their attention to a new cause. When Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese Army in April 1975 and U.S. forces withdrew from the country, for example, West German terrorist groups like the Red Army Faction began to take up the cause of the Palestinians (Hoffman, 2006). According to one of the founders of the group Movement 2 June, “Since Vietnam is finished, people should get involved with Palestine” (Baumann, 1979: 60). The availability of a suitable alternative cause may extend the life span of a terrorist group.

It may be more common, however, for terrorist groups simply to fade away because their cause is no longer relevant. Extreme leftist terrorist groups in the United States found this to be the case on several occasions. The Weather Underground, for example, based its existence on opposition to the Vietnam War and, when the war ended, left its members as rebels without a cause. Advances during the civil rights movement also left groups like the Black Liberation Army with less reason to continue the fight (Hoffman, 2006). Regarding the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional and Macheteros organizations, the Puerto Rican plebiscites in 1993 and 1998 revealed little support for the independence movement on the island. Decimated by arrests and with little popular support, the two organizations faded in the mid 1990s (Smith, 1994).

Governmental Intervention
Yet more often than not, previous research using government data has suggested that most terrorist groups in the United States have eventually succumbed to governmental interdiction. That said, Cronin (2006) has been skeptical about using such data to support this thesis because of the issue of self-selection (or sample selection bias). If researchers rely on data provided by a government, there is a potential for attending only to cases in which the government was successful. A review of approximately 325 terrorism acts officially labeled by the FBI between 1980 and 2005 indicates that most events were eventually resolved by arrest. Although government intervention has involved arrest and prosecution for most group members, the relationship between the demise of particular terrorist groups and the government’s response is actually more complex.

Law-enforcement and prosecutorial focus on terrorism has fluctuated over time and the number of persons investigated and indicted under federal terrorism investigations has varied accordingly (Damphousse and Shields, 2007). For example, renewed interest in prosecuting terrorists in the early 1980s led to the creation and expansion of the FBI’s terrorism taskforce strategy, implementation of the William French Smith Attorney General’s Guidelines in 1983, and elevation of terrorism investigations to “priority one.” These actions resulted in one of the most productive eras of FBI counterrorism efforts in years. From 1985 to 1988, federal prosecutions decimated remaining left-wing terrorist groups and suppressed a growing right-wing white supremacy/Christian identity/antitax movement (Damphousse and Smith, 2004; 5. This designation is no longer used by the FBI.)
Similarly, passage of the 1996 Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act resulted in significant increases in prosecutions and convictions for providing material support to international terrorist groups, particularly following the 9/11 attacks (Smith and Damphousse, 1998). Other less known government strategies to persuade potential terrorist groups to desist from terrorist behavior have produced similar results without prosecution. For example, in the aftermath of the siege at Ruby Ridge and the Oklahoma City bombing, the FBI embarked on a highly successful Militia Outreach Program intended to decrease tensions between federal law-enforcement agencies and the burgeoning militia movement. 6

Two Temporal Approaches: Life Spans and Precursor Behaviors

The behaviors of terrorists can be temporally examined in many ways. Some have argued that international terrorism demonstrates a cyclical nature, with well-defined peaks and valleys (Enders and Sandler, 2004), whereas others have contended that a broader look at international terrorism reveals the existence of waves of terror lasting as long as several decades (Rapoport, 2004). Although important for strategic planning, law-enforcement officials have found that such modeling provides little help in determining when and how to intervene in threats presented by specific groups. Consequently, much law-enforcement training in the United States currently focuses on the identification of preincident indicators drawn from case studies.

To compensate for some of these problems, we used two different approaches to examine the temporal patterns of U.S. terrorists for a series of projects funded by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ; Smith, Cothren, Roberts, and Damphousse, 2008; Smith, Damphousse, and Roberts, 2006). The first approach attempted to measure the life span of U.S. terrorist groups by temporally recording all terrorist incidents attributed to the groups. Although this approach does not reveal the length of time from initial radicalization to first terrorist incident, it does provide a reliable indicator of the length of time a group was involved in terrorist activities. The second approach involved recording the known precursor behaviors associated with each terrorist incident. Some of these behaviors were criminal and others were not.

