

Can White People Be Terrorists? How Media Label Kansas Shooting Suspect

By [FAIR](#)

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

A former leader of the Ku Klux Klan who founded his own militant racist group was arrested for shooting and killing three people at two Kansas City-area Jewish community centers on April 13. When he founded the White Patriot Party in 1980, Frazier Glenn Miller said its goal was “the creation of an all-white nation within the 1 million square miles of mother Dixie” ([“White Patriot Party,”](#) Terrorism Knowledge Base).

In 1986, Miller declared “total war” on Jews, blacks and the federal government (Intelligence Report, [Winter/04](#)). He served three years in prison on weapons charges and for running a paramilitary organization in violation of a court order (Hatewatch, [4/13/14](#)) . He shouted “Heil Hitler” after being taken into custody after the Kansas City attacks (New York Times, [4/14/14](#)).

But media are reluctant to label the shootings Miller is charged with as acts of terrorism, or even to raise the issue.

According to a search of the Nexis database, the word “terrorism” does not appear to have been used in connection with the Kansas shootings in the New York Times or the Washington Post. On much of the network news coverage, the killings were mostly discussed as hate crimes. NBC NightlyNews anchor Brian Williams (4/14/14) called it “a terrible outburst of violence.”

It would be difficult to see how the crimes Miller is accused of committing would not meet the conventional legal standard ([FBI.gov](#), “Definitions of Terrorism in the U.S. Code”). But calling something an act of terrorism is not just a legal or law enforcement matter; it is also a political determination.

A year ago, the bombings at the Boston Marathon were immediately discussed as an act of terror, before any suspects were announced and any motives were understood (FAIR Blog, [4/16/13](#)). The fact that early assumptions linked the act to Muslims might explain that media decision.

And there is a media pattern of [downplaying](#) acts of [right-wing](#) domestic terrorism. In 2011, Extra! ([5/11](#)) compared the effusive coverage afforded an amateur bomb set by a Muslim perpetrator in New York City’s Times Square to the sparse coverage of a much more sophisticated explosive device planted by a white supremacist at a Martin Luther King Day parade in Spokane, Wash. (Miller offered to set up a legal defense fund for Kevin Harpham, the far-right activist convicted in that bombing attempt—Talking Points Memo, [1/27/12](#).) There is also a long history of anti-abortion terrorism not being labeled as such (FAIR

Blog, [2/1/10](#)).

There were some exceptions in the media coverage. Interviewing Heidi Beirich of the Southern Poverty Law Center, CNN host Jake Tapper (4/14/14) asked: " I just wonder, if he had shouted 'Allahu Akbar' instead of 'Heil Hitler,' would he be now facing terrorism charges instead of just hate crime charges?"

And the issue came up on the PBS NewsHour ([4/14/14](#)) when host Gwen Ifill interviewed Mark Potok of the Southern Poverty Law Center, asking him, "At what point do we begin to treat these kinds of attacks as domestic terrorism, not just as hate crimes or individual acts?" Potok replied:

They are domestic terrorism. Let's be plain.

There is nothing to distinguish this from other forms of terrorism. It is a way in this case of terrorizing the Jewish community around Kansas City in particular, but around the country in general. And that's what terrorism is. It's a criminal act that is aimed at far more people than the immediate victims.

You know, the law enforcement has been off and on about being candid about the terrorist nature of these attacks. But I think, today, by and large, American law enforcement is perfectly well aware that there is a very serious domestic radical right and some people within that milieu are, in fact, terrorists.

Media can argue that they are simply following the lead of law enforcement officials, who are evidently calling the act a hate crime. But for journalists, the decision to avoid discussing this kind of violence in the context of terrorism is a political one.

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