

# The Threat from Within: An Overview of the Domestic Violent Extremist Threat Facing U.S. Nuclear Security Practitioners

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We are enormously grateful to the U.S. National Nuclear Security Administration, Office of International Nuclear Security's Nuclear Security Women initiative for the financial support of this project.

## Executive Summary

The events of the 21st century have required a reimagining of how nuclear security practitioners perceive threats in the United States. With the rise of terrorism concerns over the last two decades came the increase in the security risk posed by non-state actors to nuclear facilities. Insider threats and non-state actors are the most persistent concerns facing nuclear security practitioners – but the notion of who or what constitutes a threat is so deeply rooted in antiquated understandings of an adversary, that the U.S. nuclear security regime as a whole has struggled to address the risks posed by domestic violent extremists.

The emboldening of non-state actors through the proliferation of accelerationist ideologies among domestic violent extremist (DVE) groups pose a threat, not only to national security, but to the nuclear facilities that make up part of the nation's critical infrastructure. Compounding these risks, are intersections of insider threats and accelerationism that demonstrate the shortcomings in the protective frameworks designed by the traditional national and nuclear security decision-makers in the United States. Traditional assumptions informing security priorities are no longer sufficient to address emerging threats and evolving operational environments, because they fail to adapt to new actors and shifting environments.

Illustrating the risk posed by DVE actors and the vulnerabilities that can be exploited by insiders is a crucial step towards redefining 'threat' and understanding why the status quo is insufficient in the current threat landscape. The January 6, 2021, insurrection revealed the flaws in the system designed to weed out unsuitable candidates for sensitive work protecting nuclear materials, weapons, facilities, technology, and personnel. Understanding the limitations of the current system and the efforts underway by federal agencies to mitigate the DVE threat to nuclear and national security is a critical first step in creating a more sustainable and resilient national nuclear security regime.

# Introduction

In the aftermath of 9/11, the bulk of U.S. national security efforts – and subsequent nuclear security initiatives – were oriented towards protecting the country against a jihadist foreign terrorist organization and their efforts to cultivate homegrown violent extremists in the United States. These acts of terror were pivotal for the resurgence of nuclear security. The international community banded together against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction with the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1540 – acknowledging the devastating potential of non-state actors with malign intent acquiring nuclear, radiological, chemical, or biological weapons – supported further by UNSCR 1373 and the International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism.<sup>1</sup> Initiatives like the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism and the G7 Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction (Global Partnership) aimed to strengthen global norms to prevent, detect, and respond to nuclear terrorism through multilateral activities and assistance.<sup>2</sup>

In the United States, this commitment to the physical protection of nuclear materials, weapons, facilities, technology, and personnel was no less salient – and the U.S. has proven itself a leader in nuclear security in light of the vulnerabilities it has faced at home. This led to nuclear security experts, national security advocates, and policymakers calling for stronger leadership and initiative to combat the threat of nuclear terrorism as not only a national security issue, but a regional and international security priority – and to place focus on the threat posed by insiders, rather than the traditional purview of external actors who could be deterred by 'guns, guards, and gates.'<sup>3</sup> Through the Nuclear Security Summits, 52 countries and international organizations produced over 1000 new nuclear security commitments over six years - resulting in the Amendment to the Convention on Physical Protection of Nuclear Materials entering into force, the creation of the International Atomic Energy Agency's International Conference on Nuclear Security series, and the Fissile Material Working Group (now the International Nuclear Security Forum) for civil society advocacy and participation in nuclear security work.<sup>4</sup> However, attention on nuclear security has waned. And today's shifting threat landscape challenges the nuclear security concepts of the early 2000s.

Since 9/11, the nature of the threats facing the U.S. has evolved. Rather than focusing on international extremists with foreign ideological motives, federal agencies and law enforcement

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<sup>1</sup> Kelsey Davenport, "UN Security Council Resolution 1540 At a Glance," *Arms Control Association* (February 2021), <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/1540>

<sup>2</sup> Nuclear Threat Initiative, *Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism (GICNT)* (2022), <https://www.nti.org/education-center/treaties-and-regimes/global-initiative-combat-nuclear-terrorism-gicnt/>; Global Partnership, *Why We Work* (2023), <https://www.gpwmd.com/why-we-work>

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Bunn, "Preventing a Nuclear 9/11," *How to Make America Safe: New Policies for National Security* ed. Stephen Van Evera (Cambridge, MA: The Tobin Project, 2006): [https://tobinproject.org/sites/default/files/assets/Make\\_America\\_Safe\\_Preventing\\_Nuclear\\_9\\_11.pdf](https://tobinproject.org/sites/default/files/assets/Make_America_Safe_Preventing_Nuclear_9_11.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Scott Roecker, "A Call to Action on the Fifth Anniversary of the Final Nuclear Security Summit," *NTI Atomic Pulse* (March 31, 2021), <https://www.nti.org/atomic-pulse/call-action-fifth-anniversary-final-nuclear-security-summit/>

have begun to recognize the prevalence of domestic violent extremist threats to national security and critical infrastructure, including the nuclear sector. In 2021, U.S. Attorney General Merrick B. Garland and Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro N. Mayorkas identified the greatest domestic threat facing the United States as “racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists,” specifically highlighting white supremacists.<sup>5</sup> While anti-government, white supremacy and neo-Nazi ideologues have long existed within the fabric of U.S. society, before 9/11, many of these extremist groups or individuals were mostly rejected or were confined to the fringes of the social order. Online extremism and the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol have raised these groups’ visibility, while social media tools have helped them to proliferate their ideology and coordinate effective messaging and tactics. This paper will examine how the events of January 6, 2021, have shifted understanding of U.S. national security threats, explore strands of DVE ideology that specifically target the nuclear sector, and present case studies of DVE actors relevant to nuclear security before laying out U.S. government approaches and challenges in addressing this type of threat. We conclude by positing that the security community has not sufficiently redefined threat and present case studies of DVE actors.

