

# **Obamageddon: Fear, the Far-Right, and the Rise of “Doomsday” Prepping in Obama’s America**

## **Abstract**

This article examines the politics of American ‘doomsday’ prepping during Barack Obama’s presidency. It challenges claims that growing interest in prepping post-2008 arose exclusively from extreme apocalyptic, White Supremacist, and anti-government reactions to Obama’s electoral successes – claims that suggest prepping to be politically congruent with previous waves of extreme right-wing American ‘survivalism’. Drawing on ethnography, this paper argues that, while fears of Obama have been central to many preppers’ activities, much of their prepping under his presidency centred on fears that sit outside of survivalist politics. Building on this, the article illuminates connections between prepping and America’s 21<sup>st</sup> century electoral mainstream. Engaging with discussions about the ‘remaking’ of American conservatism during Obama’s presidency (Skocpol and Williamson, 2011), it particularly frames prepping’s growth as being engaged with, and shaped by, currents of mainstream anti-Obama fear that similarly undergirded the Tea Party’s rise within popular Republicanism at this time.

## **Introduction: The Rising Tide of American Prepping**

American interest in ‘doomsday’ prepping expanded significantly in the months leading up to, and eight years during, Barack Obama’s two terms as President of the United States. This article examines the unresearched political dimensions of this growth. Prepping is a coordinated set of activities undertaken by those preparing to independently survive periods of social collapse: medium-to-long-term scenarios in which food is not available to buy, electricity and water supply-chains are interrupted, and many people may be dead or dying. While taking on a range of forms, the activities of so-called ‘preppers’ tend to be oriented around a set of six core needs: nutrition, hydration, shelter, security, hygiene, and medicine. Prepping therefore frequently involves stockpiling food, water and medical supplies, alongside the development of numerous ‘survival skills’. It also often includes keeping fire-arms for post-collapse personal defence, as well as making plans to retreat from populated areas to remote compounds or survival bunkers. Prepping is thus distinct from ordinary short-term preparedness for

hurricanes and other natural emergencies, being distinguished by its application towards: *man-made* disasters as well as natural ones; *medium-to-long-term* survival lasting weeks, months, or even years; and *violent social breakdown* amidst collapse.

As alluded to above, there has been an intriguing post-2008 growth in American prepping, mostly made evident by a ‘doom boom’ in markets catering to its practitioners’ interests. Accounts of this development include reports that, from 2009-2014, sales of preserved food and protective NBC (Nuclear Biological Chemical) suits in the prepping industry surged by 700 and 300%, respectively.<sup>1</sup> These figures tally with the similar expansion of a recently emerging, nationwide network of prepping expos. While non-existent leading up to 2008, dozens of events (including RK Prepper Shows and PrepperCon) now each attract thousands of attendees on a yearly basis. In 2012, for example, one prepping expo company alone (Self Reliance Expos) had 40,000 total preppers enter five shows across the United States.<sup>2</sup> Surging demand for prepping products has also led to their arrival in some of the USA’s most well-known retail stores throughout the last decade. *Preppers’ Home Defence* (a book-length manual on home-based survival) has been sold in Wal-Mart since 2012. Meanwhile, lines of preserved “survival food” have also been stocked by Costco, Kmart and Bed, Bath & Beyond throughout the last five years. These developments have additionally been accompanied by prepping’s burgeoning presence *online*. For instance, on Pinterest – a popular website on which users mark favoured pages on virtual pinboards – prepping-related ‘pins’ and ‘re-pins’ increased by 87 and 300%, respectively, in 2014/15.<sup>3</sup> Altogether, while prepping lacked this vitality and visibility ten years ago – at which point it was an obscure phenomenon lacking the dynamic expos, industry, and online culture it now sustains – it has thus been subject to a recent expansion that marks it out as a topic deserving scholarly attention.

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Murphy, ‘Preppers Are Getting Ready for the Barackalypse’, *Mother Jones*, January / February 2013, at <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/11/preppers-survivalist-doomsday-obama>; Nina Strohlic, ‘Apocalypse Now: Preppers Are Gearing Up for Ebola’, *Daily Beast*, 17 October 2014, at <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/10/17/apocalypse-now-preppers-are-gearing-up-for-ebola.html>

<sup>2</sup> Ryan Herman, ‘Ready for the apocalypse! One American family shows what it takes to prepare for the end of civilisation as we know it’, *Daily Mail*, 23 March 2013, at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/moslive/article-2296472/Apocalypse-ready-Are-families-stocking-end-civilisation-crackpots-simply-canny-survivors.html>

<sup>3</sup> Caitlin Dewey, ‘Inside the fascinating, bizarre world of ‘Prepper Pinterest’’, *Washington Post*, 1 September 2015, at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2015/09/01/inside-the-fascinating-bizarre-world-of-prepper-pinterest/?utm\\_term=.54c6ade2cd81](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2015/09/01/inside-the-fascinating-bizarre-world-of-prepper-pinterest/?utm_term=.54c6ade2cd81)

## Prepping Under Obama: A Survivalist Revival?

Although prepping is practiced in small pockets around the world, the USA is the *only* nation in which it exists as a visibly widespread subculture. Prepping-related interest in the United States is, for instance, unique in sustaining the large national network of expos and conventions mentioned above.<sup>4</sup> This, of course, raises questions of *why* prepping exists in the USA on such a distinct scale, and why its popularity has expanded there *in the last decade in particular*.

Existing attempts to answer these questions suggest that prepping's contemporary popularity emerges both from a longer history of such activity in the USA, alongside a recent surge of extremist politics to which prepping is supposedly linked. Within these reflections, it is regularly emphasised that prepping bears considerable comparison to an earlier wave of extreme right-wing 'survivalism'.<sup>5</sup> Survivalism existed as a lifestyle movement centred on preparations for medium-to-long-term survival in the United States throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. In this time, it also spawned a circuit of expos that closely compares to that which surrounds prepping today.<sup>6</sup> In the public eye, survivalism's links to extremism were most notably established around a series of high-profile and (quite literally) explosive incidents involving several of its practitioners in the 1990s. These include: the deadly shootout between *Aryan Nation* sympathiser Randy Weaver and FBI agents at Ruby Ridge (Idaho); the failed FBI siege on the apocalyptic Branch Davidian cult near Waco (Texas); and the Oklahoma City bombing by anti-government terrorist Timothy McVeigh.<sup>7</sup> Giving rise to descriptions of survivalists as 'the woodsman in the tinfoil hat, the hysteric with the hoard of beans, [and] the religious doomsayer', mass

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<sup>4</sup> Chad Huddleston, "Prepper" as Resilient Citizen: Understanding Vulnerability and Fostering Resilience', Michele Companion and Miriam Chaiken (eds), *Responses to Disasters and Climate Change* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2016); Michael Mills, 'Preparing for the unknown... unknowns: 'doomsday' prepping and disaster risk anxiety in the United States', *Journal of Risk Research*, 2018, at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2018.1466825>.

<sup>5</sup> On this comparison, see Chad Huddleston, 'Doomsday Preppers': *Our New Threat?*, January 16, 2013, at <https://blog.americananthro.org/tag/chad-huddleston/>

<sup>6</sup> James Coates, *Armed and Dangerous: The Rise of the Survivalist Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995 [1987]); Philip Lamy, *Millennium Rage: Survivalists, White Supremacists, and the Doomsday Prophecy* (London: Plenum Press, 1996); Richard Mitchell Jr, *Dancing at Armageddon: Survivalism and Chaos in Modern Times* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2002)

<sup>7</sup> Lamy; Mitchell

media reflections have since regularly addressed survivalism as an ‘isolationist, anti-government, and conspiracy-minded’ subculture emerging from America’s outermost right-wing fringes.<sup>8</sup>

While adding nuance to this sensational rhetoric, detailed analyses elsewhere confirmed survivalism’s connections to extreme right-wing politics – suggesting this phenomenon’s late-20<sup>th</sup> century growth had indeed been bound up in a broader expansion of American extremist movements.<sup>9</sup> These included the Posse Comitatus, the Ku Klux Klan, Christian Identity, and numerous militia groups, each organised around hostility towards government, overt White Supremacism, and theological views of America as a sacred Christian nation.<sup>10</sup> Within this landscape, Lamy and Coates’ work, for instance, added heft to wider perceptions of survivalism as an Extreme Right phenomenon. In doing so, it indicated that survivalist pursuits particularly appealed to those whose anti-government ideology, religious fanaticism, and racist politics culminated in talk of (and preparations for) Jewish conspiracies to bomb America with nuclear missiles, ‘takeovers’ by the federal government or United Nations, and other apocalyptic scenarios of fringe fascination.<sup>11</sup>

Today, the history of survivalism weighs heavily over interpretations of the contemporary prepping movement – especially given that this latter phenomenon’s growth has occurred alongside *a more recent* surge of right-wing extremist activity.<sup>12</sup> Having expanded consistently throughout the late-20<sup>th</sup> century, survivalist culture eventually receded from public view in the late-1990s, with some survival companies reporting as much as an 88% decline in sales between 1999 and 2000 alone.<sup>13</sup> This corresponded with a broader 80% reduction in ‘antigovernment patriot’ groups between 1996 and 2001, as observed by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC). More recently, however, prepping’s post-2008 expansion has occurred simultaneous to ‘a dramatic *resurgence*’ of America’s racist and anti-

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<sup>8</sup>Evan Osnos, ‘Doomsday Prep for the Super-Rich’, *The New Yorker*, 30 January 2017, at <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/30/doomsday-prep-for-the-super-rich>; Dewey.