In this article, we elected to use these approaches to examine a single terrorist group in the United States—the environmental group known as the Family (or the Book Club). The Family is unique among environmental terrorists. Unlike most Animal Liberation Front and Earth Liberation Front “direct actions,” whose operatives acted alone and outside the realm of a known organizational structure, the Family consisted of a fairly large “cell” of at least 20 members. Furthermore, they committed numerous acts of arsons and “ecotage” over a 6-year period from 1995 through 2001. 7 Both the length of the conspiracy and the deviation from traditional environmental extremism make the Family a fascinating comparison with other terrorist groups.

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6. This was described to the author by one FBI supervisory agent as the “take your militia leader to lunch program.”

7. The term “ecotage” refers to ecological sabotage.
Data and Method
The current analysis of the Family’s activities is extracted from a combination of several much larger projects funded by the NIJ and the Department of Homeland Security (Smith et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2006). In 2003, the NIJ began funding a series of projects to examine the precursor activities of terrorist groups in the United States. Results from this pilot project were extremely promising. Subsequent funding was provided to collect additional data on international and environmental terrorists, hereafter referred to as the Geospatial Analysis of Terrorist Activities (GATA) project. A third project involved the collection of geospatial, temporal, demographic, and legal data regarding terrorism incidents (or prevented incidents) that had been the focus of federal scrutiny over a period of three decades.

Most of the incidents chosen for these analyses were selected from the American Terrorism Study database, which is a Department of Homeland Security and Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism-funded project that collects data on people indicted as a result of an FBI terrorism investigation, as defined by the attorney general guidelines for FBI terrorism and counterintelligence investigations. Although reference will be made to data from the other projects, the methodology used in the GATA project—which focused on environmental groups and includes the Family case data—will be described here. More detailed information on the data collection involved in these projects is available in the NIJ final technical reports for the first two of these projects (Smith et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2006).

For the GATA project, an initial sample of 54 court cases was selected from the American Terrorism Study. These cases were augmented by 29 additional case studies identified by a panel of subject matter experts. Of the 83 court cases and case studies, 20 were deemed not have sufficient information available, so we were left with 63 cases from which to collect data. Of these 63 cases, 5 were combined for a final total of 58 “case studies.” The data set included more than 400 variables related to the addresses or locations of the incidents, terrorists’ homes, antecedent behaviors, telephone calls, and group meetings. It also included temporal data (i.e., dates and sequence of these behaviors), relationships among group members, and demographic and legal variables.

Information on each of the 58 cases was extracted from several sources: (1) federal criminal court case records (e.g., indictments, FBI affidavits, transcripts); (2) newspapers, books, and print media; and (3) other open sources, including Internet searches and other publicly available
documents. The data were compiled by the Institute for Intelligence Studies at Mercyhurst College and were formatted into an Oracle database for analysis by the Center for Advanced Spatial Technologies at the University of Arkansas. The case studies contained information on 173 perpetrated or planned incidents (55 international and 118 environmental). Time constraints and lack of sufficient information resulted in us only being able to collect complete data on 136 of these incidents for the spatial analysis.

We are focusing only on the temporal data. Unfortunately, of the two data sets (spatial and temporal), the temporal data are much more difficult to obtain and verify. For the temporal analysis, identification of both an incident date and dates of preparatory behaviors are required for analysis and 39 incidents contained sufficient temporal data for analysis. Temporal analysis was limited, therefore, to these 10 international and 29 environmental incidents. Of the 29 environmental incidents, the Family was responsible for 21. Known temporal patterns depict an attenuated version of real events in each of these cases so we may never know all the meetings and preparations involved in a specific incident. Consequently, our findings must be discussed with caution. That said, if we assume that the volume of “missing” precursor terrorist group behaviors is random across types of groups, then comparisons between group types is possible (Little and Rubin, 1987).

Results
We discuss the Family’s activities in three subsections. First, we provide a brief history of the group, a timeline of its major direct actions, and general comments regarding the events that led to its longevity and eventual desistance. In the second subsection, we describe the preparatory behaviors for each of the incidents and compare them with known behavior patterns of non-environmental terrorist groups and other environmental terrorist groups. The third subsection is a summary of the influence of each of the four major issues affecting longevity (i.e., recruitment, quality of security measures, ideological relevance, and government intervention).

Evolution and Desistance
The Family emerged in 1995 from an eclectic group of environmental activists with fairly diverse backgrounds but a singular commitment to environmental extremism. Some members were “hippies,” others leftists and anarchists, and some—like Jacob Ferguson, who eventually became the FBI’s primary informant—had extensive criminal backgrounds. Mostly middle class and young, the group’s anarchist-hippie attitude toward life was reflective of late-1960s leftist extremism. Almost all of the 20 or so members of the group lived in the Pacific Northwest and became acquainted through the anarchist-environmental movement in and around Eugene, Oregon. In addition, many lived in (or were frequent visitors to) a semipermanent environmental protest site in the Willamette Valley called “Fort Warner” (Grigoriadis, 2006).

