

Ethan Brubaker

All 'Right'? Alt-Right? All White?: An Analysis of the Political Violence Performed by the
Proud Boys

Introduction:

When one thinks of the Disney classic *Aladdin*, a Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) hate group does not typically come to mind. Yet, founder Gavin McInnes' unusual right-wing group, The Proud Boys, takes its name from the song "Proud of Your Boy", featured in the movie *Aladdin* ("Who Are the Proud Boys"). Despite the triviality of their name, the reality of the group is less juvenile. The Proud Boys have been labeled a "General Hate Group" by the SPLC and have become synonymous with attacks against leftist protestors ("The Proud Boys" [SPLC]). How does this group justify political violence against those with differing political ideologies? The answer is that they use frame their fighting as a response to perceived leftist attacks and choose to do so as an embodiment of their nostalgic views towards manhood.

This essay will unfold in the following sections. First, I will discuss the history of the Proud Boys and how they operate. Next, I will discuss their beliefs, followed by an analysis of their use of political violence and their means of justification. I will then respond to critics who argue that their violence is indicative of terrorism and conclude my essay with a discussion regarding how politicians can prevent future violence by the Proud Boys and similar organizations.

In this essay, political violence will be defined as it has been by scholar Ted Gurr as "all collective acts [of violence] within a political community against the political regime, its actors— including competing political groups as well as the incumbents—or its policies" (Gurr

4). The alt-right will be defined as it is by the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* as “a right-wing, primarily online political movement or grouping based in the U.S. whose members reject mainstream conservative politics and espouse extremist beliefs and policies typically centered on ideas of white nationalism” (“Alt-Right”).

Who are the Proud Boys?:

Founded in 2016, the Proud Boys embody a desire for the return of men’s clubs. After noticing that men’s fraternal organizations were no longer as present as they once were, Vice Media co-founder Gavin McInnes decided to create his own club during that year’s presidential election between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump (“Who are the Proud...”). McInnes believes that men’s groups became less popular in the mid-to-late twentieth century as a result of being deemed “sexist” (“Gavin McInnes Explains...”). Seeing the possibility for groups such as the Elks Club to become as popular as they once were, McInnes officially started the Proud Boys. He chose to name the group after the *Aladdin* song “Proud of Your Boy”, believing that no boy should ever be ashamed for acting like a stereotypical boy (“Gavin McInnes Explains...”).

The group became a refuge for men who are frustrated with mainstream politically correct culture. To be a member, the only requirements are to be “a Western Chauvinist” and male - as defined by being born with a penis (“Gavin McInnes Explains”). Despite the simple requirements, the group has attracted mostly libertarian and right-leaning men who enjoy drinking, patriotism, Western pride, and not “start[ing] fights, but end[ing] them” (“Who are the Proud...”).¹ This ideology has also led most members to reject mainstream conservatism and feel that modern political discourse fails to represent them (DeCook 492). In turn, this created an

¹ These fights are primarily aimed towards Antifa members [an organization dedicated to ‘anti-fascist’ causes] and liberal protestors.

extensive ‘in group’ that strengthens itself through a specific style (e.g. Fred Perry twin-tipped black and yellow shirt) and an online meme culture (e.g. memes that praise President Trump and Pepe the Frog) (“Decoding the Language...”; DeCook 491).

The masculine nature of the group is further embodied by the organization’s multiple degrees of membership. To be a member of the organization, one must claim “I am a Western Chauvinist and do not apologize for creating the modern world” (“The Fratty Proud Boys...”). The second degree is achieved by undergoing the aptly named “Cereal Initiation”, in which the member is punched by fellow Proud Boys until they can name five kinds of breakfast cereal (“The Fratty Proud Boys...”). The third degree demonstrates one’s allegiance to the organization by abstaining from masturbation and getting a tattoo that celebrates the Proud Boys (“The Fratty Proud Boys...”). The fourth degree of initiation is earned after a member has engaged in violence against a member of Antifa (“The Fratty Proud Boys...”). Despite the niche nature of the group, they state that their speed of growth across several countries (e.g. Japan and Australia) is a testament to the groups appeal and popularity (“Welcome Page”; “Gavin McInnes Explains...”).