<sup>9</sup> Coates; Lamy

<sup>10</sup> See James Aho, *The Politics of Righteousness: Idaho Christian Patriotism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990); Morris Dees, *Gathering Storm: America’s Militia Threat* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996); Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997)

<sup>11</sup> Coates, 9, 236-249; Lamy, 22

<sup>12</sup> Huddleston, ‘Doomsday Preppers’: *Our New Threat?*

<sup>13</sup> See Keith O’Brien, ‘How to Survive Societal Collapse in Suburbia’, *New York Times*, 16 November 2012, at [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/18/magazine/how-to-survive-societal-collapse-in-suburbia.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/18/magazine/how-to-survive-societal-collapse-in-suburbia.html?_r=0)

government extremes.<sup>14</sup> According to the SPLC, the number of ‘antigovernment patriot’ groups *grew over 1000% between 2007 (131) and 2011 (1360)*, while the total of (mostly right-wing) ‘hate groups’ – having lingered at 458 in 1999 – surged beyond 1000 for the first time in 2010.<sup>15</sup>

Although numerous analysts (including those within the SPLC) have also attributed this growth to a background of broad racial resentments and recent economic crisis, Barack Obama’s election to the White House in 2008 has frequently been described as the key catalyst for this surge.<sup>16</sup> Regularly identified as a focal point for many resurgent movements – in which concerns with ‘New World Orders’ have more recently given way to fear of Obama’s supposed admiration of communism, fascism, gun bans, and/or Sharia Law – the electoral success of an African-American Democrat President has thus been (at least partially) credited with galvanising supporters of extreme right-wing politics into heightened fear, organisation, and activity.<sup>17</sup>

Against this backdrop, prepping’s rise has (unsurprisingly) often been interpreted as an apocalyptic expression of this extremist anti-Obama surge – and thus as a phenomenon largely consistent with earlier waves of fringe right-wing survivalism. Journalistic explanations of prepping have therefore regularly emphasised that the movement’s popularity has, like survivalism before it, been inseparable from wider trajectories of extreme ideology. In this vein, *CNN* has described some preppers being ‘overwrought over doomsday scenarios’ following Obama’s electoral successes.<sup>18</sup> *Mother Jones* has elsewhere detailed preppers being wracked with fear of ‘a borderline tyrannical’ President intent on implementing ‘massive gun confiscation’, as well as highlighting some preppers’ plans to establish ‘Christian Transition Villages’ on the premise that ‘Obama is expediting the arrival of the Islamic Antichrist’.<sup>19</sup> With other reports detailing descriptions of Obama as a biblical ‘augur of doom known as

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<sup>14</sup> Mark Potok quoted in Daryl Johnson, *Right-Wing Resurgence: How a Domestic Terrorist Threat is Being Ignored* (Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012), 310, emphasis added

<sup>15</sup> SPLC, *Intelligence Report*, Spring 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Johnson, 310. See also SPLC, 2016; David Neiwert, *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Luigi Leone and Fabio Presaghi, ‘Tea Party Support, Racial Resentment and Evaluations of Obama: A Moderation Analysis’, *Race and Social Problems*, Volume 10 (2018), 91–100

<sup>17</sup> See John Amato and David Neiwert, *Over the Cliff: How Obama’s Election Drove the American Right Insane* (Sausalito, CA: PoliPoint Press, 2010); Johnson; Neiwert

<sup>18</sup> David Morris, ‘What I saw at the doomsday prepper convention’, *Fortune*, 11 November 2013, at <http://fortune.com/2013/11/11/what-i-saw-at-the-doomsday-prepper-convention/>

<sup>19</sup> Murphy

The Leopard', a common theme in media coverage has therefore been to highlight the connections between prepping and extreme right-wing fears of the 44<sup>th</sup> President.<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile, *scholarly* literature around American prepping has yet to effectively support or challenge this narrative. Although a few credible studies of prepping exist – including Huddleston's ethnography of one localised prepping group – little attention within them has been focussed on the movement's broad political character or guiding ideologies.<sup>21</sup> That said, this lack of empirical engagement with prepping's politics has not prevented *some* authors from speculatively linking this movement to extremism. In particular, Foster's passing suggestions that preppers are 'eagerly awaiting the coming of the apocalypse' in a 'paranoid' mind-set provide vague reinforcements of prominent journalistic narratives.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, Foster's claims are not only brief; they also rely, problematically, upon an analysis of "reality" TV documentaries on prepping. Lacking direct engagement with any preppers whatsoever, they thus fail to offer a reliable and robust understanding of this movement's political reality, influences, or significance. The politics undergirding prepping's rise have thus been subject to conjecture, but *not* focussed empirical research.

This article therefore presents an overdue exploration of prepping's politics under Obama. In particular, I draw on an exploratory ethnography of thirty-nine preppers (located across eighteen states) undertaken between March and November 2014. Fieldwork involved sustained visits (lasting several days) to participants' homes and local areas featuring: recorded semi-structured interviews; additional unrecorded conversations; tours of preppers' homes and prepping resources; and participation in aspects of their prepping (including medical training, self-defence training, the use of 'survival skills', as well as the killing and butchering of livestock).<sup>23</sup> This activity was used to develop a deep understanding of:

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<sup>20</sup> Nicky Woolf, 'When the apocalypse comes, preppers will be ready. But you won't', *The Guardian*, 20 February 2015, at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/feb/20/apocalypse-preppers-expo-florida>

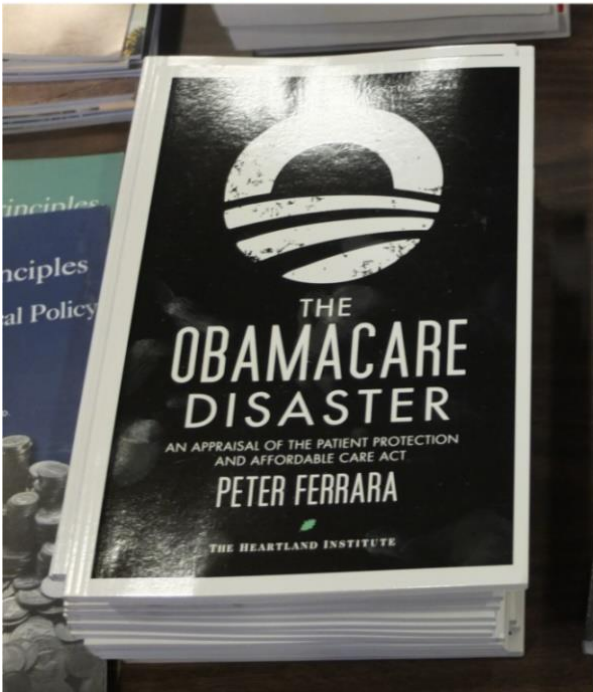
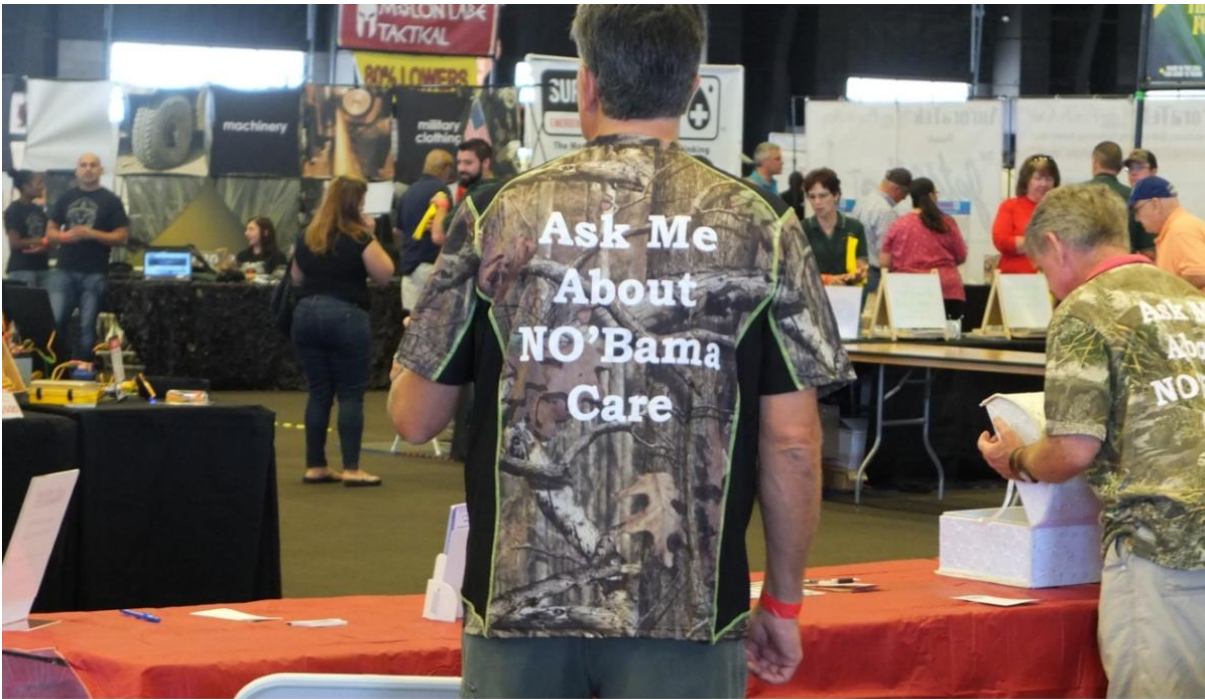
<sup>21</sup> Huddleston, "'Prepper' as Resilient Citizen"; see also Mills