Federal prosecutors eventually connected members of the group to 21 “ecotage” and arson attacks from December 1995 through October 2001 (Indictments and U.S. Government’s
FIGURE 1

“The Family” incident timeline

12/24/1995
Dutch Girl Arson:
Tubbs

10/28/1996
Detroit Ranger
Station Arson:
Ferguson
Overaker

10/30/1996
Oakridge Ranger
Station Arson:
Ferguson
Overaker
Tubbs

8/21/1998
USDAAPHIS
and ADC Arsons:
Ferguson
Tubbs
Rodgers
Dibee
Overaker

9/21/1998
Redwood Coast and
Wayne Bare Trucking
Company Arsons:
Ferguson
Tankersley

Burns BLM Arson:
Ferguson
Tubbs
Overaker
Rodgers
Rubin

10/11/1998
BPA Transmission
Tower Destruction:
Ferguson
Meyerhoff
Overaker
Gerlach

12/30/1999
BPA Transmission
Tower Destruction:
Ferguson
Meyerhoff
Overaker
Gerlach

5/21/2001
UW
Horticulture
Center:
Rodgers
Solondz
Waters
Kolar
Philiabeum

5/15/2001
Litchfield BLM
Arson:
Meyerhoff
Dibee
Kolar
Thurston
Rubin
Tubbs

7/21/1997
Cavel West Arson:
Paul
Kolar
Dibee
Tubbs
Ferguson

11/30/1997
BLM Wild Horse
Corrals Arson:
Ferguson
Overaker
Tubbs
Rodgers,
Meyerhoff
Gerlach
Rubin

10/19/1998
Vail Ski Resort Arson:
Ferguson
Overaker
Tubbs
Rodgers
Meyerhoff
Gerlach
Rubin

12/27/1998
US Forest Industries Arson:
Ferguson
Tubbs
Tankersley
Rubin

5/9/1999
Childers Meat Co. Arson:
Ferguson
Meyerhoff
Tubbs
Overaker
Gerlach
Unindicted Co-conspirator

9/2/2000
WUPS Substation
Arson:
Meyerhoff
Tubbs
Gerlach

1/2/2001
Superior Lumber
Company Arson:
Ferguson
Meyerhoff
Tubbs
Savoie
McGowan

3/30/2001
Romania Chevrolet
Truck Center Arson:
Meyerhoff
Tubbs
Rodgers
Block
Zacher

Length of conspiracy six years
Sentencing Memorandum, 2007). As of July 2008, 16 members had been convicted of these crimes and 4 remained fugitives. Kevin Tubbs committed the Family’s first terrorist act in December 1995 when he placed timed incendiary devices on three trucks at the Dutch Girl Dairy in Eugene, Oregon, then spray painted “A.L.F.” and “Go Vegan” on other trucks. Nine months later, two additional participants (Jacob Ferguson and his then-girlfriend, Josephine Overaker) attempted to burn the Detroit Ranger Station at Detroit, Oregon; they also spray-painted the facility and trucks with different graffiti, attributing the act to the “Earth Liberation Front.”

Thus began the series of attacks that stretched into the next decade. A timeline of their terrorist acts is provided in Figure 1. The figure shows the 6-year life course of the Family’s conspiracy, the dates of each attack, and the members who were known to be involved in each attack. The attacks began with the Christmas Eve Dutch Girl arson in 1995 by Tubbs and ended with the Litchfield Bureau of Land Management Horse Corrals arson in 2001. Note that, even though as many as 20 people were members of the Family during this period, no attack was perpetrated by more than 8 members.