## The Domestic Violent Extremist Threat

### Post-January 6<sup>th</sup> and the Current DVE threat

Many scholars have pointed to January 6<sup>th</sup> as the catalyst for renewed attention on insider threats and domestic violent extremism as national security priorities.<sup>6</sup> Both the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security have since recognized the evolving threat landscape since 9/11 and national and nuclear security priorities have slowly shifted from its long-time focus on international jihadists and foreign radicalization, towards domestic terrorists. In the aftermath of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, the issue of “insider threats” was at the forefront of U.S. counterterrorism efforts, but failed to evolve in the post-9/11 environment.<sup>7</sup> In the weeks following the siege, a new picture of the threat landscape emerged as the Department of Justice and FBI launched a nationwide effort to investigate the participants of January 6<sup>th</sup>. The investigation revealed that most participants were adherents of extremist ideology, many of whom were radicalized online and mobilized to take part in the insurrection. Some also adhered to a DVE ideology of concern for nuclear security, accelerationism, which is described in more detail later in this paper.

What is concerning, however, is the original failure of the FBI to anticipate the Capitol attack in the first place. Before the end of the 2020 presidential race, a team of intelligence analysts tried to game out the worst potential outcomes of a disputed election. But they never thought of the

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<sup>5</sup> Eileen Sullivan and Katie Benner, “Top law enforcement officials say the biggest domestic terror threat comes from white supremacists,” *The New York Times*, (May 12, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/12/us/politics/domestic-terror-white-supremacists.html>

<sup>6</sup> Seamus Huges, Ilana Krill, “Assessing US Domestic Extremism in Light of Capitol Riot Investigations,” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism* (June 30, 2022) <https://icct.nl/publication/assessing-us-domestic-extremism-in-light-of-capitol-riot-investigations/>

<sup>7</sup> Van Dongen, Teun, Yannick Veilleux-Lepage, Eviane Leidig, Hanna Rigault Srkhis, “Right-Wing Extremism in the Military: A Typology of the Threat,” *International Centre For Counter-Terrorism* (May 2022).

one that transpired: a violent mob mobilizing to overturn the election in support of Donald Trump.<sup>8</sup> Adam Goldman and Alan Feur write that the FBI was “[a]pparently blinded by a narrow focus on ‘lone wolf’ offenders and a misguided belief that the threat from the far left was as great as that from the far right,” thus, officials at the bureau did not anticipate or adequately prepare for the attack.<sup>9</sup> This confirmation bias also failed to account for actors such as militia groups or white supremacists, who took a leading role in the Capitol siege.

In May 2021, Attorney General Merrick B. Garland and Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro N. Mayorkas identified the greatest domestic threat facing the United States as “racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists,” specifically, white supremacists.<sup>10</sup> White supremacist extremists pose the primary threat among all domestic violent extremists. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) provided data showing that white supremacists were responsible for 51 out of 169 domestic terrorist attacks and plots from 2010 through 2021, the highest number among domestic terrorist ideologies.<sup>11</sup> In October 2022, the FBI and DHS issued a report titled “Strategic Intelligence Assessment and Data on Domestic Terrorism,” which put forth the most significant threat facing the U.S. as being posed by “lone offenders and small groups of individuals who commit acts of violence motivated by a range of ideological beliefs and/or personal grievances.”<sup>12</sup> The report also contended that of these actors, “domestic violent extremists represent one of the most persistent threats to the United States today.”<sup>13</sup>

The January 6<sup>th</sup> Capitol riot compelled the Biden Administration to prioritize the issue of domestic extremism. FBI Director Chris Wray condemned the January insurrection as “domestic terrorism” and described in stark terms the threat domestic violent extremists posed to the United

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<sup>8</sup> Adam Goldman and Alan Feur, “Bias and Human Error Played Parts in F.B.I.’s Jan. 6 Failure, Documents Suggest,” *The New York Times* (February 1, 2023) <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/01/us/politics/trump-jan-6-fbi.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>

<sup>9</sup> Adam Goldman and Alan Feur, “Bias and Human Error Played Parts in F.B.I.’s Jan. 6 Failure, Documents Suggest,” *The New York Times* (February 1, 2023) <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/01/us/politics/trump-jan-6-fbi.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>

<sup>10</sup> Eileen Sullivan and Katie Benner, “Top law enforcement officials say the biggest domestic terror threat comes from white supremacists,” *The New York Times*, May 12, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/12/us/politics/domestic-terror-white-supremacists.html>

<sup>11</sup> “The Rising Threat of Domestic Terrorism, A Review of the Federal Response to Domestic Terrorism and the Spread of Extremist Content on Social Media” (November 16, 2022), <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/media/majority-media/peters-investigative-report-shows-dhs-and-fbi-are-not-adequately-addressing-domestic-terrorism-threat>

<sup>12</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation and Department of Homeland Security, “Strategic Intelligence Assessment and Data on Domestic Terrorism,” Submitted to the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, the Committee on Homeland Security, and the Committee of the Judiciary of the United States House of Representatives, and the Select Committee on Intelligence, the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, and the Committee of the Judiciary of the United States Senate (October 2022), <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/fbi-dhs-domestic-terrorism-strategic-report.pdf/view>

<sup>13</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation and Department of Homeland Security, “Strategic Intelligence Assessment and Data on Domestic Terrorism,” Submitted to the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, the Committee on Homeland Security, and the Committee of the Judiciary of the United States House of Representatives, and the Select Committee on Intelligence, the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, and the Committee of the Judiciary of the United States Senate (October 2022), <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/fbi-dhs-domestic-terrorism-strategic-report.pdf/view>

States.<sup>14</sup> While not every individual involved in the attack was part of a militia or right-wing group, many shared common beliefs.