<sup>22</sup> Gwendoline Audrey Foster, 'Consuming the Apocalypse, Marketing Bunker Materiality', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* Volume 33, No. 4 (2016), 285–302, 290 and *Hoarders, Doomsday Preppers, and the Culture of the Apocalypse* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 27

<sup>23</sup> Respondents were recruited through appeals published on six prominent prepping websites (for example, [www.doomandbloom.net](http://www.doomandbloom.net)). The websites selected were chosen because their content focusses on the *practicalities* of prepping – including instruction and guidance on various aspects of storing food and practicing disaster medicine – rather than promoting particular political ideas.

what political problems respondents identified in the world around them; who (or what) they believed to be responsible for these problems; and where outlooks on politics energised respondents' fears of disaster and subsequent preparations for collapse. Fieldwork also involved visits to three prepping expos, which produced over one-hundred short interviews with exhibitors and attendees, as well observations in thirty 'expert-led' prepping workshops. These were *Self Reliance Expos* in Houston and Denver (12-13<sup>th</sup> September and 7-8<sup>th</sup> November 2014), and *PrepperFest* near Phoenix (25-26<sup>th</sup> October 2014). The expo-based fieldwork was used to make sense of the extent to which the views within the ethnographic sample resonated across prepping culture on a broader basis.

Drawing on this research, I argue that existing interpretations of prepping's politics offer a poor fit with much of their reality. The article thus challenges the tendency to situate prepping's growth entirely within a revival of survivalist-like extremism under Obama, and contends that much of prepping's rise reflects shifts and fears within *more popular* American right-wing politics. In presenting this argument, I will proceed through four sections. Immediately below, I describe the main concerns undergirding preppers' activities under Obama – shedding light on the ways in which respondents' disaster-related fears intermingled with outlooks on political problems. The sections following that discussion will then respectively: address the parallels (or lack thereof) between these concerns and familiar aspects of survivalist extremism; identify the particular alignment between many preppers' politics and popular 'Tea Party' Republicanism under Obama; and explore the ways in which prepping and the Tea Party movement have each emerged from mainstreamed currents of intense fear-based dualism within prominent spheres of America's right-wing culture. Given this, the article ultimately directs us to make sense of prepping as a phenomenon related to the everyday political world, with it representing an exemplification of wider fearful politics and Far Right ideology surging within the right-wing Republican mainstream under (and indeed beyond) Obama's presidency.



*Fig 1. Anti-Obama sentiment at PrepperFest: Health insurance campaigners instructing attendees to 'Ask Me About NO'Bama Care', books critiquing Obama's policy agenda, and stalls selling T-Shirts printed with memes mocking Obama's supporters (Photo credit: author)*



## Prepping, Political Problems, and the President: Preparing for Obamageddon

Interviewer: Let me ask how politics impacts on your prepping. Could you-

Maria: Yeah, Obama needs to go! [*Moving closer to the recording device and shouting*] OBAMA NEEDS TO GO!

Fieldwork indicated that prepping is an overwhelmingly right-wing phenomenon. Indeed, thirty-five of the thirty-nine ethnographic participants *situated themselves* on the political Right – self-describing under a range of labels that included ‘conservative’, ‘right-wing Republican’, ‘libertarian’, and ‘conservatarian’. That said, a minority of two registered Democrats, one ‘progressive independent’, and one anarchist, did regard their politics as being left-wing. At this juncture it is worth stating that, in order to examine the outlooks that *broadly* circulate within prepping culture, this discussion will only address its large right-wing majority – even though the politics and activities of left-wing preppers remain highly intriguing.

While traversing several themes, the accounts offered by right-wing participants tended to centre on one main focus of political concern. As indicated by visible features of *PrepperFest* (see Fig 1), and Maria’s response to the *mere mention* of politics when interviewed (quoted above), this focal point was (unsurprisingly) Barack Obama’s presidency. Emerging as respondents’ most urgent and frequently referenced subject of political grievance, their prepping was repeatedly described as being (at least partially) a direct response to problems produced by Obama’s election and leadership. For instance, Clint – married, in his forties, and living in New Mexico – reflected as follows:

The defining moment, or really what redoubled my efforts and really kinda got me to where I’m really more intense about following politics, and paying attention to the news, and adjusting preparedness off of that, is really the election of President Obama. It’s because I knew what he was about, and I knew what he was going to... what his policies were going to direct America toward [...] There are some things that I feel are *good*, but for the most part it just never... it’s just this person is beginning to steer us in the wrong direction. And because of that I began to

redouble my efforts... buying more food than I normally kept, and all these other things that I feel are needed in case the policies result in some catastrophic failure.

Despite locating Obama's presidency as his chief prepping concern, here Clint offers us only a vague sense of what problems he thought it might produce. To expand beyond these remarks, then, this section will illuminate what he and others identified as being the substantive threats linked to the 44<sup>th</sup> President's leadership.

There was substantial consistency across the sample's prepping-related criticisms of Obama, which broke down into two main themes. Drawing on an established trope in right-wing assessments of mixed-model politics, the first was a critique of Obama's 'Big Government' approach to economic affairs – with economic disaster being the only collapse-based scenario the sample *universally* described as a likelihood in the near future.<sup>24</sup> Giving an introduction to this area of concern, and an overview of prepping culture from his position as a prominent figure within online prepping media, Patrick explained:

We have a podcast, and when we interview guests we always ask them: "What do you think it is that could tip society over the brink?" Their concern almost always points in the direction of an economic collapse of some sort. Not an elevator falling from the top of the building to crash, but a downward spiral. And, so, this is what, I think, people are most concerned about, and they're starting to put away things.

Adding depth to this picture, other respondents repeatedly framed this issue as a problem *shaped specifically by Obama's administrations*. Indeed, *all* of the right-wing preppers in the sample primarily attributed responsibility for future economic crisis to Obama's Big Government orientation, often notably marginalising (or entirely ignoring) the role of deregulation that set the key context for these concerns: the financial crash of 2007.<sup>25</sup> Respondents' accounts thus regularly suggested that the cause

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<sup>24</sup> See Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson, *American Amnesia: How the War on Government led us to Forget What Made America Prosper*. (London: Simon and Schuster, 2016)

<sup>25</sup> See John Bellamy Foster and Fred Magdoff, *The Great Financial Crisis: Causes and Consequences* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009); Joseph Stiglitz, *Freefall: Free Markets and the Sinking of the Global Economy* (London: Penguin, 2010)

of America's vulnerability lay in 'unsustainable' public spending on welfare and healthcare reform, as well as overly intrusive regulation of free markets, supposedly taking place under Obama's leadership.

Speaking to this shared interpretation, Oliver (a middle-aged, married father of two living near the Mexican border in Arizona) expressed a view that was typical of the wider sample when focussing this unease on 'ridiculous amounts' of national debt. 'We're up to seventeen trillion', he reflected when asked for his reflections on Obama's presidency, adding: 'when I was a kid they were talking about not even one trillion dollars of debt like it was the end of the world'. Joe, in his early sixties from Georgia, echoed this perspective:

In my opinion, the Democrat Party is too much... socialist. They buy votes by giving free stuff... that somebody else is having to pay for. The last thing I heard about the debt... it doesn't seem *anybody's* paying for it, but they're just giving away, giving away... and they're thinking about today, not next week, or ten years from now.

Similarly bemoaning Obama's record on spending and regulation, while suggesting it could result in disastrous consequences, Christopher's account also gave expression to the ways in which these concerns would then frequently culminate in discussions of severe economic crisis:

Oh, I don't think we're gonna see things get better for a long, *long* time. We're in the throes of... something that rivals, and perhaps exceeds, the Great Depression of the 1930s. [...] Things are in bad shape. Things like Obamacare are tearing things apart. It's hard for businesses and... these are things that are putting such a strain on society at large. It's only gonna get worse. [...] I just... I think we all need to look at things more individualistically and think of how we're going to cope with the way things are going. And, you know, I tell people: "*Don't* get involved in political things because it's gonna distract you from your preparedness."

As these remarks suggest, economic concerns tied to Obama's presidency thus had a demonstrable effect on respondents' preparations, which featured a range of measures intended to mitigate the impact of future economic upheaval. This included storing surplus meat, eggs and vegetables at home, with such efforts frequently being introduced and framed, principally, as a means

to reduce outgoings in the event of job loss or sky-rocketing costs of living. In one example, Andrew (in North Carolina) boasted of being able to ‘go shopping downstairs’ among supplies stored in his basement, should prices rise in local stores. Cassie elsewhere explained:

When you have food put by, that’s one thing off the table that you don’t have to worry about. If your income is cut in half, the money has to stretch further. If you have food put by, then that just gives you a little bit... a little bit of peace of mind

Up-close engagement with the ways that preppers spoke and went about preparedness – and the *value* they ascribed to aspects of this activity – thus indicated that (1) interpretations of economic problems impacted upon their prepping and (2) their concerns about these problems were often shaped by anxieties around Obama’s presidency.