Ferguson (a semiskilled criminal with a drug habit), Overaker (his adoring, environmentalist girlfriend), and Tubbs (a college-educated animal rights radical with degrees in philosophy and fine arts) formed the core participants in the formative years of the organization (Grigoriadis, 2006). During this time, they became acquainted with William Rodgers, who eventually became the group leader once it had expanded to include 20 or more members. By early 1997, three additional people were added to the list of active participants in the group. Tubbs and Ferguson conducted reconnaissance on a score of fur farms and Bureau of Land Management facilities before deciding on a horse processing plant in Redmond, Oregon, as the next target. Then they recruited Jonathan Paul (a well-known animal rights activist), Jennifer Kolar (Paul’s girlfriend who was working on her Ph.D. at the University of Colorado), and Joseph Dibee (a Microsoft Internet security tester; Freeman, 2007; Grigoriadis, 2006; U.S. Government Sentencing Memorandum, 2007). They burned the Cavel West meat processing facility to the ground in July 1997, which resulted in approximately $1 million in damages—their most destructive arson to date.

The 14-month period from November 1997 through December 1998 was an important period for the group. Their successes led them to recruit five more members. In addition to William Rodgers (aka Avalon), who eventually assumed the leading role in the organization, the group added Kendall Tankersley (Ferguson’s then girlfriend and receptionist at a Planned Parenthood clinic), Gregory Meyerhof (a radical anarchist who eventually called for violent action against persons, not just facilities), Rebecca Rubin (reportedly a Canadian animal researcher who studied cranes), and Chelsea Dawn Gerlach (who began her transformation to radical environmentalism after meeting William Rodgers in 1993 at the age of 16 years; Abraham, 2006; Grigoriadis, 2006; U.S. Government Sentencing Memorandum, 2007). Gerlach, who had

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11. The four fugitives are Josephine “Sunshine” Overaker, Rebecca Rubin, Joseph Dibee, and Justin Solondz.
12. Chelsea Dawn Gerlach is also known as Sarah Kendall Harvey.
been romantically involved with Meyerhof while they were in high school in Eugene, Oregon, later became romantically involved with Darren Thurston (a late addition to the group). Gerlach and Thurston often sold drugs as their major source of income (U.S. Government Sentencing Memorandum, 2007: 92–93). These individuals were all highly committed to environmental activism and were selected for participation in specific acts after members of the group became acquainted with them at environmental meetings.

In 1998, Rodgers and Dibee formed a plan to train core group members through what came to be known as “Book Club” meetings. Five of these meetings were held in different locations around the country. The first meeting included the core group of nine members, though Jacob Ferguson, the founding member of the group and its most prolific arsonist, was not among the attendees. The meetings included training on lock-picking, computer security, target reconnaissance, and bomb making (Petition to Enter Plea of Guilty for Kendall Tankersley, 2006). At one of these meetings, Jennifer Kolar (who had become a software designer for AOL) shared “her extensive expertise in computers by providing encryption diskettes and instructing in their use, so the group could communicate secretly” (U.S. Government’s Sentencing Memorandum, 2007: 123). As many as 16 of the members attended at least one of the Book Club meetings.

In 1998 and 1999, the group committed at least nine major attacks, including the arson at a Vail ski resort as it was under construction. This concentration of acts is evident in Figure 1. The Vail attack was their most destructive attack and one that launched their cause into the national limelight. Directed personally by William Rodgers, the Vail fire damage was estimated at nearly $25,000,000. Yet during 2000, the group was inactive and some of the members became disillusioned, believing that their tactics were not having the desired effects. The ski resort at Vail, for example, was covered by insurance and was rebuilt in an even more grandiose fashion than before. In fact, all of the facilities they firebombed were rebuilt within a matter of months (Grigoriadis, 2006).

In 2001, the group ended their dormancy, but it was also the year of their undoing. To show support for Jeffrey Luers—an environmental activist accused of burning three sport utility vehicles—Bill Rodgers and four others burned 35 sport utility vehicles at a Chevrolet dealership in Eugene, Oregon, the night before Luers’s March 31 trial was set to begin. In addition to being a member of a radical punk rock band, a heavy drug user, and a womanizer, Ferguson’s reputation as an outspoken environmental activist led many protesters to wrongly assume that he had been involved. The public linking of Ferguson’s name to the attack sent shockwaves through the Family. Considerable dissention had developed within the group, including disagreements about the success of their actions and problems with Rodgers’ abusive sexual behavior, and the group committed its last direct action on October 15, 2001—even as members had begun to scatter across the country.

In the years that followed, Ferguson became addicted to heroin, Rodgers moved to Arizona, and others in the group returned to their earlier lives as activists instead of arsonists. Some, however, increasingly turned to crime and violence. Darren Thurston and Chelsea Gerlach, for example, became heavily involved in drug trafficking, bought an arsenal of weapons, and even
provided explosives training for Zapatista guerrillas from Mexico (U.S. Government Sentencing Memorandum, 2007).