## DVE, Accelerationism, and Critical Nuclear Infrastructure

Domestic violent extremism (DVE) is an all-encompassing category that includes a variety of ideologies, including anti-government extremists, anarchists, anti-abortion extremists, white supremacists, involuntary celibates, ecoterrorists, and a smattering of other assorted extremists from across the political spectrum.<sup>15</sup> While DVE represents a range of threats, the interest in nuclear terrorism by accelerationist white nationalist groups represents a particular security concern for the nuclear policy community.

### Critical Infrastructure

One commonly shared feature of DVE adherents is the focus on attacking critical infrastructure – including nuclear power plants. Attacks on U.S. energy infrastructure are increasing.<sup>16</sup> Recent incidents on infrastructure include six “intrusion events” at Florida substations in September 2022; six attacks on substations in the US Northwest in November and December of 2022; four substations vandalized in Washington State cutting power to 14,000 on Christmas Day, 2022; and a December 2022 North Carolina “targeted attack that left thousands without power.”<sup>17</sup> Attackers often seek to attack regional power substations in order to cause economic distress and civil unrest. Leftist, anti-statist, accelerationist groups have also emerged on Telegram, to espouse their views that the U.S. electrical grid must be systematically attacked and dismantled. Telegram has attempted to remove much of the content but has been ineffective at regulating its content to filter extremist messaging.<sup>18</sup> As laid out in detail in the Case Studies section below, white supremacists Brandon Russell and Sarah Clendaniel were arrested in February 2023, on federal charges of plotting to shoot up a ring of subpower stations in Baltimore. The intent was to “destroy” Baltimore, a majority Black city.<sup>19</sup> Greg Harman writes that the “arrest reflects a

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<sup>14</sup> Eric Tucker and Mary Clare Jalonick, “FBI Chief Chris Wray Calls Jan. 5 ‘Domestic Terrorism,’ Defends Intel,” *PBS News Hour* (March 2, 2021), <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/watch-live-fbi-chief-chris-wray-to-face-questions-about-extremism-capitol-riot>

<sup>15</sup> “‘This is our House!’: A Preliminary Assessment of the Capitol Hill Siege Participants,” *Program on Extremism, The George Washington University* (March 2021). <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/This-Is-Our-House.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Catherine Morehouse, “Physical Attacks on Power Grid Surge to New Peak,” *Politico* (December 26, 2022), <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/12/26/physical-attacks-electrical-grid-peak-00075216>

<sup>17</sup> Greg Harman, “Rising Nazi Terror and Nuclear Power Risk: A Conversation with Edwin Lyman of the Union of Concerned Scientists,” *Deceleration* (February 13, 2023), <https://deceleration.news/2023/02/13/rising-nazi-terror-and-nuclear-power-risk/>

<sup>18</sup> Michael Loadenthal, “Infrastructure, Sabotage, and Accelerationism,” *Global Network on Extremism & Technology* (February 15, 2021), <https://gnet-research.org/2021/02/15/infrastructure-sabotage-and-accelerationism/>

<sup>19</sup> Greg Harman, “Rising Nazi Terror and Nuclear Power Risk: A Conversation with Edwin Lyman of the Union of Concerned Scientists,” *Deceleration* (February 13, 2023), <https://deceleration.news/2023/02/13/rising-nazi-terror-and-nuclear-power-risk/>

sustained mobilization of homegrown neo-Nazi networks, whose members are seeking to disrupt the nation's power supply in hopes of ushering in economic collapse and race war.”<sup>20</sup>

DVE and insider threats thus represent a particular area of concern for nuclear security, as evidenced by the Institute of Nuclear Management's (INMM) exploration of the intersection of homegrown violent extremism and the security of nuclear facilities at its 63<sup>rd</sup> Annual Meeting. Indeed, prior to targeting the Baltimore grid, Brandon Russell had expressed interest in taking out a Florida nuclear plant.<sup>21</sup> Russell's case is not an outlier. Other domestic violent extremist actors have illustrated the vulnerabilities in how security practitioners identify threats to nuclear security across the ideological spectrum – from other far-right actors like Matthew Gebert and Ashli Babbitt in recent years, to the jihadist radicalization of Sharif Mobley following the 9/11 attacks. The Case Studies section of this paper presents more detail on each of these cases.