It should also be noted that the relationship between the Proud Boys and the overall radical right-wing movement prevents the violence committed by McInnes’ organization from being fully coupled with that of the alt-right. Though some may couple the Proud Boys with the extremist right-wing movement due to their propensity for violence and traditional values, there has been conflict between the movement and those in the organization (Summers). Whereas McInnes disagrees with the radical nature of the alt-right and white-nationalism, he has also been attacked by the alt-right writer Spencer Quinn for choosing the term “western chauvinist” over

“*white*² chauvinist” (Summers). Therefore, when approaching the violence of the Proud Boys, it must not be done through the frame of the alt-right movement. Rather, it can be framed in relation to the alt-right movement the modern-day conservative resurgence .

A Culture of Political Violence:

Within the fraternal organization, the Proud Boys have been able to establish a culture that encourages and praises violence that they deem as morally just. Since part of the group’s mantra is masculine pride, the group has emboldened and supported sanctioned violence either through consensual fighting (e.g. the cereal initiation) or against certain protestors. This overall condoning of violence has been effective in gaining new membership, as it has allowed members to take pride and indulge in “toxic masculinity” (“Why I Joined”). Furthermore, the use of intragroup violent acts begets more violence in the future. According to Rebecca Littman and Elizabeth Levy Paluk of Princeton University, the diminishing of aversion and distress that comes with a normalization and repeated use of violence predisposes a person to commit more violence in the future (Littman & Paluk 2015). As a result, the violence normalized within the group can prime new and current members to resort to fighting more quickly.

The Proud Boys’ use of political violence against political opponents has manifested itself primarily in skirmishes in Berkley, California in 2017 and in Manhattan, New York the following year. In 2017, multiple members of the Proud Boys who attended the right-wing Patriots Day Free Speech Rally in California were seen fighting with liberal protestors. Afterward, many members were taking to social media to ‘claim victory’ in the brawl (‘Alt Right’ Proud Boys...”). Members of the Proud Boys continued to enshrine their violence by

² Emphasis added by author

praising one of its members who fought protestors with a wooden flag pole, aptly naming him “Based Stickman” (“The Fight to Destroy Antifa...”). In New York, members of the Proud Boys who escorted Gavin McInnes out of the Metropolitan Republican Club building were seen throwing the first punch at a group of protestors, since one of them had thrown a bottle at the men (“Police Seek 9...”). Multiple fights between the two groups occurred shortly after, resulting in arrests of both Proud Boys and protestors. Both of these instances demonstrate the trend of the Proud Boys to resort to violence when faced with aggression.

Creating a Culture of Political Violence as a ‘Defense’:

Despite condemnation from mainstream media sources regarding these attacks, members of the Proud Boys have justified their actions as being within the confines of self-defense. When discussing the event in Berkley, Gavin McInnes stated that the Proud Boys were “left to fight” after being attacked with pepper spray by protestors (“Gavin McInnes Explains...”).

Additionally, McInnes believes that surveillance footage of the fights in New York absolves the group of blame, due to the protestors being the instigators (“NYC 9”). In turn, he claims that the Proud Boys are victims of a “left-wing city that hates them” and that it is the overt efforts of the mayor, attorney-general, and governor that are driving their persecution (“NYC 9”). Thus, McInnes is blaming the liberal government leaders and activists for both inciting and criminalizing the actions of the Proud Boys.

Additionally, researcher Adam Klein of Pace University has discussed how the Proud Boys have created pretexts for violence in order to justify their actions. Klein discussed how the much group’s twitter feed leading up to their violence at the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia embodied the phrase of “the Left is attacking” (Klein). They framed the

political left, particularly Antifa, as the assaulting force against American conservatism that must be stopped (Klein). Similar to the rhetoric of McInnes, the online presence of the Proud Boys mirrors their self-identification as defenders against the provocative left through the use of phrases such as, “left-wing Antifa terrorists have attacked Americans” and, “in the name of humanity, the LEFT must go!” (Klein). Hence, they are claiming to only act as a result of the opposition’s violence.

Conjointly, the work of Dr. Randy Borum of the University of South Florida can explain the Proud Boy’s ability to demonize leftist protestors. According to Borum, the social cognition (perception of reality) of those who partake in political violence is able to deeply vilify others by blaming them for a perceived unfair social deprivation (Borum). Borum is able to elaborate on the pretext for violence noted by Klein. By framing leftist protestors as the ones responsible for the dismantling of conservative values in the mainstream, the Proud Boys’ social cognition is frames violence of the group as a form of necessary retribution.