However, this was not the only way in which particular fears around Obama impacted the sample’s prepping. As alluded to earlier, there was second direction in respondents’ shared discontent that emphasised a rather *different* issue. Indeed, whereas they had bemoaned *too much* government action in some areas, many elsewhere claimed that there was *not enough* in others. Particularly, these frustrations targeted supposedly ‘soft’ and ‘passive’ approaches in security-related policy under Obama – being broadly encapsulated in comments from William, a prepper in his fifties working in law enforcement in Colorado:

Interviewer: A short while ago, you briefly mentioned that concerns with government shaped your prepping. Could you say more about what those concerns are, and why they’re important?

William: It’s the seeming inability of the current administration to handle... pretty much any crisis. I sit there and I see a very... a very... I think he [Obama] probably has good intentions, but just a very poorly executed ability. I think that it... I think it opens us up as a nation for people to sit there and to see things happen to us... for other countries to sit there and say “They’re not gonna do anything.” [...] I’m not worried about our current administration going rogue, and

Homeland Security taking over. What I *am* afraid of is that there will be a perception of weakness of our nation... and does that mount an invitation for, you know, radical Islamists? I think it does. I think that's another potential scenario.

A further eighteen participants were dissatisfied with 'weakness' from the President in the two areas highlighted by William: foreign policy and Islamic terrorism. For example, Anthony (in his forties, from Florida) similarly expressed concern that Obama's 'weakness' had opened up the USA to heightened threats from foreign governments – particularly from Russia and Iran:

With our current ... [*Pauses and sighs*]... our current presidential administration... [*Pause*]  
It's just, I believe he's weakened our country immensely. *Immensely*. And it's just such an embarrassment. [...] It's like, "I can't believe he just said that"... That kills me, so I've been watching a lot lately how they deal with things round the world, which is pretty wimpy. You know, I don't like and that's... that, that could just dump us down the drain.

Pertaining to counter-terrorism, it was also often claimed that *blasé* and permissive approaches to illegal immigration and national security under Obama had rendered the American-Mexican border insecure, allowing foreign terrorist threats to enter the USA. As Doug, an ageing, bearded and denim-clad attendee at the *Self-Reliance Expo* in Houston put it to me: 'America's borders are not secure and the immigration screening methods are not good [...] People are being let in that are known gang members, drug dealers, murderers, and terrorists.' In particular, here, preppers' fears tended to centre on the possibility of foreign members of ISIS having entered the USA to commit terrorist attacks:

I don't expect the zombies to come over the hill tomorrow. But with ISIS... threatening the US. I mean, there's no doubt that some of their operatives are already here. So there, that's a potential scenario. (Andrew)

But this ISIS thing, since they are already here, is very concerning. [UK] Prime Minister [David] Cameron... when the beheading [of journalist James Foley in August 2014] happened, he went back to his office... to get the COBRA meeting going. After the beheading, here, the President

said “Oh I’m really sorry” and went to the golf course. To me, that does not do a lot of confidence. (Gloria)

As with economic concerns, these reflections then carried over into the practicalities of prepping, with respondents regularly making specific preparations for security-related scenarios. These included, for instance, the storing of specialist NBC suits and face masks for protection against nuclear, biological, or chemical attacks.

Ultimately, then, fieldwork indicated that, where it was visibly shaped by intense political anxieties, respondents’ prepping broadly drew inspiration from two main concerns linked to Obama’s leadership. Indeed, as the following summary offered by Cassie and Darren (a married couple nearing retirement in Ohio) illustrates, this was a dynamic that many explicitly recognised:

Cassie: For me, the last three-to-four years... the current world events have really impacted why I feel it’s important to prep. Mainly because I don’t see... I don’t see our country getting any better.

Darren: Just since we got our current president, I can’t really say “Yeah I depend on the administration” like I did under [George] W. Bush... I would just think “Oh he’ll take care of stuff in Iraq, or he’ll have more competence on certain things”-

Cassie: And as our economy’s getting worse and worse and all the things that Obama promised haven’t... *and* the healthcare act, which has turned out to be... economically *crippling* for so many people. [...] There is no part of the government that is working anymore. We’ve got Obama golfing, not hitting his security briefings. That is a man with no class. That is a man who proves he is very narcissistic and doesn’t give a rat’s ass about this country or anybody in it, except for himself. I have never felt this way about a President. I have always respected the office and that includes... Clinton’s a close second. But this man, he makes me *afraid*.

It is worth pointing out that *some other* prepping concerns had weaker connections to these political fears – with many respondents acknowledging, for instance, that ‘unavoidable’ natural disasters and weather patterns also shaped their interest in prepping to some degree. Meanwhile, respondents’ opposition to Obama’s presidency (as discussed later) also touched upon other themes outside of the prepping-related themes addressed in this section. Nevertheless, what importantly emerged here was a pattern in which the anxieties articulated above *were* typically integral to participants’ entries into prepping throughout the last decade, and the ways they practiced it at the time of being interviewed. Specifically, respondents’ *own words* offered clear and consistent indications that many regarded Obama as *the key cause* of several likely disasters, and had tailored their burgeoning preparations around this impression. Although the relatively small sample featured here renders such conclusions tentative, this suggests that fears around Obama acted as a key catalyst for prepping’s expansion post-2008.

### **‘I’ve learned how to weed out those kinda total nut-jobs... people that are crazy’: Rejections of Survivalist Extremism in Prepping Culture**

So, to what extent do the fears and narratives articulated above correspond with prepping’s existing reputation? In different regards, fieldwork ultimately revealed that respondents’ accounts both curiously reproduced *and departed from* aspects of the anti-Obama, extreme right-wing politics with which prepping is frequently associated. Certainly, as evidenced above, many participants expressed intense right-wing concerns around Obama’s administration, even *self-describing* their prepping as a reaction to these anxieties. At the same time, however, this section will highlight how participants’ outlooks were *also distinct* from forms of extreme survivalist politics that have often been assumed to resonate throughout contemporary prepping culture – politics that, consistent with Berger, Lipset and Raab, Hofstadter, and Mudde’s definitions of extremism (among others), promote discrimination and violence against ‘out-groups’ as being necessary to political success (including particular ethnicities, religions, sexual orientations, and government bodies), while adopting a Manichean view of political change as

being principally driven by conspiracies and malicious intent.<sup>26</sup> As a result, this section clarifies that, while preppers' activities were often centred on fears of Obama, many nevertheless *rejected* the variants of 'extremist' politics with which they are often linked.

That said, it is first worth acknowledging that numerous aspects of established survivalist politics *were* encountered throughout the research. At Arizona's PrepperFest, for example, exhibitors included Steven Anderson: a Baptist preacher who has praised AIDS for killing homosexuals, and once appeared on a BBC documentary titled *America's Hate Preachers*. They also included Richard Mack: a self-proclaimed 'Constitutional Sheriff' strongly linked to the extreme anti-government Oath Keepers network. Anderson was in attendance to distribute free DVDs warning of impending Armageddon (titled *After the Tribulation and New World Order*), while Mack worked a nearby stall selling his self-authored books. In the environment of the expo hall, it was thus easy to find evidence of overlaps between prepping and extreme ideologies – including anti-government conspiracy theory, and religious identifications of evil in homosexuality.

Moreover, the ethnographic sample testified to *their own* encounters with right-wing extremism in different areas of prepping culture. In particular, several recalled interactions with 'conspiracy nuts', in Anthony's words, through online prepping forums and face-to-face interactions. On this theme, Daniel – a middle-aged father of two in Florida – reflected on one (unsuccessful) attempt to establish a joint survival plan with another prepper as follows:

I'd be remiss in my duties if I didn't mention this... but I had a friend who was just sort of trying to feed this sense of general paranoia. He was giving me these books on Civil War II... and all this sort of oppressive federal government, tin-foil hat kind of stuff. After a while, I just had to back away from him... sort of rejected all that. He would call me and say: "Daniel, there's something *really* important. I need to talk about it with you *in person*." So, I drive up there. And his grand idea was to look at a map and formulate alternative routes to each other's houses. I

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<sup>26</sup> J.M. Berger, *Extremism* (London: MIT Press, 2018), 33, 44; Seymour Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 7-11; Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008) Cas Mudde, *The Far Right in America* (London: Routledge, 2018), 1-2



was like: “*Really?* You could have told me that over the phone. I just drove over two hours for your super-secret anti-government idea of getting out an atlas and drawing on it with a highlighter?” You know [*Laughs*], there’s *some* of that.