After the immediate effects of the 9/11 attacks had subsided, the FBI’s renewed interest in domestic terrorism brought increased focus on the Family’s arsons, and Ferguson became the center of attention. Fearing a life behind bars, he agreed to become a government informant. In addition to providing federal prosecutors with details about his involvement in the arsons, Ferguson was flown around the country, wired for sound, and set up to meet with the now-scattered members of the group. Over time, he obtained incriminating statements from many of them.

In December 2005, 6 of the members, including Rodgers, were arrested for crimes affiliated with the Family (Egan, 2005). When he was arrested in Arizona, Rodgers was found not only with incriminating evidence about the Family’s activities, but also with child pornography on his computer. He eventually hanged himself in his jail cell in December 2005. The following month, 11 members of the Family were indicted in federal court in Eugene, Oregon (Janofsky, 2006). After their indictments, the defendants turned on each other. Because many of the members had been romantically involved with other members in the group, jealousy and conflict over sexual issues became fodder for both defense attorneys and prosecutors alike.

Four members of the group went underground and remain fugitive: Justin Solondz (Briana Waters’ former boyfriend), Josephine Overaker (Ferguson’s first girlfriend in the group), Rebecca Rubin (believed to be in Canada), and Joseph Dibee (who had allegedly planned to assassinate Jonathan Paul; Government’s Sentencing Memorandum, 2007: 79). Other than those still fugitive, all defendants except one pleaded guilty to one or more of the charges against them. Only Briana Waters (a violin teacher from Olympia, Washington, who served as a lookout during the arson at the University of Washington Center for Urban Horticulture) went to trial. She was convicted and sentenced on June 20, 2008, to 6 years in the federal penitentiary and was ordered to pay $6 million in restitution to the University of Washington (Bartley and Carter, 2008).

**Incident Planning and Preparation**

Our second method of examining temporal issues involved using each incident as the unit of analysis. This method may be a useful tool for law enforcement because routinized patterns of conduct can be identified for specific groups. Although this approach is still new, some patterns of behavior have been identified (see Smith et al., 2006, 2008, for an overview of initial NIJ projects using this approach). Figure 2 shows a summary of these temporal patterns in precursor behaviors for the terrorists in our data set divided by terrorism motivation (i.e., international, environmental, right wing, and left wing). Antecedent conduct that could not be linked di-

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13. Thurston, a Canadian with an extensive criminal record, remains a fugitive and is believed to be in Canada.

14. Known as Operation Backfire, the 10-year investigation eventually had successes in 2004 and 2005.

15. Despite having a leading role in the organization, Ferguson received 2 years of probation and no restitution requirements for his activities (Associated Press, 2008).
rectly to a particular incident was excluded from the analysis. We collected more than 1,300
temporal measurements across all groups. In general, this method of examining the temporal
sequencing of the terrorists’ planning and preparation processes indicates that environmental
terrorists engage in a shorter preparatory cycle than any other groups that committed acts of
terrorism in the United States.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category (Incidents)</th>
<th>3+ years</th>
<th>1–3 years</th>
<th>6–12 months</th>
<th>1–6 months</th>
<th>21–30 days</th>
<th>11–20 days</th>
<th>6–10 days</th>
<th>2–5 days</th>
<th>Day before</th>
<th>Incident day</th>
<th>Total acts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Left wing (45)</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right wing (40)</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International (13)</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single issue, other (11)</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental (38)</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All categories (147)</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>962</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The information in the figure shows the percent of precursor activities that took place at
distinct time periods before the terrorist attack. For example, several of the international, left-
wing, and right-wing terrorist groups took longer than a year to complete preparations for an
incident: 75% of their behaviors took place prior to 10 days before the incident and most of
their preparations occurred between 11 days and 6 months prior to the terrorist act. However,
most (88%) preparations for environmental acts of terrorism occurred within 30 days of the
incident. Of the 38 environmental incidents that we examined for which temporal data were
available, more than 30% occurred either the day of the incident or the day prior. Compared
with left-wing (3%), right-wing (7%), international (6%), and other single-issue terrorists
(8%), the data suggest that environmental terrorists seem to be much more spontaneous than
other types of terrorists.