Though McInnes and the group’s claims of victimhood portray their violence as instigated, such actions are not unexpected. Using the work of scholar Jeff Victoroff, the humiliation-revenge theory of political violence can be used towards the Proud Boys. This theory states that a political group that feels humiliated will be more likely to utilize political violence to obtain their goal (Victoroff). In both the fights in Berkley and New York, it can be surmised that the Proud Boys felt humiliated by the “attacks” of the left-wing protestors. In both instances, the Proud Boys are reacting to perceived threats against their power. Therefore, they rely on violence as the resort to prevent the humiliation that would come from this power loss.

McInnes justifies this resort to violence by stating that current circumstances and the overall political climate necessitate violence. When confronted by a reporter who asked him why the group didn't just take the attacks nonviolently, McInnes argued that "it is not a great statement to take the beating" and that "people now are [like] crazy ex-girlfriends", arguing that traditional nonviolence is not applicable to the modern-day ("Gavin McInnes Explains..."). This comment further demonstrates Victoroff's theory, since it allows us to see the situation from the Proud Boys' perspective. Since their social cognition frames the opposition as irrational and "crazy", to allow for unreturned attacks would be a transgression of their morals. This would result in humiliation from other like-minded individuals. Since the group condemns the use of nonviolence, any action that does not involve violence would cause humiliation within the ingroup.

Additionally, the group is able to position their violence as defensive and necessary by framing their organization as 'security' for prominent right-wing figures. These figures include McInnes himself and Rodger Stone ("Police Seek 9..."; "How the Proud Boys Became..."). These actions emulate how the group has created an identity for themselves as defenders of fringe-Republicanism, willing to use violence when controversial right-wing thinkers are threatened by protestors. This persona further embodies their altruistic self image and could work to further embolden their reliance on political violence.

Utilizing Nostalgia to Justify their 'Defense':

The group's susceptibility to humiliation as a result of a loss of power is also a product of a belief that drives much of their political violence: their nostalgic views toward manhood.

According to an analysis of their online presence by Julia DeCook of Michigan State University, the group utilizes images that aim to invoke nostalgia of America's past, when traditional gender roles were celebrated and prevalent within mainstream culture (DeCook 492). These images include the photos of the Americana figure Uncle Sam and black and white pictures of a mid-century nuclear family (DeCook 492,499). These images correlate with their identity as the traditional Libertarian and protective man who uses strength to defend traditional American, Christian, and Conservative values. These values *tend* to include being pro-capitalist ("Why I Joined"), islamophobic, nativist, and adoptive of traditional gender roles ("Proud Boys"). Furthermore, it has been found that men are more likely to commit domestic extremist crimes and personal violence than women ("Laying the Groundwork for.."), which coincides greatly with their masculine ideals. As a result, the Proud Boys' masculinity has been a driving factor behind their violent tendencies.

Given the prominent calls for progressivism by the American political-left and the liberalism of the modern society, they feel as if their values are under siege and must be defended. Since they place such pride and trust in themselves as individuals, their inclination to fight others emulates the trend for far right groups to distrust authority (Chermak et. al.). Since they feel that their conservative ideals are no longer defended by authorities and the state, they feel they must rely on themselves to defend their ideals and physical safety. By instilling this identity of traditional masculinity upon themselves, their propensity for violence is just an extension of the beliefs they are trying to defend.

Conjointly, their nostalgic views have created a sense of moral superiority that can further validate their actions. According to Laird Wilcox in the book *American Extremists*, a

sense of moral superiority can be derived from a sense of victimhood and willingness to sacrifice oneself (Wilcox 58), and the Proud Boys emulated these characteristics. By claiming to be *victims* of the political left's attacks, they have found justification for their willingness to engage in violence against them and *sacrifice* the possibility of getting injured . As a result, the nostalgic views of manhood that justify their actions also creates a sense of moral superiority. This sense of superiority could then instill validation regarding the members' beliefs, thus creating a cycle of belief and validation.

Certainly, the Proud Boys' use of political violence is rooted in their victimhood narrative and their regard for traditional views of masculinity. These two components allow for the Proud Boys to hold themselves with high esteem and regard, resulting in an identity that they wear proudly on their sleeve. In both action and belief, the Proud Boys demonstrate that their controversiality is engrained in how they view themselves, the world, and the relationship between the two.