Hannah reflected similarly on her experiences exhibiting at hundreds of prepping expos as a business owner, describing some preppers as ‘conspiracy theorists’ for believing that the Federal Emergency Management Agency intends to use disasters as a pretext to indefinitely intern right-wing Americans in ‘FEMA camps’. She added:

They have a military background. They’re all men in their thirties or forties [...] And they do have... they come to you at the conferences and I’m like... [*Sighs, and raises her eyebrows with a sceptical expression*]. They’re like: “Have you seen this website?” [*Laughs*]

However, as the mocking nature of the above reflections suggests, such outlooks did not receive much support within the sample. Although there is no doubt that some preppers act in anticipation of federal takeovers, gun bans, and other subjects of fringe concern, participants were almost unanimous in departing from these familiar extremist narratives.<sup>27</sup> As Anthony put it: ‘I’ve learned how to weed out those kinda total nut-jobs... people that are crazy.’ As the last sections indicates, rather than embracing such ideas, respondents were thus typically moved by alternative fears concerning *possible, unintended, non-apocalyptic (and thus non-Biblical) collapses shaped by failures of government policy under Obama*.<sup>28</sup> ‘That’s kinda the way I look at the political issue’, William explained, adding it’s ‘not that there’s horrible, evil people that want to take care of the world... or a New World Order.’ Hannah similarly rejected this Manichean understanding, stating: ‘We don’t believe that they’re evil people up there planning this... I believe that they probably feel they’re helping their people and communities.’ Meanwhile Daniel spoke for his small prepping group’s outlook in stating:

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<sup>27</sup> The one exception to this within the sample was Gloria, a widowed prepper in Florida who at one point claimed: ‘FEMA [the Federal Emergency Management Agency]... they do things with ulterior motives. [...] In my opinion... and we all know what opinions are... FEMA has the FEMA camps and I truly feel that, at some point in time that, one of the leader’s executive orders... unsuspecting Americans will be put in these camps. It’s like a prisoner of war camp... guards, lights.’

<sup>28</sup> For a broader overview of the non-apocalyptic nature of many preppers’ disaster-related anxieties, see Mills, 6-9

We see things going on in the government right now that are completely contrary to our values in what we think this government should stand for... Too many to keep up with almost. [...] We *do* talk about conspiracies in my group, and what *you* could think are conspiracies, we think are just incompetency and complacency. On the part of those who are supposed to be in charge... they either don't know what they're doing, or they're too lazy! [*Laughs*] It's not that they got together to construct this horrible thing. We get that. We really do.

With the sample's outlooks generally consistent with this view, the *rejection* of survivalist conspiracy theory emerged as one of the most frequently and powerfully expressed themes in respondents' economy-and-security-centred fears.

Respondents' accounts also departed from numerous extreme positions concerning race – although this area remains rife with complexity. Certainly, prepping is a primarily Caucasian phenomenon. Indeed, *all* respondents, and the vast majority of expo attendees, were Caucasian. Nevertheless, race did not emerge as an explicit focus in participants' accounts of why they prepared for disaster in ways that existing commentary suggests it might have done. This was the case in their recorded interviews, *and* in sustained and more informal ethnographic chatter traversing several areas of political discussion taking place over several days. For example, respondents' critiques of Obama did not raise the theme of *his* race or ethnicity, conspicuously focussing on policy matters instead (including, for instance, the consequences of ballooning national debt). In this sense, the sample's outlooks lacked the rhetorical emphases within the White Supremacist ideologies dominating much of 20<sup>th</sup> century survivalist culture – politics that have centred on identifying threats in, and advocating hostile actions against, non-white groups. That said, it is perhaps impossible – even through in-depth ethnography – to fully and reliably assess of the extent to which any individual's worldviews may be shaped by racism. Thus, while the fieldwork suggested a separation between respondents' racial politics and those within older survivalist culture, this does not *at all* exclude scope for understanding preppers' worldviews – and broad trepidation around Obama's leadership – as being shaped by nuanced features of

ethnocentrism and racism that permeate various strands of contemporary right-wing thinking (more on this in the next section).<sup>29</sup>

In numerous respects, then, while there is undoubtedly a visible Extreme Right presence within prepping culture, numerous incongruences between prepping and its popular reputation emerged here. Indeed, even where familiar survivalist politics were most prominent – in prepping expos – they tended to be simultaneously undermined and rejected by many. By the conclusion of *PrepperFest*, for instance, large stacks of Steven Anderson’s free apocalyptic DVDs went unclaimed – that the preacher *could not even give them away* to attendees offered a somewhat fitting illustration of the disconnect between his ideas and those encountered throughout this ethnography. With the stereotype of the survivalist White Supremacist, religious fanatic, and extreme anti-government ideologue offering a poor fit with many in the expo crowds and ethnographic sample, it thus became evident through fieldwork that existing reflections have failed to capture and engage with the nuances of many preppers’ anti-Obama fears. As a result, the matter of how we properly place prepping within the American political landscape remains unclear. To effectively understand this phenomenon, we are therefore required to explain how much of it has emerged *beyond* familiar areas of survivalist extremism, and identify its connections to *other* currents of American political sentiment.

### **The Prepping-Tea Party Nexus**

While incongruent with survivalist ideologies, respondents’ outlooks did tend to echo *other* spheres of contemporary American right-wing politics. The rest of this article therefore examines the ways in which

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<sup>29</sup> Indeed, as is well established in sociological and political literature, racist notions can (and do) permeate the political and social views of many who disavow racist discrimination. In particular, numerous studies provide valuable examinations of the ways in which racism can linger as a ‘subterranean agenda’ within numerous positions on immigration, welfare, and other matters. Following this line of argument, racism certainly permeates many preppers’ reactions to Obama, and their politics more generally, even where no overtly racist views are expressed. Future research on race/racism in prepping would therefore be useful to further interrogate this aspect of preppers’ social outlooks. See: Rory McVeigh, ‘Structured ignorance and organized racism in the United States’, *Social Forces*, Volume 82, No 3 (2004), 895-936; Kathleen M. Blee and Elizabeth A. Yates, ‘The Place of Race in Conservative and Far-right Movements’, *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, Volume 1, No 1 (2015), pp.127–136.

ther prepping notably blurred with, and drew inspiration from, those broader political currents. Reflecting further on the fieldwork, here I specifically explore the ways in which many respondents' prepping maintained particularly close connections with relatively mainstream, Far Right, Republican 'Tea Party' politics arising in response to Obama's presidency – contending that this relationship ultimately marks prepping out as a phenomenon more closely connected to popular electoral politics than its survivalist predecessor.

Originally coalescing around a series of 2009 protests against Obama's healthcare reforms, the Tea Party has since evolved into a significant and sustained wing on the rightward edge of Republican politics.<sup>30</sup> Populated by a large network of activists and a caucus within the House of Representatives, the Tea Party has thus received vocal support from numerous elite donors, grass-roots organisations, and leading Republican politicians (including, for instance, Ted Cruz, Ron Paul, and Marco Rubio). It is *also* a platform that achieved significant levels of popular favourability as an oppositional stance against Obama's presidency. Under Obama, for instance, the Tea Party consisted of approximately 1000 local grassroots chapters and as many as 350,000 active members.<sup>31</sup> More widely, from 2009 to 2011, 30% of American adults (approximately 71 million people) reported having a favourable impression of the Tea Party. The number of "Strong" Tea Party supporters was meanwhile estimated at 46 million.<sup>32</sup>

Evidence of a meaningful nexus between prepping culture and Tea Party politics emerged throughout various stages of the fieldwork. Initial signs included a clear correspondence between respondents' main political grievances and the Tea Party's focal concerns. Although the Tea Party platform features competing strains within its boundaries (more on this soon), research indicates that anti-welfarism, low taxation, pro-gun politics, and 'strong' interventions around immigration and

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<sup>30</sup> Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012)

<sup>31</sup> Skocpol and Williamson, 8; Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (London: The New Press, 2016), 7

<sup>32</sup> Nate Silver, 'Poll Shows More Americans Have Unfavorable Views of Tea Party' *New York Times*, 30 March 2011; Christopher Parker and Matt Barreto, *Change They Can't Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), 13-14, 73.

national security have been its highest priority areas.<sup>33</sup> Its supporters are thus even more likely to oppose increasing taxation, raising the debt ceiling, and mass immigration, than other self-identified conservatives.<sup>34</sup> Certainly, in such regards, the Tea Party aligns with pseudo-libertarian and neo-conservative outlook expressed by most preppers encountered in this study. As demonstrated earlier, respondents' main discontents under Obama centred on several themes of such concern: the national debt, taxation, and welfare spending (including healthcare reform). This was combined with Tea Party-like stances on foreign policy and national security, where small-state 'principles' were cast aside in arguments for bullish diplomacy and intense border policing.<sup>35</sup>

Beyond this, *other* aspects of respondents' politics – thus far marginalised in this discussion on the basis that they had little direct relation to collapse-based fears – corresponded with Tea Party sentiment. This included, for example, uncompromising support for the Second Amendment and strident opposition to most forms of gun control.<sup>36</sup> Much of the sample thus expressed concerns around Obama's possible intent to implement stricter background checks on gun buyers during his presidency. Likewise, they expressed forceful opposition to new bans on particular fire-arms, and generally addressed gun rights as high political priority. However, consistent with their rejection of various Manichean conspiracy theories (addressed earlier), it is worth emphasising that none discussed 'massive gun confiscation' as a likelihood, or regarded conflict with government over this issue as a scenario one to 'prepare' for – this was meanwhile supported by the reality that their preparations corresponded with a range of other scenarios, including economic collapse, nuclear attacks, natural disasters, and pandemic diseases. Nevertheless, respondents' reflections on gun control provided additional evidence of significant overlaps between preppers' politics and the broad, characteristic features of the Tea Party platform.

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<sup>33</sup> Skocpol, and Williamson; Parker and Barreto, 98; Juraj Medzihorsky, Levente Littvay and Erin K. Jenne, 'Has the Tea Party Era Radicalized the Republican Party? Evidence from Text Analysis of the 2008 and 2012 Republican Primary Debates' in *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 47(4) (October 2014), 806-12.

