



Countering Domestic Violent Extremism

Rapporteur: Zack Gold

Domestic violent extremism (DVE) is a pressing concern for defense and national security policy-makers. In order to define the issue, place DVE in historical context, and suggest steps to address the problem, CNA's National Security Seminar convened three of its experts for a discussion titled "Countering DVE: Drivers, Challenges, and What Comes Next."

Defining the challenge

DVE refers to extremism inspired by domestic-based ideologies that direct or inspire US persons to commit violent acts within the United States. Mr. Thomas K. Plofchan III, a senior advisor to CNA's Institute for Public Research, highlighted the importance of defining a number of related terms (e.g., *terrorism*, *domestic terrorism*, *HVE* (homegrown violent extremism), and *REMVE* (racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism)) in order to have a productive conversation on the topic.

Both Plofchan and Dr. Megan McBride, a research analyst in CNA's Center for Stability and Development, pointed out that *violence* is the important differentiator in DVE. McBride said that blurring the line between ideological extremism and violent extremism is a problem. She referenced the US War on Terror, in which Islamist extremists were radicalized to violence partly because of US policies that failed to differentiate ideologues from *violent* ideologues. If US national security professionals lump all supporters of an ideology into a DVE frame, they risk repeating that mistake. Plofchan concurred, adding that because the First Amendment protects even hateful speech, authorities who target ideas rather than violence or calls to violence could unintentionally perpetuate narratives of ideological persecution.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) recently identified REMVE—particularly violent white supremacist extremism—as the most lethal DVE challenge today. At the same time, Plofchan, who previously served at DHS, said DVE is on the rise across the political spectrum—including DVE inspired by anti-government, anti-fascist (or antifa), and environmental ideologies.

DVE is part of the US political landscape

Dr. William Rosenau, CNA's senior policy historian, illustrated that the US has entered a new historical wave, but DVE has always been part of the US political landscape. White supremacist and anti-government violent extremists are the most important actors in the space today, and Rosenau tied this moment to the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), which is the most significant DVE organization in US history. The KKK had peaks during the post-Civil War Reconstruction period, in the 1920s and 1930s, and alongside the Civil Rights movement.

Other US-based ideologies have been violent as well, such as the anarchist DVE of the early 20th century. The 1960s–1980s featured ethno-nationalist violence, such as Puerto Rican separatists and the New Left (e.g., the Weather Underground Organization). Another distinct period of anti-government DVE occurred during the 1970s–1990s, culminating in the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in

Oklahoma City. The historical lesson to consider in the current wave, according to Rosenau, is that DVE can be subdued, not eliminated, and will reemerge periodically.

Reasons for the current surge in DVE

Terrorism experts were not surprised by the violence at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, said McBride. It was a matter of when, not if. The drivers of DVE are similar to the drivers of HVE, including a perceived loss of status and loss of faith in the government. The pandemic created a national-level cognitive rupture, which built on the 2008–2012 economic downturn and major cultural shifts in the US. The cognitive opening created by this instability and uncertainty was met with ideologies that were available and accessible to a portion of the population—most clearly far right and white supremacist ideologies.

Another factor driving DVE is community, which both McBride and Plofchan noted can be built online far more easily and quickly than in person. McBride commented that echo chambers are easy to find on the internet, and these online communities are responsible for decreasing the timeline to radicalization. According to Plofchan, radicalization to violence is happening now faster than at any time in US history. The key challenge of this fast radicalization timeline is that it outpaces traditional law enforcement mechanisms to prevent violent extremism.

How the US can confront DVE

McBride, Plofchan, and Rosenau recommended a number of immediate steps that national security policy-makers can take against DVE. Rosenau noted the importance of political will, pointing to the effective dismantling of the KKK in the 19th century and of anti-government DVE organizations in the 1990s. In recent years, partisanship has made such political will difficult. Plofchan agreed, saying that a nuanced approach is necessary to confront DVE and to separate DVE from differing political opinions.

Plofchan encouraged learning from the War on Terror, during which the US overstepped civil liberties through tactics such as profiling. These tactics enforced stereotypes, marginalized moderates, and radicalized individuals. McBride added that efforts to counter DVE benefit from the fact that politics, ideologies, and cultures in the United States are better understood by US actors.

Confronting online radicalization will be a significant challenge going forward, and Plofchan predicted that a conversation about liability for social media companies is coming. McBride also warned that “de-platforming” risks pushing extremist voices into ideological echo chambers and that social media algorithms for increasing engagement play a role in driving radicalization.

Plofchan called for a whole-of-society approach in which the federal government provides resources to state, local, and tribal engagements with local communities and civil society. McBride agreed that a whole-of-government approach was the best path forward, noting that local initiatives often have more authority, credibility, and relevance because they are more closely connected to at-risk populations. In addition to funding, Plofchan recommended fixing intelligence-sharing between the Department of Justice (DOJ) and DHS. When DOJ withholds intelligence on DVE threats from DHS, the latter is less effective at prevention and at informing state, local, and tribal law enforcement of radicalization trends. Finally, the panelists recommended expanding research into DVE, since available data are sparse and scholarship on the subject is limited compared to that on international terrorism.