## Accelerationism

Accelerationist ideology, which holds that the modern, Western democratic state is so mired in corruption and ineptitude that true patriots should instigate a violent insurrection, ultimately allowing a new, white-dominated order to emerge, presents additional concerns for the nuclear security community as some groups advocate for the use of nuclear weapons to achieve the new order.<sup>22</sup> Accelerationist dogma is often adopted by adherents who subscribe to an ‘alternative history,’ one that usually serves as a foil to the increasing racial diversity of American society. Accelerationists have created a historical narrative that utilizes stock footage, still images, and classical literature to assemble a romanticized image of an American past that valued whiteness, marriage, family values, and religiosity to claim that these values are in decline and to recruit membership from involuntary celibates (incels) and young, white men who wish to return to a manufactured past.<sup>23</sup>

One accelerationist group that caught the attention of the nuclear community is the Atomwaffen Division (AWD). AWD was organized as a series of terror cells advocating for the use of nuclear weapons to yield the collapse of civilization. Unlike some other white power activists, accelerationists believe modernity “has reached such a level of degeneracy and corruption that it cannot be rescued through mass movements or other political means.”<sup>24</sup> Many of the most violent manifestations of domestic violent extremism in the U.S. are encouraged by “mobilizing concepts.”<sup>9</sup> Mobilizing concepts are different from traditional ideological frameworks, which are rooted in more clearly articulated beliefs or theories about how political or economic systems

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<sup>20</sup> Greg Harmon, “Rising Nazi Terror and Nuclear Power Risk: A Conversation with Edwin Lyman of the Union of Concerned Scientists,” *Deceleration* (February 13, 2023), <https://deceleration.news/2023/02/13/rising-nazi-terror-and-nuclear-power-risk/>

<sup>21</sup> Janet Reitman, “All-American Nazis,” *Rolling Stone* (May 2, 2018), <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/all-american-nazis-628023/>

<sup>22</sup> Bruce Hoffman, “A Year After January 6, is Accelerationism the New Terrorist Threat?” *Council on Foreign Relations* (January 5, 2022), <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/year-after-january-6-accelerationism-new-terrorist-threat> (Accessed April 14, 2022).

<sup>23</sup> Michael Loadenthal, “Modern Fascism's Fascination with ‘Good Ol’ Family’ Values of an Imagined Past,” California Institute of Integrated Studies (May 22, 2021), <https://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/lavlang/2021/saturday/11/>

<sup>24</sup> “Atomwaffen,” *Southern Poverty Law Center* (Accessed April 18, 2023), <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/atomwaffen-division>

should work (anarchism, communism, fascism, etc.). An understanding of these neo-fascist accelerationist groups as a fluid network with broader goals of social destruction, rather than individual units with distinct ideological perspectives helps understand the continued relevance of AWD and its mission even after its dormancy in 2017.<sup>25</sup> The effectiveness of these mobilizing concepts and the fluid nature of the ideological network can be seen in how AWD has inspired similar neo-fascist accelerationist groups such as The Base, which unlike AWD, has tried to veil its desire to spark a “nuclear civil war” behind claims that it is focused on maintaining a “survivalism and self-defense network” in an effort to recruit broader membership.<sup>26</sup>

Another offshoot of the now-defunct neo-Nazi terror group Atomwaffen Division recently undertook a propaganda push to capitalize on the December 2022 power grid attack in Moore County, which resulted in widespread power outages affecting 40,000 customers.<sup>27</sup> The morning after the attack, neo-Nazi accelerationists on a private Telegram channel began to speculate about the involvement of the National Socialist Resistance Front (NSRF).<sup>28</sup> NSRF represents another rotating face of a network of neo-fascist groups that seek to use terror to promote their ideological goals of a new white-led order. In weeks leading up to the Moore County power grid attack, members of Uncle Ted’s Cabin channel distributed multiple terror manuals that encourage mass shootings and industrial sabotage.<sup>29</sup>

While not all accelerationist or DVE groups have nuclear ambitions, examining AWD and its ability to influence other extremist groups provides a clearer understanding of the threat landscape. Insights into membership mobility can inform preventative actions by governments and emphasize the importance of examining the ties between accelerationist groups, to ensure that DVE groups remain unable to acquire nuclear materials, weapons, technology, or information that would advance their cause.

## U.S. Military and DVE

Studies have found that far-right extremist groups intentionally target recruitment towards veterans and active military personnel in an effort to gain military training and insider knowledge

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<sup>25</sup> Alex Newhouse, “The Threat Is the Network: The Multi-Node Structure of Neo-Fascist Accelerationism,” in *CTC Sentinel*, Vol 14, No 5, (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, June 2021), p. 17 – 25;

<https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/CTC-SENTINEL-052021.pdf> (accessed November 9, 2021)

<sup>26</sup> Greg Huffman, “Far-right accelerationists hope to spark the next U.S. civil war,” *Institute for Southern Studies*, (February 3, 2021), <https://www.facingsouth.org/2021/02/far-right-accelerationists-hope-spark-next-us-civil-war> ; David Gartenstein-Ross, Samuel Hodgson, and Colin P. Clarke, “The Growing Threat Posed by Accelerationism and Accelerationist Groups Worldwide,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute* (April 20, 2020),

<https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/04/the-growing-threat-posed-by-accelerationism-and-accelerationist-groups-worldwide/>

<sup>27</sup> Jordan Green, “‘Part of the war is terror’: A new neo-Nazi group is trying to capitalize on the Moore County power grid attack,” *Raw Story* (December 19, 2022), <https://www.rawstory.com/moore-grid/>

<sup>28</sup> Jordan Green, “‘Part of the war is terror’: A new neo-Nazi group is trying to capitalize on the Moore County power grid attack,” *Raw Story* (December 19, 2022), <https://www.rawstory.com/moore-grid/>