<sup>34</sup> Emily McClintock Ekins, 'The Character and Origins of the Tea Party Movement' (unpublished working paper delivered at the *Midwest Political Science Association*, Chicago, Illinois, 2011), 17; Skocpol, and Williamson, 57

<sup>35</sup> See Anthony DiMaggio, *The Rise of the Tea Party: Political Discontent and Corporate Media in the Age of Obama* (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 50; Parker and Barreto, 167-168

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Skocpol and Williamson, 4

Crucially, evidence of this prepping-Tea Party nexus *also* emerged through respondents' *own accounts* of their politics, *in which they regularly expressed support for the Tea Party and its leading figures*. For instance, when asked if it was realistic to expect positive change coming from within America's two main political parties, Jonathon focussed his optimism on a prominent Tea Party favourite from his home state of Kentucky – suggesting that Rand Paul was one of very few politicians that offered a 'glimmer of hope' for America's future. In California, Bradley directly singled out the Tea Party's broader entry into the Republican fold as offering similar promise:

I hope ultimately for... you know, the Tea Party conservatives, the people like Ted Cruz or Rand Paul. You know, I see people like that, and those are people who are providing a message that are... that resonates with me. So, I hope to see that... to see those types of values and policies get more prominent in the government.

Elsewhere, Stan – semi-retired, in rural east Texas – similarly explained:

I haven't seen one [recent movement] better than the Tea Party. Our Senator here, Cruz, is a Tea Partyer. And he has the idea that Big Government is the problem, not the solution... and you need to fix the government first before you fix the other issues. Yeah, I'm for the Tea Party.

The convergence between enthusiasm for prepping and support for the Tea Party was likewise evident at Phoenix's *PrepperFest*, where organisers had erected a 'Tea Party Pavilion' filled by the movement's local campaigners. Elsewhere, Oliver had even become an *active organiser in the Tea Party's grass-roots*, having helped stage a rally attended by thousands of supporters in his local area. While the ethnographic sample did not *universally* self-identify as Tea Party sympathisers – some approved of the platform's economic, limited government, and anti-immigration rhetoric, while particularly rejecting aspects of its religious social conservatism – praise for it was thus remarkably widespread within the sample. Ultimately, thirty of the thirty-five right-wing preppers explicitly considered themselves supportive of the Tea Party's agenda.

In light of this, fieldwork indicated that these preppers' politics maintained closer links to the American electoral mainstream than (1) the earlier survivalist movement and (2) is often recognised in

prepping-related commentary describing it as a fringe phenomenon. That said, in making this claim, it is necessary to acknowledge that the Tea Party has been, in many regards, an unconventional mainstream movement – and, thus, while prepping converges with ‘mainstream’ thinking more than its predecessor, it has particularly aligned with a movement amplifying strains of previously more marginal Far Right politics. As has elsewhere been argued by MacLean and others, the rise of the Tea Party sits within a wider history in which radical right-wing factions have increasingly established influence over Republican politics throughout the last fifty years.<sup>37</sup> Consistent with this claim, it is well established that expressions of numerous fringe ideas have been visible throughout Tea Party culture.<sup>38</sup> These include racist conspiracy theories regarding Obama’s birthplace and religion, and a tendency for many Tea Party supporters to draw on explicitly racist logic and discourses in expressing support for racially-profiled policing and heightened border security.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, even in less conspiratorial and overtly racist Tea Party sentiments, it is still widely acknowledged that the movement has a broadly racist basis to its politics – in which support for free market discourse, anti-immigration-and-welfare positions, as well as amorphous opposition to Obama, has often been undergirded by degrees of more subtle racism and ethnocentrism.<sup>40</sup>

Yet, as was alluded to earlier in this section, *in terms of its size and influence*, the Tea Party platform nevertheless represents a major, mainstream force in American politics – one that has received support from a former Speaker of the House (Paul Ryan), two Vice-Presidential nominees (Ryan, Sarah Palin), and the *sitting* Vice President (Mike Pence). It has thus undoubtedly shaped and reflected the Republican Party’s contemporary ideological makeup to a significant extent – with many of its positions

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<sup>37</sup> See, for instance, Nancy MacLean, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right’s Stealth Plan for America* (London: Penguin, 2018). See also Skocpol and Williamson, Parker and Barreto

<sup>38</sup> Skocpol and Williamson, 33; Neiwert, 139

<sup>39</sup> Parker and Barreto, 198

<sup>40</sup> See for example, Skocpol and Williamson; Blee and Yates, 128. See also Lisa Disch, ‘The Tea Party: A White Citizenship Movement?’ in L. Rosenthal and C. Trost (eds), *Steep: The Precipitous Rise of the Tea Party* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 133–151; Meghan Burke, ‘Beyond Fear and Loathing: Tea Party Organizers’ Continuum of Knowledge in a Racialized Social System’, *Race, Gender & Class*, Volume 20, No1/2 (2012), 93-109; Angie Maxwell and T. Wayne Parent, ‘A “Subterranean Agenda”? Racial Attitudes, Presidential Evaluations, and Tea Party Membership’, *Race and Social Problems*, Volume 5, No 1 (2013), 226–237.

(including an emphasis on border security and aggressive international posturing) being sustained into the present day Trump presidency.<sup>41</sup>

In-keeping with this reality, a depth of empirical studies also indicate that much of the Tea Party's political *substance* maintains connections to long-running features of conventional Republican politics and rhetoric. These range across numerous policy themes, including positions on foreign policy, the Second Amendment, immigration, and welfare spending.<sup>42</sup> They also include aspects of the Tea Party's racial politics. For example, while support for Tea Party has often been animated by reactionary ethnocentrism and racial resentment, even critics have recognised it as a 'conservative movement' shaped by racism in relatively nuanced ways. Much of the Tea Party is thus subsequently viewed as having closer associations with mainstream Reaganite Republican traditions (in which racism often sits at a subterranean level) than extremist 'movements that explicitly promote racist ideologies and... goals of violent racial terrorism'.<sup>43</sup> Through this lens, then, the Tea Party is less a movement that uniformly embraces the 'paranoid' and overtly racist style characterising its own fringe elements, and more a right-wing coalition in which such thinking intermingles with a large body of more conventional limited government, anti-welfare, and security-centred right-wing messaging.<sup>44</sup> While it is appropriate to recognise the Tea Party as an umbrella for fringe *and* more established politics on the Republican movement's rightward edge, the likes of Mudde have thus appropriately recognised it as a 'Far Right' (rather than familiarly 'extreme') platform capable of significantly integrating into the electoral mainstream.

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<sup>41</sup> Patrick Fisher, 'The Tea Party and the demographic and ideological gaps within the Republican Party', *Geopolitics, History and International Relations*, Volume 7, Number 2 (2015), 13; Jordan M. Ragusa and Anthony Gaspar, 'Where's the Tea Party? An Examination of the Tea Party's Voting Behavior in the House of Representatives', *Political Research Quarterly*, Volume 69 (2016), 361–372

<sup>42</sup> Jill Lepore, *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Charles Postel, 'The Tea Party in Historical Perspective: A Conservative Response to a Crisis of Political Economy' in L. Rosenthal and C. Trost (eds), *Steep: The Precipitous Rise of the Tea Party* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 32, 41; Skocpol and Williamson; DiMaggio; Fisher; Hochschild

<sup>43</sup> Blee and Yates, 128; Disch; Burke; Maxwell and Parent.

<sup>44</sup> On the similarly fractured and hard-right nature of previous periods of popular Republican politics see, for example, Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan The Movie: And Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (University of California Press, 1988); Alan Brinkley, 'The Problem of American Conservatism', *The American Historical Review*, Volume 99, No. 2 (April, 1994), pp.409-429.



What is ultimately crucial to grasp here in relation to *this* study is that respondents' alignment with the Tea Party therefore demonstrated a connection between their prepping and relatively popular currents of right-wing politics. Indeed, in the significant strains of prepping culture identified here, we are confronted with a manifestation of a larger right-wing phenomenon encompassing the leadership and membership of one of the USA's two major parties – rather than being a wholly separate phenomenon with little connection to the everyday political world. As such, it is clear that much of contemporary, anti-Obama prepping has appealed to Americans whose politics broadly align with relatively popular right-wing politics.

### **Far Right Fear: Prepping, the Tea Party, and Fear-Based Dualism under Obama**

The alignment between prepping and the Tea Party under Obama confronts us with dynamics that cannot be understood through theories of 20<sup>th</sup> century survivalist activity.<sup>45</sup> Those perspectives help explain, for instance, how survivalism's growth was previously inculcated through marginal networks and literature, in which *permanent* collapse (via conspiracy, race war, or some other scenario) was addressed as an *imminent certainty* to prepare for. However, while similar theories may still explain the activities of *some* preppers, the above suggests that much prepping under Obama arose from *non*-apocalyptic and precautionary fears of disaster that were aligned with areas of *relatively popular* political sentiments – even maintaining close connections to a major movement centred on achieving political reform. What is evidently lacking in literature around prepping and survivalism, therefore, is any sense of *how* contemporary prepping has been energised from within the right-wing electoral mainstream. Addressing this curious dynamic, this section draws attention to ways in which preppers' activities under Obama particularly interacted with a prominent politics of (non-apocalyptic) fear resonating around the Tea Party's platform – and the ways in which prepping is thus reflective of shifts that have allowed for more intense expressions of fear towards various supposed crises to be cemented within everyday right-wing politics.

