

# THE US FACES THREATS OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE

HPM JOHN S. HOLLYWOOD, PH.D.  
 CHAIR, HOMELAND SECURITY  
 COMMANDER, MAJ GEN WADE CHAPTER, DC



An FBI wanted poster is displayed at a bus stop near the US Capitol. Source: Gamal Diab/EPA

All three, according to the Network Contagion Research Institute (NCRI) at Rutgers University, share similar characteristics, including apocalyptic beliefs matched with utopian thinking (e.g., “all we have to do is kill our enemies and the utopia will appear”), narratives supporting martyrdom for the cause, having organized armed militia, and having “highly strategic” publicity,

The seditious attack on the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 made clear the US is facing a serious and ongoing threat of political violence. We know of five deaths on scene. For injuries, the Capitol Police union reports close to 140 injured officers, including brain injuries, cracked ribs, smashed spinal discs, a lost eye, and an officer stabbed with a metal fence stake (Villarreal, 2021). We do not yet know the extent of attacker, protester, and bystander injuries.

Today, we are facing not one politically violent movement, but three. All are loosely organized (to the point of being “leaderless” in some cases) but still potent violent extremist movements being enabled online through social media. They are, according to the Network Contagion Research Institute at Rutgers University (Finkelstein et al., 2020):

- Jihadist groups, such as Daesh (also known as ISIS).
- Right-wing extremist groups, most notably Boogaloo networks (White Supremacist / Neo-Nazi).
- Left-wing extremist groups, most notably Anarcho-Socialist networks.

recruiting, and operational security measures, to include using largely unknown and/or restricted online communications.

There are several ways that Companions can help defend against this triple threat, both for themselves and to educate others. The first is to understand potential signs of attack plots underway and to report them to authorities, in line with the US Department of Homeland Security’s “See Something, Say Something” campaign. The second is to protect yourself and others from unwittingly allying with violent extremists. The third is knowing what to do in case you are caught up in a violent attack, which in recent years has mostly come from active shootings (USAFacts, 2020).

First, for “See Something, Say Something,” the most important “something” to report is leakage. These are admissions by someone in person or online that they are actively planning for an attack, and are divided into intent and action:

- Intent reflects someone’s motivation to conduct

an attack - that they are enraged enough about someone to warrant attacking them violently - as well as that it is legitimate to conduct the attack.

- Action reflects what someone is doing to prepare for an attack. Examples have included would-be attackers describing or showing:
  - Purchasing or stealing new guns and ammunition for an attack.
  - Conducting site surveillance (which increasingly is done online with “virtual walkthroughs”).
  - Conducting detailed studies of how to conduct a specific attack and/or maximize casualties.
  - Conducting training and rehearsals for an attack.
  - Traveling, or purchasing tickets and making plans to travel, to get paramilitary training for a violent cause.
  - Traveling, or purchasing tickets and making plans to travel, to go to an attack site to conduct an attack.

Like most everything else, the above warning signs are increasingly being posted online, via social media.

The FBI, National Counterterrorism Center, and DHS have prepared a booklet on indicators of violent extremist mobilization (Federal Bureau of Investigation et al., 2019) that is available online; it was intended primarily for foreign-supported Jihadist terror groups, but the bulk of the indicators work for all causes. My own research (for example, Strom et al., 2016) also provides more detail on indicators of plots, how we have foiled them successfully, and what went wrong when we did not.

As to where to report potential signs of impending violence: report them to your local authorities, state investigators and/or the FBI (via [tips.fbi.gov](https://tips.fbi.gov)). If you learn of an imminent attack, call 911 directly to get an immediate response.

Most interventions with those reported to be potentially plotting violent attacks are wellness checks and discussions to deter them from going through with attacks, not arrests. It is unlikely that the result of reporting people you know will lead to their prosecution, unless there are strong signs that they pose an imminent danger or are otherwise openly engaging in serious criminal activity. When you have major concerns, err on the side of reporting—in my research, we found that the highest casualty attacks tended to be preceded by

some sort of breakdown in which vital clues either were not reported or not properly followed up.

Second, take measures to protect oneself and others from unknowingly being drawn into violent extremist networks. Companions need to be aware that extremist groups are actively trying to draw the politically angry and despairing into their ranks (see, for example, Daniels, 2021 for general “soft power” strategies by extremists and Collins, 2021, for White Supremacist recruiting of QAnon adherents).

Recruiting efforts, as well as possible major physical danger, starts at protests and rallies. If there are people dressed in full battlefield, riot gear, all black concealing garb, and/or brandishing weapons at a supposedly “peaceful” protest or rally, there is something wrong. If there are people carrying flags with symbols that look like they were inspired by Nazi symbology, they probably are—and that is a “red flag.” If there are people preparing Molotov cocktails or otherwise discussing their plans to conduct violent attacks during the protest, it is time to flee the scene and call law enforcement.

Recruiting and other influence operations, as well as open threats, are more common online, via a wide range of social media. Again, displays of known extremist symbols, flags, and memes are reason for concern. Being asked to read major extremist literature such as *The Camp of the Saints* or the *Turner Diaries*, is a reason for concern. Otherwise, being approached to be told “the truth” about an ethnic group, or other large group of people with some ascribed trait, is a reason for concern. Messaging about extremely violent, horrific, and vast conspiracies involving massive classes of people that just happen to parallel historic extremist propaganda by the Nazis and others is cause for concern.