<sup>29</sup> Jordan Green, “‘Part of the war is terror’: A new neo-Nazi group is trying to capitalize on the Moore County power grid attack,” *Raw Story* (December 19, 2022), <https://www.rawstory.com/moore-grid/>

of how institutions of power operate.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, online radicalization is the most common form of indoctrination into an extremist belief system. White-nationalist groups now outperform ISIS in nearly every social metric and notably, there was 600% increase in followers of American white-nationalist movements on Twitter between 2012 and 2016.<sup>31</sup> The targeted recruitment of veterans by extremist groups on social media platforms poses an evolving risk for national and nuclear security practitioners. While individual groups can be targeted by governments, and in the case of Atomwaffen Division, dissolve, the threat posed by individual members does not wane.<sup>32</sup> Recent studies of the 2020 collapse of AWD found that neo-fascist accelerationist groups, thanks in large part to their use of the internet, exist more as a fluid network with broader goals of social destruction, rather than individual units, demonstrating the continued relevance of the AWD, its mission and potential acts of violence, despite the group's formal dissolution.<sup>33</sup>

Extremism in the military has manifested in a number of ways—from attacks and/or hate crimes against fellow service members and civilians, theft of military equipment, security breaches, and broader harm to morale, unit cohesion, personnel retention, recruiting efforts, and mission success.<sup>34</sup> When considered in the context of nuclear security, extremism unchecked poses a threat to organizational security culture by creating a toxic workplace in which individuals are less likely to share concerns about abuse, hostility, or incivility on the basis of race, gender, or other characteristics.<sup>35</sup> The military plays a critical role in protecting our nation's nuclear materials, thus extremism poses a significant risk to nuclear security.

January 6<sup>th</sup> became an important focal point for examining extremism trends in the military. Individuals with a military background were around four times more likely to be members of a domestic extremist organization.<sup>36</sup> Individuals with experience in the Marines (47.8%) and the Army (41.3%) made up the vast majority of military arrestees (89.1% combined).<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Rachel Goldwasser, “Extremism Among Active-Duty Military and Veterans Remains a Clear and Present Danger” in *Hatewatch*, (Montgomery: Southern Poverty Law Center, October 12, 2021), <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2021/10/12/extremism-among-active-duty-military-and-veterans-remains-clear-and-present-danger>

<sup>31</sup> Janet Reitman, “All-American Nazis,” *Rolling Stone* (May 2, 2018),

<https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/all-american-nazis-628023/>

<sup>32</sup> Kirk Kennedy and David Prina, “Summary of Active Violent Domestic Extremist Groups,” *Defense Technical Information Center* (August 2021) <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/trecms/pdf/AD1148358.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> Alex Newhouse, “The Threat Is the Network: The Multi-Node Structure of Neo-Fascist Accelerationism,” in *CTC Sentinel*, Vol 14, No 5, (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, June 2021), p. 17 – 25; <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/CTC-SENTINEL-052021.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> Daniel Milton, Andrew Mines, “‘This is War’: Examining Military Experience Among the Capitol Hill Siege Participants,” George Washington University, Program on Extremism (April, 2021), (Accessed December 5, 2022).

<sup>35</sup> Amina A. Neville, Julie Fenderson, & Stephanie L. Jaros, “‘Maybe It’s Me’—A Visual Campaign To Encourage Self-Awareness & Self-Improvement in the Workforce” *The Threat Lab* (June 2021), [https://www.dhra.mil/Portals/52/Documents/perserec/20210706\\_PERS\\_Rpt\\_RN-21-01\\_Maybe-It's-Me.pdf](https://www.dhra.mil/Portals/52/Documents/perserec/20210706_PERS_Rpt_RN-21-01_Maybe-It's-Me.pdf)

<sup>36</sup> Seamus Huges, Ilana Krill, “Assessing US Domestic Extremism in Light of Capitol Riot Investigations,” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism* (June 30, 2022), <https://icct.nl/publication/assessing-us-domestic-extremism-in-light-of-capitol-riot-investigations/> (Accessed December 5, 2022).

<sup>37</sup> Daniel Milton, Andrew Mines, “‘This is War’: Examining Military Experience Among the Capitol Hill Siege Participants,” George Washington University, Program on Extremism (April, 2021), (Accessed December 5, 2022).

With tightened focus on DVE, security and policy experts can assess the growing risk of DVE insider threats. Public-sector employees, notably former State Department employee Matthew Gebert and including at least one employee at Los Alamos National Laboratories, have been linked to an anti-government militia group, and dangers of extremism in the military have been highlighted as a threat among both active duty servicemembers and veterans.<sup>38</sup> While data on extremism in the military is limited, in 2021 6.4% of all U.S. domestic terrorist incidents were linked to active-duty and reserve military personnel – an increase from 1.5% in 2019.<sup>39</sup>

An additional point of concern emerges when this trend of online radicalization of military personnel is placed in the context of hiring practices for nuclear power plants. All holding companies that own five or more nuclear power plants in the U.S. have veteran-specific hiring initiatives.<sup>40</sup> Veterans are attractive hires given their military experience, security expertise, and the fact that they are ‘pre-vetted’ by the nature of their previous employment.<sup>41</sup> Legislative approaches, policy prescriptions, and public discussions have tended to focus on extremism as a recruitment problem or for those currently serving. Focus on veterans and extremism tends to be neglected.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, as noted below, there are flaws in the military personnel fitness systems that may be allowing extremists to slip through the cracks, thus creating the potential for radicalized ex-military hires to gain access to sensitive roles at nuclear facilities and exacerbate the risk of these individuals becoming threats to nuclear security.