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<sup>45</sup> See Coates, Lamy, Mitchell

It is well-established that fear was a central theme in the Tea Party's ascendance under Obama. As has been noted throughout numerous analyses, much of the Tea Party platform burgeoned around a shared perception of Obama's presidency as a slip towards various serious crises, *and* suggestions that the scale of these problems was peculiarly acute.<sup>46</sup> As the following remarks from Ted Cruz and Ron Paul on foreign policy and economic collapse briefly demonstrate, crisis-laden framing around Obama's election has thus hardly been specific to prepping culture. Rather, it has been powerfully, prominently, and regularly expressed by figures at the forefront of the Tea Party:

'You know we can't keep going down this road much longer. We're nearing the edge of the cliff . . . We have only a couple of years to turn this country around or we go off the cliff to oblivion!' (Cruz)

'The Obama economy is a disaster. Obamacare is a train-wreck. And the Obama-Clinton foreign policy of leading from behind... The whole world's on fire!' (Cruz)

'It [economic collapse] has to come. ... The crisis will come. [...] If we continue to do this we're gonna be as stagnant as Japan has been in these last several decades. It's coming! It's coming!' (Paul)<sup>47</sup>

With such rhetoric extending beyond these specific comments – and also to themes of religious liberty, immigration, and gun rights – existing analyses indicate that the of positioning Obama's leadership as an ongoing 'threat' to American society has been central within the Tea Party's framing of its own emergent place in American politics.<sup>48</sup> Even where this avoided Manichean/conspiratorial descriptions of Obama *deliberately* seeking to act against American interests, the narrative that his administration

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<sup>46</sup> Lepore, Chip Berlet, 'Reframing Populist Resentments in the Tea Party' in L. Rosenthal and C. Trost (eds), *Steep: The Precipitous Rise of the Tea Party* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Christine Trost and Lawrence Rosenthal, 'Introduction: The Rise of the Tea Party' in L. Rosenthal and C. Trost (eds), *Steep: The Precipitous Rise of the Tea Party* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 9; Postel, 32, 41; DiMaggio, 13; Paul Street and Anthony DiMaggio, *Crashing the Tea Party: Mass Media and the Campaign to Remake American Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011); Parker and Barreto, 200; Deana A. Rohlinger and Jesse Klein, 'From Fervour to Fear: ICT and Emotions in the Tea Party Movement', in N. van Dyke and D.S. Meyer (eds), *Understanding the Tea Party Movement* (London: Routledge, 2014); Hochschild

<sup>47</sup> Quotes taken from comments at the Values Voters Summit (Washington D.C.) October 11<sup>th</sup> 2013; speech in Barrington, N.H., March 15<sup>th</sup> 2015; Fox News, June 1 2015, at <https://video.foxbusiness.com/v/4269330211001/#sp=show-clips>

<sup>48</sup> Skocpol and Williamson, 79,77

ought to be feared is one thus identified throughout deconstructions of the Tea Party's peculiar position in the mainstream American Right. As Berlet puts it, since its origins, the Tea Party has drawn on particularly intense forms of 'fear-based dualism' that cast the leadership of Democrat opponents as being so misguided that they present a danger to American stability.<sup>49</sup> In DiMaggio's words, then, while 'paranoid' conspiracy theory is often (but not always) disavowed in public-facing Tea Party politics, intense 'fear-mongering' over Democrat management of the economy and other political issues has still represented a key part of the movement's attempts to position itself as an important and necessary political force.<sup>50</sup> As DiMaggio elaborates, this utilisation of fear has been essential to the rebranding of widely discredited Republican politics following the George W. Bush administration – establishing a narrative (seemingly sustained through Donald Trump's 2016 campaign) in which the Party's platform could be positioned as outsider energy acting on behalf of all Americans against an urgent threat.

Existing research also helps us understand various channels through which this politics of fear has been popularly communicated and established – including an 'echo chamber' of mainstream right-wing news media complementary to Tea Party messaging. This spans a range of television (including Fox News), online (The Drudge Report, The Daily Caller), and talk-radio outlets (including shows fronted by Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, and Glenn Beck) credited with moving the boundaries of popular conservative thought and culture towards increasingly fearful discourses over several decades, while also popularising the Tea Party within mainstream right-wing culture specifically throughout the last ten years.<sup>51</sup>

As Skocpol and Williamson contend, Fox News and its equivalents have been integral to the rapid and sustained popularisation of the Tea Party's fear-centred platform. Here, they particularly argue

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<sup>49</sup> Berlet, 48; see also Alan I. Abramowitz, 'Grand Old Tea Party: Partisan Polarization and the Rise of the Tea Party Movement' in L. Rosenthal and C. Trost (eds), *Steep: The Precipitous Rise of the Tea Party* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011)

<sup>50</sup> DiMaggio, 102

<sup>51</sup> Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph Cappella, *The Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Amato and Neiwert; Street and DiMaggio; DiMaggio; Bill Press, *The Obama Hate Machine: The Lies, Distortions, and Personal Attacks on the President - And Who Is Behind Them* (New York City: Thomas Dunne Books, 2012); Skocpol and Williamson; Jeffrey M Berry and Sarah Sobieraj, *The Outrage Industry: Political Opinion Media and the New Incivility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Theda Skocpol and Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, 'The Koch Network and Republican Party Extremism', *Perspectives on Politics* Volume 14, No. 3 (September 2016), 681-699

that media framing of Obama's leadership provided a foundation on which the movement's leading advocates have been able to communicate partisan, fear-laden assessments of economic policy, healthcare reform, and security risks to wide and receptive audiences.<sup>52</sup> This includes highlighting a succession of speculative risk assessments and (often unsubstantiated) Obama-related scandals into popular right-wing consciousness – ranging across commentary on America's national debt, fears around lax immigration control, as well as allegations of deceit by Obama and Hillary Clinton following attacks on the American embassy in Benghazi (Libya). Their analysis thus concludes that the growth of Tea Party 'cannot be understood without recognizing the mobilization' provided by this partisan media sphere – suggesting that such outlets have provided 'a steady diet of information and misinformation... that keeps Tea Party people in a constant state of anger and fear about the direction of the country and the doings of government officials'.<sup>53</sup> In this dynamic, the politics of fear recognised as being integral to the Tea Party's political style and successes is one linked to a network of widely consumed right-wing media, in which dualist narratives of crises have consistently been established and expanded within a defence and renarration of Republican ideology.<sup>54</sup>

Returning to the matter of prepping, fieldwork revealed that – consistent with their enthusiasm for the Tea Party – respondents' interpretations of political *and prepping-related* problems maintained close connections to fears promoted within this media sphere. As has been broadly illuminated elsewhere, preppers' perceptions of collapse-related risks tend to be shaped significantly by news media.<sup>55</sup> As such, news of real *and predicted* disasters is known to play a key role in shaping many preppers' entries into this pursuit, as well as their continued involvement. Nevertheless, what has *yet* to be examined in this literature is the *particular news outlets that American preppers tend to consume*. What became clear in this study, however, was that participants often exclusively relied on outlets associated with hard-right interpretations of current affairs. Fox News was the most frequently preferred outlet throughout the sample. Others, including The Daily Caller, Drudge Report and talk-radio shows

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<sup>52</sup> See Amato and Neiwert; Street and DiMaggio; DiMaggio; Press; Skocpol and Williamson; Berry and Sobieraj.

<sup>53</sup> Skocpol, and Williamson, 12-13

<sup>54</sup> Amato and Neiwert; Press; Skocpol and Williamson, 201-202; DiMaggio; Street and DiMaggio; Arlie Russell Hochschild

<sup>55</sup> Mills

hosted by Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity, were also regularly mentioned as being highly trusted. As one prepping-fiction author – going by the pseudonym Angry American – thus put it in his Self-Reliance Expo workshop on monitoring risks of social collapse: ‘Fox News will give you most of the truth, CNN won’t give you any of it... and no-one watches MSNBC’. Reflecting this sentiment, respondents shared corresponding summaries of their (often knowingly) partisan news media preferences. For example, Gloria, explained ‘I go for Fox News, and I like Sean Hannity ‘cause he’s pro-Republican’, while most of the sample testified to relying heavily on Fox and other right-wing outlets for information about current affairs. Meanwhile, the consumption of partisan right-wing media also became a recurrent part of my attempts to join respondents’ daily routines – both as a start to the day, and efforts to catch up on news events via primetime evening broadcasts.

Unsurprisingly, then, connections between this news consumption and respondents’ interpretations of *prepping-related problems* emerged throughout the fieldwork. Indeed, direct references to warnings from Fox, online media, and talk-radio, concerning economic vulnerability, the detrimental consequences of Obamacare, and new terrorist threats being ‘ignored’ by the White House, regularly featured in respondents’ descriptions of ongoing threats. In one example, Gloria expressed fears of an attack by ISIS operatives crossing the US-Mexican border. Here, she offered an account that directly aped a Fox News discussion we had watched together earlier that day, both by chastising Obama’s time on the golf course as a threat to national security and twice remarking that ISIS had ‘already’ entered the US via Mexico (an entirely unverified claim). Andrew, another member of the sample to claim that ISIS had ‘arrived’ via Mexico, similarly attested to ‘keeping track of things on the news’ when substantiating such remarks – Andrew’s news preferences were heavily oriented around Fox (as well as a talk radio show hosted by Mark Levin, who has since become a host on the channel). In these instances, among many others, evidence emerged to frequently suggest a direct link between speculative reporting around the management of borders and the scenarios participants actively prepared for.