Part of the reason environmental terrorists seem to have such a short planning cycle may
be their tactics and the crimes they commit. Infamous for using uncoordinated violence, both
the Animal Liberation Front and the Earth Liberation Front are known for “direct actions”
committed by “lone wolves” (or the “elves”). Most of their crimes require little preparation. That
said, because the Family represents such a departure from the uncoordinated violence (lone wolf)
model by involving a fairly large number of persons in a vast conspiracy, we initially suspected
that its patterns of preparatory conduct would reflect a longer planning and preparatory cycle
than other environmental incidents. But this does not seem to be the case.

We conducted a separate analysis of the Family’s preparatory activity for each of its serial
attacks. When we compared the confirmed preparatory behaviors in Family incidents with those
of other environmental terrorists, we observed a similarly short preparatory cycle. In Figure 3,
we present the temporal sequence of each preparatory act for 19 of the 21 incidents committed
by the Family. The data show that only 2 incidents (i.e., Cavel West and Litchfield) included preparatory activity more than 30 days before the attack. Instead, the majority of the precursor activities (60%) took place within 2 days of the attacks. This temporal pattern is similar to that exhibited by other environmental terrorists in our sample, suggesting that the length of attack planning by environmental terrorist groups seems to be independent of organizational structure and size.

However, that unlike environmental attacks that were committed by non-Family terrorists, members of the Family engaged in significant Internet research on potential targets as much as 3 to 4 months in advance of target selection. For example, Jacob Ferguson reportedly conducted reconnaissance on more than 20 fur farms and Bureau of Land Management facilities in the Northwest (Grigoriadis, 2006). Others had similar in-depth knowledge of potential environmental targets in the region because of their extensive earlier participation in the environmental movement. Most members of the Family were not novices: They were already knowledgeable about environmental issues, the corporations and facilities to be targeted, and basic monkey-wrenching tactics. Because these behaviors were not target specific, they were not included in our analysis of preparatory behaviors.

The type of weapon used (usually an incendiary device, sometimes with a timer, sometimes without) did not require the theft of explosive materials or a bomb-making laboratory. In fact, preparation of the typical “vegan jello” involved a 5-gallon bucket filled with gasoline and diesel fuel and a road flare or gas-soaked sponge to ignite the mixture. More complicated versions included a delay timer made from an alarm clock attached to a battery and light filament that heated up and ignited matches or some other source to ignite the explosive material (Government’s Sentencing Memorandum, 2007: 2–18). Because of the ease with which these devices could be made and the volatility and difficulty of storing them, the collection of ingredients and their actual construction usually occurred shortly before the attack. For these reasons, most attacks committed by the Family had a relatively short preparatory cycle. The easily accessible ingredients used and the difficulty of investigating arsons likewise might have contributed to the overall longevity of the group.

Discussion
Each of the four predictors of longevity—recruitment, quality of security measures, ideological relevance, and government intervention—played a role in the life span of the Family. The group committed more than a score of terrorist-related arsons for 6 years and then survived another 4 years before being indicted and convicted. Despite its 4-year hiatus, its initial 6-year run is fairly remarkable among U.S. terrorist groups. Although some others have had similar success (e.g., the United Freedom Front and the M19CO in particular), the Family must be considered one of the more successful terrorist groups in terms of longevity. It is also noteworthy that all

16. Temporal measurements were not available for the other 2 incidents.
### Temporal distribution of pre-incident activities of “the Family”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incidents (19/21)</th>
<th>3+ years</th>
<th>1-3 years</th>
<th>7-12 months</th>
<th>1-6 months</th>
<th>21-30 days</th>
<th>11-20 days</th>
<th>10 days</th>
<th>9 days</th>
<th>8 days</th>
<th>7 days</th>
<th>6 days</th>
<th>5 days</th>
<th>4 days</th>
<th>3 days</th>
<th>2 days</th>
<th>1 days</th>
<th>Day of incident</th>
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<td>&quot;Dutch Girl Dairy&quot;</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>&quot;Detroit Ranger Station&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Cavel West&quot;</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>&quot;Burns BLM&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;USDA APHIS 1&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;Arcata Trucking 1&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Vail Ski Resort&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;US Forest Industries&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;Childs Meat Co.&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;Boise Cascade&quot;</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;BPA Tower&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;WUPS Substation&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;Romania Chevrolet&quot;</td>
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</table>

**Act Total (71)**

| % Acts from Incidents | 3   | 2   | 4   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 6   | 3   | 4   | 10  | 17  | 15  | 100% | 96% | 93% | 87% | 86% | 85% | 82% | 80% | 77% | 69% | 65% | 59% | 45% | 21% |

* Temporal data on two of the incidents could not be found.
of these groups were leftist in orientation.\textsuperscript{17} Demographically, these groups were much better educated than members of other groups and included street-smart criminals with lower class backgrounds (Corley, Smith, and Damphousse, 2005; Smith and Damphousse, 2008; Smith and Morgan, 1994). Whether this combination caused their longevity is debatable, but the correlation is unquestionable.