## Access and Participation: Reflecting on Who Makes it Through

When considering the DVE threat posed to nuclear security, situating the threat within the larger national security framework is important to understand how the threat manages to proliferate. Beyond the well-documented SF-86 for security clearance applications, the U.S. government employs the Trusted Workforce 2.0 Program to continuously evaluate cleared individuals’ backgrounds to ensure they continue to meet security clearance requirements and remain eligible to hold positions of trust.<sup>43</sup> However, through internal audits and external reports, it has become

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<sup>38</sup> Tim Dickinson, “They Joined an Anti-Government Militia — With Their Government Emails,” *Rolling Stone*, (October 26, 2021), <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/oath-keepers-investigation-public-employees-1246358/>; Rachel Goldwasser, “Extremism Among Active-Duty Military and Veterans Remains a Clear and Present Danger” in *Hatewatch*, (Montgomery: Southern Poverty Law Center, October 12, 2021); <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2021/10/12/extremism-among-active-duty-military-and-veterans-remains-clear-and-present-danger>

<sup>39</sup> Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, Grace Hwang, “The Military, Police, and the Rise of Terrorism in the United States,” *CSIS Briefs* (April 12, 2021), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/military-police-and-rise-terrorism-united-states>

<sup>40</sup> Scott Sagan, *Protecting Against Insider Threats*, [International Nuclear Security Forum presentation at the Stimson Center], March 24, 2021, <https://www.stimson.org/event/protecting-against-insider-threats/>

<sup>41</sup> Scott Sagan, *Protecting Against Insider Threats*, [International Nuclear Security Forum presentation at the Stimson Center], March 24, 2021, <https://www.stimson.org/event/protecting-against-insider-threats/>

<sup>42</sup> Daniel Milton, Andrew Mines, “‘This is War’: Examining Military Experience Among the Capitol Hill Siege Participants,” George Washington University, Program on Extremism (April, 2021), (Accessed December 5, 2022).

<sup>43</sup> Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency, “Trusted Workforce 2.0 and Continuous Vetting” (2023), <https://www.dcsa.mil/mc/pv/cv/>

evident that these barriers to entry and participation in nuclear and national security are disproportionately applied to historically marginalized groups.

Reports show that qualified applicants with foreign ties or from certain racial or ethnic groups have been discouraged from applying to sensitive national security positions and faced barriers to obtaining a security clearance, in part due to preconceived biases held by investigators about certain racial or ethnic groups.<sup>44</sup> This ‘othering’ of applicants at the first barrier of entry to participation in the nuclear security field also reflects a bias of preference towards candidates who fit a stereotypical ‘American’ image – suggesting that white applicants face less scrutiny during fitness investigations, as 55.2% of background investigators are white.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, when applying continuous vetting to applicants it is important to recall that not all groups perceive threat in the same way, and the disproportionate representation of white people in the investigator workforce creates risk that threats or behaviors that don’t appear to pose a risk to white communities may slip through the cracks. Homogeneity in the pool of investigators creates vulnerability in what risks are identified because individual positionality and lived experience informs how threats are perceived.

## Proliferation of DVE Ideology

January 6<sup>th</sup> offered insight into how the DVE landscape in the U.S. operates. DVE is quite fractured; the perpetrators of January 6 were not a homogenous group.<sup>46</sup> Yet certain categories emerged, which the George Washington Program on Extremism defined as organized clusters, inspired believers, to military networks—terms that help better connect participation in the siege to the nature of radicalization and mobilization to violent extremism within the U.S.<sup>47</sup> The events of January 6 revealed what happens when supporters of relatively disparate extremist movements coalesce around one event, but there are still differences and distinctions that must be understood in order to properly allocate resources against this threat.

Extremist ideology proliferates in the online environment. DVE attackers often radicalize independently by consuming violent extremist material online and mobilize without direction from a violent extremist organization, making detection and disruption difficult.<sup>48</sup> These

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<sup>44</sup> National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2004): <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-911REPORT/pdf/GPO-911REPORT.pdf> ; Tepring Piquado, Sina Beaghley, Lisa P. Colabella, and Nahom M. Beyene, *Assessing the Potential for Racial Bias in the Security Clearance Process*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2022): [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA1200/RRA1201-1-v2/RAND\\_RRA1201-1-v2.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RRA1200/RRA1201-1-v2/RAND_RRA1201-1-v2.pdf)

<sup>45</sup> Zippia, “Demographics” *Background Investigator Demographics and Statistics in the US* (2021), <https://www.zippia.com/background-investigator-jobs/demographics/>

<sup>46</sup> “‘This is our House!’: A Preliminary Assessment of the Capitol Hill Siege Participants,” *Program on Extremism, The George Washington University* (March 2021), <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/This-Is-Our-House.pdf>

<sup>47</sup> “‘This is our House!’: A Preliminary Assessment of the Capitol Hill Siege Participants,” *Program on Extremism, The George Washington University* (March 2021), <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/This-Is-Our-House.pdf>

<sup>48</sup> “Domestic Violent Extremism Poses Heightened Threat in 2021,” Office of the Director of National Intelligence (March 1, 2021), <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/domestic-violent-extremism-poses-heightened-threat-2021>

individuals will seek weapons and then attack “soft targets.”<sup>49</sup> In response to the growing prevalence of online extremism, social media companies and online platforms took actions against extremist content and activities, leading to a “great scattering” of extremists and extremist groups across alternative platforms.<sup>50</sup> However, organized extremist groups have retooled their approaches to building online movements. Unlawful private militias, for example, have posted messages declaring that they are incorporating traditional methods of recruitment, like soliciting at in-person events.<sup>51</sup> Movements that sought to return to or remain on mainstream platforms have deployed coded language and parallel rhetoric to evade detection from moderators.<sup>52</sup>