In making the broader case that Obama had been overly *blasé* and passive concerning national security, ethnographic participants and expo attendees similarly drew on talking points within such

outlets at the time of the fieldwork. These included stories regarding the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives' 'Fast and the Furious' gun-running scandal, as well as speculation that the Obama administration had neglected to take threats against the American Embassy in Benghazi seriously enough before it was attacked by an Islamic militant group in 2012:

'I do have mistrust in the *current* government. Along with everything else that's happened with Benghazi, to down here they were running guns to the Mexican cartels and we've had border control... we had at least one confirmed border patrol agent be killed. And the whole time it's been complacent... nothing but a state of denial, you know.' (Oliver)

'The current administration shows us over and over again that they don't care what we want or think. Obamacare had a 60% disapproval rating when signed in. Scandal after scandal goes unanswered... Fast and Furious, Benghazi, and so on.' (Ryan - Expo Attendee)<sup>56</sup>

In such cases, prompts for respondents to substantiate their concerns saw them frequently refer me to their most trusted news sources. This almost universally redirected conversation back towards Fox News, stories found via Drudge Report, and, less frequently, The Daily Caller. In the case of Ryan (quoted above), following up on his concerns meant taking a tour of the bookmarked websites in his iPhone browser: Fox News, Drudge Report, and half-a-dozen websites dedicated to offering prepping-related advice (including, for example, guidance on the application of first-aid skills). Encounters, such as this, throughout the fieldwork thus revealed a pattern in which respondents' prepping based fears were demonstrably informed by news provided within lynchpins of contemporary right-wing culture – rather than niche survivalist networks.

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<sup>56</sup> In references to issues like Benghazi we see how, despite many preppers' seemingly sincere disavowal of various conspiracy theories, their fears sometimes drew on speculative and pseudo-conspiratorial reporting through right-wing media. In particular, this case demonstrates how the prominence of the Benghazi attack as a story in right-wing media – around which reporting suggested members of the Obama administration constructed a false narrative of spontaneous protest leading to the attack – fed into participants' own assessments of the President. (The House Select Committee on Intelligence, and the Senate Select Committee, have since confirmed these comments on protests were based on the CIA's own conclusions at the time.) Here, respondents did not communicate elaborate theories concerning conspiracy related to Benghazi, as has sometimes been the case in right-wing culture. Nevertheless, mentions that, at a more basic level, the continued nature of the 'scandal' had exposed the Obama administration's poor performance in, and lack of proper commitment to, national security and foreign policy seemed to illustrate ways in such thinking still indirectly resonated in their considerations on some occasions.

Complementing the insights gained from the fieldwork, evidence of a connection between prepping and such outlets has elsewhere emerged from *the promotion of prepping throughout this news media sphere itself*. Within this, participants featured in National Geographic’s documentary series *Doomsday Preppers* (2011-2014) appeared multiple times on Fox News for light-hearted interviews.<sup>57</sup> Meanwhile, numerous prepping companies (including Food Insurance) have gone so far as to target advertising space on *Fox News*, while also seeking endorsements from prominent figures in this media sphere (including Sean Hannity and Glenn Beck).<sup>58</sup> Elsewhere, other right-wing media personalities including Ben Shapiro – former editor of Breitbart and founder of The Daily Wire – continue to dedicate spaces in their broadcasts and written media to promoting prepping food products.<sup>59</sup> Such a relationship suggests that the prepping industry is aware of a reality that this research has likewise confronted: that the sentiments permeating many preppers’ anxieties – and thus their sense of what might need to be prepared for – have tended to be informed and updated by prominent (and often corporate) right-wing media.

It would be a vast oversimplification to claim that preppers’ politics and fears were shaped entirely by Fox and other such outlets’ promotion of intense fear-based dualism under Obama’s presidency. Nevertheless, the findings do above give us *at least a partial sense* of how preppers’ activities have curiously emerged from within relatively popular right-wing politics throughout the last decade. As mentioned earlier, it appears that many preppers’ fears have been detached from familiar survivalist networks and ideas. Meanwhile, the above indicates that their trepidation, *instead*, maintains links to Tea Party-aligned media’s dualist defence of Republicanism, which notably gave momentum to (1) the framing Obama’s presidency as an ongoing crisis permeated with various scandals and (2) daily (often speculative and misleading) coverage suggesting this crisis was becoming ever more urgent and multi-faceted. In many instances here, we thus see how reporting of this sphere frequently energised prepping concerns regarding the economy and international relations, while also *introducing emergent*

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<sup>57</sup> Fox News, “Doomsday Preppers”, 13 February 2012, at <http://video.foxnews.com/v/1450325975001/?#sp=show-clips>; Fox News, ‘Fox Flash: ‘Doomsday Preppers’’, 13 November 2012, at <http://video.foxnews.com/v/1965380587001/?#sp=show-clips>

<sup>58</sup> Skocpol and Williamson, 2012; Murphy, 2013; Hacker and Pierson, 253

<sup>59</sup> See [www.preparewithben.com](http://www.preparewithben.com)

*themes into their anxieties* (for example, the new ISIS threat being discussed at the time of the fieldwork). Therefore, while this media and political sphere can hardly be deemed a sole cause of preppers' fears, the research signals that such outlets, *at the very least*, served to *reinforce and amplify particular* concerns about Obama's administration that subsequently underpinned respondents' prepping.

This study therefore indicates that, at least in part, significant areas of contemporary prepping's growth have been meaningfully tied to wider shifts within American's mainstream right-wing politics – although the size of the sample featured in this research means this argument ought to be made tentatively. In particular, they indicate that the heightened fear-based dualism that emerged around the Tea Party's reconfiguration of Republicanism under Obama's presidency played a notable role in energising the fears of many American preppers. It is appropriate to acknowledge, meanwhile, that this dualism sits within a longer history in which radical right-wing ideology – and its concomitant politics of fear – has achieved greater influence over mainstream Republican politics throughout the past fifty years.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, as acknowledged earlier, the particularly acute crisis-laden framing of the transition between the George W. Bush and Obama administration is already recognised as undergirding the broad rise of the Tea Party and its popular support. What we see *here*, however, is that such fear has not only contributed to the rise of a vociferous, fear-based political movement. Rather, the growth of prepping as a revival of American survivalist interest here clearly emerges as an overspill of these same developments. Acknowledging this ultimately helps us grasp prepping's wider significance in American life – not as a reflection and resurrection of established survivalist fears, but as a reaction to shifting concerns and discourses given prominence in popular American politics under Obama.

## **Conclusions**

This article provides a marker in mapping prepping's previously unresearched place within American culture and, more specifically, its relationship to a more widely burgeoning politics of fear in the

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<sup>60</sup> See, Hacker and Pierson; MacLean



American electoral (Tea Party) mainstream during Obama's presidency. Drawing on ethnography, this paper has presented the first empirically-supported and focussed interrogation of the politics underlying the recently burgeoning American prepping movement. In doing so, it has argued for a new understanding of prepping as a political phenomenon – calling for the replacement of survivalist stereotypes with an analysis that engages with the nuances of prepping culture and its interrelation with the more widely shifting nature of popular right-wing politics over the past several decades. While, in its focus on prepping, the article it does not offer a detailed interrogation of the complex *causes* of the Tea Party's rise within a *longer-running* normalisation of free market, reactionary, and Far Right ideology in American right-wing politics, it *does* therefore shed important light on their *previously unacknowledged consequences* in regards to prepping.<sup>61</sup>

However, to be clear, this discussion alone does not offer a full exploration of prepping culture's many features and influences. Around such an under-researched phenomenon, there are clearly various avenues for future research and clarification that would continue to shed light on prepping *and* the wider dynamics that surround it. Among them, as alluded to earlier, would be a more detailed examination in the ways that race may animate preppers' worldviews, and prepping-related fears in ways that diverge from survivalist White Supremacism. However, going forward, prepping's trajectory following the exit of Obama from the White House also emerges as a subject of interest around this area. Specifically, whether Obama's replacement by Donald Trump has diminished preppers' grievances, and undercut their fears, is unknown. Similarly, we are not yet able to understand whether the politics of fear utilised throughout Trump's ascent (in the wake of the Tea-Party's own emergence) may have sustained preppers' fears of around the US-Mexican border and Democrat opponents – thus maintaining right-wing interest in prepping that now focusses on 'threats' *outside* of the White House.<sup>62</sup> Regardless of

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<sup>61</sup> Around this theme, see DiMaggio; Gary Kabaservice, *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, from Eisenhower to the Tea Party* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Mike Lofgren, *The Party is Over: How Republicans Went Crazy, Democrats Became Useless, and the Middle Class got Shafted* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012); Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein, *It's Even Worse than it Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism* (New York: Basic Books, 2012); Skocpol and Williamson; Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez; Matt Grossmann and David Hopkins, 'Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats: The Asymmetry of American Party Politics', *Perspectives on Politics*, Volume 13, No. 1 (March 2015), 119-139; Hacker and Pierson; MacLean.

<sup>62</sup> On this, see Hochschild

these uncertainties, what remains clear is research into prepping that avoids the mere regurgitation of established ‘wisdom’ would continue offer valuable insights into this phenomenon – *and the wider shifts that appear to shape it.*

### **Author and Biographical Note**

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