Recruitment within the Family was unique. Most terrorist groups in the United States that chose to continue adding members after becoming active in terrorism quickly found themselves infiltrated by law-enforcement authorities or informants that brought the organization to an abrupt end (Smith, 1994). Those who added new members after they had started using terrorist methods (e.g., the Order) inducted people with little or no experience in violent extremism. The Family was an exception to this pattern. New members continued to be recruited for specific terrorist attacks and allowed to participate in Book Club meetings on into the final year of the group’s terror spree in 2001. However, the Family added personnel with established histories of active participation in direct action in other venues. Most additions to the Family were seasoned environmental extremists who had been arrested numerous times at demonstrations. They were known by Family members to be “true believers” in the cause.

Perhaps because of the educational backgrounds of many members, training in operations and security was exceptional within the group. The Book Club meetings provided training not only in operational tactics but also in secure communications. In addition to Jennifer Kolar’s expertise in communications software and the use of encryption techniques, Darren Thurston (who was also the primary publicist for the Animal Liberation Front during this time) taught the group “how to use ‘dead drops’ (anonymous e-mail accounts with unsent messages stored in the draft folder) for communicating secret messages” (U.S. Government Sentencing Memorandum, 2007: 134).

Tactically, the group wisely committed crimes (primarily arson) that are difficult to investigate. Although not the primary reason for the group’s eventual demise, the repeated use of similar timers on the incendiary devices eventually aided prosecutors in linking some of the crimes together. William Rodgers’ belief that investigators had connected his timing devices to some of his writings led him to post instructions on how to manufacture these devices on the Web. He reasoned that this posting would allow him to claim that others had simply picked up his techniques from the Web and that they were being used by numerous “elves.” Federal investigators did not believe that story.

Although the Family’s commitment to environmentalism cannot be questioned, many members eventually began to question the relevance of their tactics. As Grigoriadis (2006: 13)

\textsuperscript{17. Although the FBI lists environmental terror in the “single issue” category, many subtle characteristics of these groups suggest links to leftism. In addition to David Foreman’s assessment, they most resemble leftist groups from the 1970s and 1980s demographically; the Animal Liberation Front clearly incorporates the internationally recognized symbol for anarchism in its logo; both the Animal Liberation Front and the Earth Liberation Front refer to their terrorist behaviors as “direct actions,” an interesting descriptive reminiscent of the leftist Baader-Meinhof spin-off group in France that called itself “Directe Actione”; and many of the Family members were also affiliated with the anarchist movement in Eugene, Oregon.}
noted, “every single place they burned down had been rebuilt—even Vail, which was insured for the entire damage—was up and running in a manner of months and was expanded in exactly the ways environmentalists had been protesting. Even some of the hardcore members, including Kevin Tubbs (the Dog), began to see their biggest action as a dismal failure.” Others, however, like Daniel McGowan, never lamented the failure of these actions, claiming instead “the victory is in the…publicity” (U.S. Government Sentencing Memorandum, 2007: 107). Despite McGowan’s optimistic outlook, the Family was wracked by ideological discontent in its later years. In addition, many members simply did not like each other; discussions of altered communiqués, sexual infidelity, and abusive relationships came to consume much of the time at Book Club meetings.

Ultimately, fear about, and actual commitment of, government resources to investigate the string of Family arsons led to their demise. When Jacob Ferguson’s name was incorrectly linked to the arson of SUVs at the Romania Chevrolet Truck dealership March 2001, members of the Family feared the worst. Within a few months, the group disbanded. Although some members continued to affiliate with one another by providing financial assistance, false identification papers, and the like, the group ended its series of attacks after the October 2001 Bureau of Land Management horse corral arson.