Online terrorism and violent extremism are cross-platform and transnational by nature. The current threat landscape grows increasingly more dynamic each day as a diverse array of violent extremist ideologies circulate in the online environment.<sup>53</sup> Terrorists and violent extremists have always been able to adapt themselves to tactics that intelligence and law enforcement professionals use to disrupt them. Similarly, when it comes to modern technology and communication tools, this creates an immense challenge for those enforcing policies and terms of service.<sup>54</sup>

## Case Studies: DVE Threats to Nuclear Security

The following four case studies evaluate the radicalization and danger posed by insider threats working within the national security and nuclear security community. Insider threats represent a critical security concern because they “could take advantage of their access rights, complemented by their authority and knowledge to bypass dedicated physical protection elements or other provisions, such as safety procedures.”<sup>55</sup> Threats posed by insiders for security

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<sup>49</sup> Kevin Breuninger, “DOJ unveils new domestic terror unit as U.S. faces ‘persistent and evolving’ threats a year after Jan. 6, officials warn,” *CNBC* (January 11, 2022), <https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/11/doj-unveils-new-domestic-terror-unit-says-threats-rising-a-year-after-jan-6.html> (Accessed December 5, 2022).

<sup>50</sup> Jared Holt, “After the Insurrection: How Domestic Extremists Adapted and Evolved After the January 6, US Capitol Attack.” *Atlantic Council* (January 2022). <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/after-the-insurrection-how-domestic-extremists-adapted-and-evolved-after-the-january-6-us-capitol-attack/> (Accessed December 5, 2022).

<sup>51</sup> Jared Holt, “After the Insurrection: How Domestic Extremists Adapted and Evolved After the January 6, US Capitol Attack.” *Atlantic Council* (January 2022). <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/after-the-insurrection-how-domestic-extremists-adapted-and-evolved-after-the-january-6-us-capitol-attack/> (Accessed December 5, 2022).

<sup>52</sup> Jared Holt, “After the Insurrection: How Domestic Extremists Adapted and Evolved After the January 6, US Capitol Attack.” *Atlantic Council* (January 2022). <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/after-the-insurrection-how-domestic-extremists-adapted-and-evolved-after-the-january-6-us-capitol-attack/> (Accessed December 5, 2022).

<sup>53</sup> Nicholas J. Rasmussen, Executive Director, The Global Internal Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT). Written Statement of Proposed Testimony. “The Dynamic Terrorism Landscape and What it Means for America.” *Committee of Homeland Security U.S. House of Representatives*. (February 2, 2022).

<sup>54</sup> Nicholas J. Rasmussen, Executive Director, The Global Internal Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT). Written Statement of Proposed Testimony. “The Dynamic Terrorism Landscape and What it Means for America.” *Committee of Homeland Security U.S. House of Representatives*. (February 2, 2022).

<sup>55</sup> “Nuclear Security Recommendations on Physical Protection of Nuclear Material and Nuclear Facilities,” *International Atomic Energy Agency, INFCIRC/225/Rev. 5*, (Vienna, Austria: IAEA, 2011), 12.

practitioners is a well-established and understood risk.<sup>56</sup> Nearly every publicly documented case of nuclear theft or sabotage was carried out by insiders or with the help of insider knowledge. Insiders continue to create vulnerabilities for nuclear and security facilities because the traditional insider threat assessment framework lacks the proper tools to identify insider threats. While programs like the Department of Energy’s Human Reliability Program and Trusted Workforce Initiative and the Department of Defense’s Personnel Reliability Program are crucial to mitigating threats, there is often insufficient emphasis placed on identifying insider threat “potential” in security efforts.<sup>57</sup> Organizations struggle to keep up with the pace and speed of radicalization. Examining the following case studies will provide insight into how to recognize radicalization within employees and craft better screening procedures moving forward.

## Brandon Russell

Brandon Russell is the founder of the Atomwaffen Division (AWD), a neo-Nazi group that formed in 2015 out of the Iron March, an influential online fascist forum. Many members of AWD subscribe to accelerationist philosophy, which fetishizes violence and favors a “leaderless resistance” or diffuse cell-structured networks for the purpose of engaging in terroristic acts.<sup>58</sup> Before founding the AWD, Russell grew up as a racial minority in the Bahamas—where a large majority of the population is Black—and was educated at an elite, multicultural private school.<sup>59</sup> He was diagnosed in elementary school with ADHD, and later suffered from depression. Online, however, he adopted a “new more heroic” identity, calling himself “Odin” after the warrior god of Norse mythology.<sup>60</sup> In October 2015, he posted on Iron March about the formation of AWD, writing “[w]e are a very fanatical, ideological band of comrades who do both activism and military training.” “No “keyboard warriors,” he added. “If you don’t want to meet up and get things done don’t bother.”<sup>61</sup> In creating AWD, Russell promoted the strategy of attacking public infrastructure in the belief that doing so would serve as the catalyst for a crisis that would trigger the collapse of “The System” – or what white accelerationists called the status quo political order.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Matthew Bunn and Scott Sagan, *A Worst Practice Guide to Insider Threats: Lessons from Past Mistakes* (Cambridge, U.S.A.: American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2014), <https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/insiderThreats.pdf> ; Christopher Hobbs and Matthew Moran, “Insider Threats: An Educational Handbook of Nuclear & Non-Nuclear Case Studies,” *Center for Science and Security Studies*, 2019 <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/csss/assets/insider-threats-handbook.pdf>

<sup>57</sup> John Landers, “Homegrown Violent Extremists: Are They a Threat to Nuclear Facilities?” Institute for Nuclear Material Management Panel Discussion at 63rd Annual Meeting (July 26, 2022).