For more information on symbols used by violent extremist groups, the Anti-Defamation League maintains a database of White Supremacist and Neo-Nazi symbols (Anti-Defamation League, 2021). Several news organizations have compiled a list of the flags and symbols used by the militant groups who attacked the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 (for example, Simon & Sidner, 2021). The NCRI report mentioned earlier includes examples of extremist left (Anarcho-Socialist) symbols and memes (Finkelstein, et al., 2020).





If you are caught in a terrorist attack, which in recent years would be in the form of an active shooting (USAfacts, 2020), remember the federal government’s mantra of Run, Hide, Fight (Ready.gov, 2020). Here are some details of what each of these really means:

**Run:** The first preference is to flee the location altogether and call authorities with details about what you observed. Do not waste time picking up your possessions. Help others to leave if possible and warn others about going into the shooting scene.

**Hide:** If fleeing the scene is not an option, the next step is to hide. Note that “hiding” means hiding in a place where you are truly unlikely to be seen or heard by the shooter, ideally behind a locked door or at least behind a major physical obstacle.

**Fight:** If faced with an active shooter, it is imperative to physically attack them immediately. Do not just let yourself be shot. My own analysis of the FBI’s active shooter cases (Blair & Schweit, 2014) is that actively fighting active shooters was associated with

an over 50% reduction in casualties. These were aggressive physical actions to tackle (ground) and disarm the shooter. There is also some evidence that bystanders should charge shooters at angles and move perpendicularly to the shooter, rather than just frontally charging a shooter. It is very difficult to hit a moving target, especially for an active shooter not really expecting resistance, but there are cases of shooters killing people charging them head-on (too close to being a stationary target). Aggressive physical resistance also does not mean arguing or trying to persuade the shooter to stop.

Today, the US is indeed faced with not one, but three serious threats for causing political violence. That said, it is important to note that the risk continues to be very small, about ten attacks per hundred million US residents per year. There are also a few key actions we can take to secure ourselves and the country against this triple threat: understanding what suspicious activity around political violence plots looks like and reporting it when it appears; understanding signs of extremist recruiting, propagandizing, and action and avoiding them; and understanding what to do in the rare event of being involved in an attack. By taking these measures and educating others in our community as part of the Order’s service efforts, we can go a long way towards bolstering the our nation’s homeland security. ★

1. Anti-Defamation League. (2021). Hate Symbols Database. ADL.org. Retrieved 13 February, 2021, from [https://www.adl.org/hate-symbols?cat\\_id%5B146%5D=146](https://www.adl.org/hate-symbols?cat_id%5B146%5D=146)
2. Blair, J. P., & Schweit, K. W. (2014). A Study of Active Shooter Incidents in the United States Between 2000 and 2013. Federal Bureau of Investigation. <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=757920>
3. Collins, B. (2021, 21 January). White supremacist groups target QAnon conspiracy theorists who feel let down by Trump. NBC News. Retrieved 13 February, 2021, from <https://www.nbcnews.com/now/video/white-supremacist-groups-target-qanon-conspiracy-theorists-who-feel-let-down-by-trump-99811909788>
4. Daniels, L. (2021, 5 February). How White Supremacists Use Soft Power. Lawfare. Retrieved 13 February, 2021, from <https://www.lawfareblog.com/how-white-supremacists-use-soft-power>
5. Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Counterterrorism Center, & Department of Homeland Security. (2019). Homegrown Violent Extremist Mobilization Indicators, 2019 Edition. [https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news\\_documents/NCTC-FBI-DHS-HVE-Mobilization-Indicators-Booklet-2019.pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news_documents/NCTC-FBI-DHS-HVE-Mobilization-Indicators-Booklet-2019.pdf)
6. Finkelstein, et al., J. (2020, September 14). Network-Enabled Anarchy: How Militant Anarcho-Socialist Networks Use Social Media to Instigate Widespread Violence Against Political Opponents and Law Enforcement. Networkcontagion.us. Retrieved 6 February, 2021, from <https://networkcontagion.us/reports/network-enabled-anarchy/>
7. Ready.gov. (2020, 10 November). Attacks in Crowded and Public Spaces. Ready.gov. Retrieved 13 February, 2021, from <https://www.ready.gov/public-spaces>
8. Simon, M., & Sidner, S. (2021, 11 January). Decoding the extremist symbols and groups at the Capitol Hill insurrection. CNN.com. Retrieved 13 February, 2021, from <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/09/us/capitol-hill-insurrection-extremist-flags-soh/index.html>
9. Strom, K. J., Hollywood, J. S., & Pope, M. (2016). Terrorist Plots Against the United States: What We Have Really Faced, and How We Might Best Defend Against It. In *The Handbook of the Criminology of Terrorism* (pp. 468-481). John Wiley & Sons. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/working\\_papers/WR1113.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/working_papers/WR1113.html)
10. USAfacts. (2020, 23 September). The federal data available on active shooter incidents, mass killings and domestic terrorism. USAfacts.org. Retrieved 6 February, 2021, from <https://usafacts.org/articles/federal-data-available-active-shooter-incidents-mass-killings-and-domestic-terrorism/>
11. Villarreal, D. (2021, 27 January). Capitol Police Union Reveals Cops Suffered ‘Brain Injuries,’ Loss of Eye After Pro-Trump Riot. Newsweek. <https://www.newsweek.com/capitol-police-union-reveals-cops-suffered-brain-injuries-loss-eye-after-pro-trump-riot-1564993>