Although the fear of arrest halted its activities, the Family was actually somewhat premature in believing that the government had marshaled its vast resources against them. FBI resources were committed primarily to preemting international terrorism after the September 11, 2001 attacks. The number of FBI joint terrorism task forces more than doubled and the number of federal agents assigned to counterterrorism increased dramatically (White, 2009). Once the international threat was assessed and contained, however, these resources were again free to combat domestic terrorism—and environmental terrorism was at the top of the list (Jarboe, 2002). Jacob Ferguson—the hard-rocking, drug-addicted musician and prolific anarchist arsonist—became the target of investigative pressure. By 2004, he had cracked and, under the threat of a lifetime in prison, agreed to cooperate fully in the investigation.

Although Jacob Ferguson had been involved in more acts of terrorism attributed to the Family than anyone else, he received the most lenient sentence for his crimes—2 years probation. Since Attorney General William French Smith issued new guidelines in 1983, FBI investigations on terrorism have concentrated on “beheading” terrorist organizations. Despite Ferguson’s longstanding and fervent participation, he was not recognized as the leader of the operation. Others—like William Rodgers, Joseph Dibee, Stan Meyerhof, Kevin Tubbs, Jonathan Paul, and Darren Thurston—were observed as more important figures in the environmental movement whose convictions were more likely to have a deterrent effect on people contemplating violence. Rodgers committed suicide while in jail awaiting trial and Dibee remains a fugitive. Of the remaining defendants, Meyerhof and Tubbs were sentenced to 13 years in prison and the other defendants were sentenced to 5 to 9 years. Compared with other people convicted through FBI terrorism investigations, these sentences are relatively light. How these prosecutions and
failures to capture Dibee, Overaker, and other Family members will affect people considering environmental extremism remains to be determined.

Conclusions
As part of three NIJ projects, temporal and spatial data were collected on 325 terrorism incidents in the United States from 1980 to 2004. Approximately three fourths of these incidents were designated “official” acts of terrorism in FBI annual reports. More than 3,000 spatial measurements and 1,300 temporal measurements were collected during the course of these projects, allowing comparisons between various groups regarding their planning behaviors and the spatial distribution of these acts. The Family perpetrated 21 of these officially designated acts of U.S. terrorism and provides an opportunity to examine issues involving both their longevity and their preparatory processes.

We examined many factors that have affected U.S. terrorist groups in the past to determine whether they influenced the longevity or demise of this particular environmental group. In general, we found that three of the four factors we examined—recruitment practices, security measures, and ideological relevance—contributed positively to the group’s ability to survive as long as it did. In particular, limiting recruitment to those immersed in the violent fringes of the environmental movement—most of whom already demonstrate a willingness to engage in illegal “direct actions”—combined with some fairly sophisticated and secure means of communication, seem to be important contributors to the group’s survival. However, like most groups who have engaged in terrorism in the United States, the government eventually was able to intervene successfully.

Finally, the Family is unique among environmental groups in that it involved a fairly large conspiracy, exhibiting organizational behaviors unlike most other environmental cases investigated by the FBI. Nevertheless, the group’s temporal behavior patterns are similar to other environmental terrorism groups. They had relatively short planning cycles per incident, which suggests that the type of incident committed (e.g., improvised incendiary bombings) is a more important predictor of the length of the preparatory process than is organizational structure. This finding is of course not conclusive, but it suggests that more research on this subject could be useful—for theoretical development as well as for informing practical intervention guidelines.

References


Smith, Brent L. and Kelly R. Damphousse. 2008. *Terrorism in time and space*. Presentation at the American Association for the Advancement of Science Conference, Boston, MA.


**Cases Cited**


**Statutes Cited**


Brent L. Smith is a distinguished professor and chair of the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice at the University of Arkansas. He also serves as director of the Terrorism Research Center in the University of Arkansas’s Fulbright College. His recent research has examined the geospatial and temporal patterns of American terrorists’ preparatory behaviors, defense and prosecutorial strategies in terrorism trials, and the measurement of government intervention strategies in counterterrorism. He is the author of *Terrorism in America: Pipe bombs and pipe dreams* (1994), and additional publications of his on terrorism have appeared in *Criminology, Justice Quarterly, Criminology & Public Policy*, the *National Institute of Justice Journal*, and other scholarly outlets.

Kelly R. Damphousse is the associate dean in the College of Arts and Sciences and Presidential Professor of Sociology at the University of Oklahoma. He has served as the associate director of the American Terrorism Study since 1994 and has completed research on terrorism, voice stress analysis, homicide, drugs and crime, Satanism, media and crime, gangs, jails, and prisons. From 1998 to 2004, he was site director of the NIJ-funded Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring program for Oklahoma City and Tulsa.