The Proud Boy's Violence is Not Domestic Terrorism:

Currently, the Terrorist Research and Analysis Consortium (TRAC) has a profile on its website dedicated to the Proud Boys, denoting that they believe the group is terroristic in nature ("The Proud Boys" [TRAC]). Though the group's use of political violence may lead this consortium and others to label the Proud Boys as a terrorist group, this thinking is flawed.

Given that the organization does not have a publicized or given definition to terrorism, the Proud Boys cannot be labeled as terrorists because it violates one of the most prominent definitions of domestic terrorism, that of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The FBI defines domestic terrorism as "[terrorism] perpetrated by individuals and/or groups inspired by

or associated with primarily U.S.-based movements that espouse extremist ideologies of a political, religious, social, racial, or environmental nature” (“Terrorism”). A key factor in this definition is “extremist”, which the FBI offers no public definition.³ Nonetheless, the agency has announced publicly that they do not find The Proud Boys to be extremist, with a representative of the bureau explicitly stating that “[FBI] [does] not intend... to designate the group as extremist” (“Head of Oregon’s FBI...”). Given that they are not extremist under the FBI’s definition, they cannot be deemed domestic terrorists by the bureau .

Furthermore, the use of another definition of terrorism would fail to label the group as a terrorist group. According to Alexander Clayton of American University, terrorism is the “threat or use of violence against non-combatants to instill fear and influence an opponent in pursuance of a political goal” (Clayton). Whereas “extremist” was the defining word in the FBI’s definition, so is the word “noncombatants” in Clayton’s definition. During the altercations in California and Manhattan, the Proud Boys directed their violence towards liberal protestors. These protestors voluntarily engaged with the Proud Boys, albeit through less violent means. Therefore, they cannot be deemed “noncombatants” because of these engagements. This is in accordance with the *Merriam-Webster* definition of the word, which partly defines “noncombatants” as a “civilian” (“Noncombatant”).⁴ Since the Proud Boys do not partake in terrorism as defined both by law enforcement or academia , the labeling of the group as terroristic is faulty.

³ The FBI does offer a definition of “violent extremism”, but it is based primarily on the action, not the ideology behind it. This definition can found on <https://www.fbi.gov/cve508/teen-website/why-do-people-become-violent-extremists>

⁴ In both circumstances, noncombatants would include outside and uninvolved people, since they abstained from involving themselves in the altercations.

Despite failing to constitute being a terrorist organization by these two definitions, the Proud Boy should still be monitored closely. Given that their use of political violence is primarily reactionary, this causal nature may change. As the group grows older, the changing size and makeup of the organization may lead it to either diminish to obscurity or grow to volatility. Though the Proud Boys' violence cannot currently be deemed as terroristic, it is possible that it may become so. Continued monitoring of both their online presence and their public behavior would allow for law enforcement to ensure that, if their violence becomes unprovoked, the organization can be dismantled.

Conclusion:

Despite being less than five years old, The Proud Boys have grown immensely in both membership and notoriety. They have garnered negative attention due to their publicized violent altercations towards protestors as well as their unconventional beliefs and practices. Yet, their involvement in political violence comes as a response to perceived aggression by opposing protestors as well as an embodiment of their traditional values.

If their pattern of violence continues to follow these trends, policymakers need to use their platform to advocate for greater nonviolence in public protesting. Though this may seem like an overly simplistic answer to a complex problem, it is grounded in realism. An analysis conducted by Erica Chenoweth and Maria J Stephan that was published in *Foreign Affairs* found that nonviolent resistance efforts against authoritarian regimes have more than double the chance of succeeding than violent resistance ("Drop Your Weapons"). Given their past effectiveness, public figures whom the radical left and right admire (e.g. Senator Bernie Sanders and President Donald Trump respectively) could make justifiable calls for nonviolence directed at their

political followers. Public statements advocating against violence on both sides of the spectrum could decrease the use of such tactics by their political followers. In turn, reactionary political violence such as the actions by the Proud Boys would occur less often, since in the instigations would not be present. Considering that leftist instigation and the deeming of their actions as defensive is important to the narrative of the Proud Boys, the loss of such factors could hinder members from partaking in political violence.

The future of the Proud Boys is unknown. Just like the men's groups that inspired them, so too may there be an impending future where they are no longer in existence. Yet, we should not use this possibility as justification for inaction. The future as a whole contains many uncertainties that prohibit us from fully predicting it. So, we must do all that we can now to ensure that it is as safe from violence as possible. This includes being more knowledgeable about how such violence comes to fruition.

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