<sup>58</sup> “Atomwaffen Division” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, (Accessed April 5, 2023), <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/atomwaffen-division>

<sup>59</sup> Janet Reitman, “All-American Nazis” *Rolling Stone* (May 2, 2018), <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/all-american-nazis-628023/>

<sup>60</sup> Janet Reitman, “All-American Nazis” *Rolling Stone* (May 2, 2018), <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/all-american-nazis-628023/>

<sup>61</sup> Janet Reitman, “All-American Nazis” *Rolling Stone* (May 2, 2018), <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/all-american-nazis-628023/>

<sup>62</sup> Hannah Gais and Jason Wilson, “Leaked Chats, Documents Show Atomwaffen Founder’s Path to Terror Plot,” *Southern Poverty Law Center* (February 23, 2023), <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2023/02/23/leaked-chats-documents-show-atomwaffen-founders-path-terror-plot>

Russell was also a member of the Florida National Guard. White supremacist and neo-Nazi groups often encourage their members to join the military, seeing it as free training for the racial holy war.<sup>63</sup> To spread AWD ideology, Russell and fellow member Devon Arthurs undertook a flyering campaign at the University of Central Florida. The pair reportedly posted AWD flyers and attached stickers with antisemitic slogans – some featuring an early AWD tagline urging readers to “Join your local Nazis!”<sup>64</sup> AWD flyers began appearing elsewhere throughout the country in late March 2016, first on the campus of Old Dominion University in Virginia, and then at Boston University in late April. However, Russell’s activities came to a standstill in 2017 when he was arrested following the murder of his two roommates by his friend Devon Arthurs. Arthurs shot Russell’s roommates on May 19, 2017 in a gated community near the University of South Florida. Police searching the house found several copies of *Mein Kampf*, a gas mask, a trove of neo-Nazi white-supremacist propaganda, and a framed photo of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh.<sup>65</sup>

The local bomb squad was also called in to examine the contents of the garage, where they discovered a small cooler marked “Brandon” containing HMTD, a white cakelike substance often used in making homemade explosives in addition to thorium and americium – radioactive materials.<sup>66</sup> Two days after the murders, on May 21, Brandon’s car was spotted in Key Largo, where police arrested him after he had illegally purchased a hunting rifle and an AR-15-style weapon with four high-capacity magazines and more than 500 rounds of ammunition with a fellow AWD member.

While Russell faced explosive charges, interrogators investigating Devon Arthurs learned that he had planned to blow up power lines along Alligator Alley and launch explosives into the Turkey Point nuclear power plant in Homestead. Russell had posted in Iron March about attacking the plant and Arthurs claimed that he had “the knowledge to build a nuclear bomb.”<sup>67</sup>

Though Brandon Russell was indicted on felony explosive charges, he was granted bond by a federal judge who was unable to find “clear and convincing evidence” that he posed a threat. It took an 11<sup>th</sup>-hour plea by Justice Department officials to overturn the ruling and revoke the bond. Russell eventually was sentenced to five years at the Coleman Federal Correctional Institute, a low-security prison in Wildwood, Florida. Though Russell’s arrest and imprisonment likely

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<sup>63</sup> Matt Kennard, *Irregular Army: How the US Military Recruited Neo-Nazis, Gang Members, and Criminals to Fight the War on Terror*, (New York: Verso, 2012); Janet Reitman, “All-American Nazis” *Rolling Stone* (May 2, 2018), <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/all-american-nazis-628023/>

<sup>64</sup> “Atomwaffen Division,” *Southern Poverty Law Center* [https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/atomwaffen-division?gclid=Cj0KCCQiAtlCdBhCLARIsALUBFcEh3-Q3G\\_O3l79ybbm3PEJHNj4hNOBCTcjbFULB6x0lgo17tU8P-GEaAjdMEALw\\_wcB](https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/atomwaffen-division?gclid=Cj0KCCQiAtlCdBhCLARIsALUBFcEh3-Q3G_O3l79ybbm3PEJHNj4hNOBCTcjbFULB6x0lgo17tU8P-GEaAjdMEALw_wcB)

<sup>65</sup> Janet Reitman, “All-American Nazis” *Rolling Stone* (May 2, 2018),

<https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/all-american-nazis-628023/>

<sup>66</sup> A.C. Thompson, “An Atomwaffen member sketched a map to take the neo-Nazis down. What path officials took is a mystery,” *ProPublica*, November 20, 2018, <https://www.propublica.org/article/an-atomwaffen-member-sketched-a-map-to-take-the-neo-nazis-down-what-path-officials-took-is-a-mystery>; Earnhardt, R. L., Hyatt, B., Roth, N., “A threat to confront: far-right extremists and nuclear terrorism,” *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, (January 14, 2021), [https://thebulletin.org/2021/01/a-threat-to-confront-far-right-extremists-and-nuclear-terrorism/#\\_ftn8](https://thebulletin.org/2021/01/a-threat-to-confront-far-right-extremists-and-nuclear-terrorism/#_ftn8)

<sup>67</sup> Janet Reitman, “All-American Nazis” *Rolling Stone* (May 2, 2018), <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/all-american-nazis-628023/>

mitigated a potential national security threat, questions still arise as to why someone with extremist views was able to serve within the military force. Russell openly expressed white supremacist views at his workplace and maintained an actively online persona that spewed vitriol and hate-speech.<sup>68</sup> A further layer of concern is that Russell was also able to release supremacist propaganda while he was in prison.

A new coalition of AWD leaders emerged after Russell's imprisonment, many of whom worked to place visual propaganda at the center of their mission. The organization shared heavily stylized videos of members firing barrages of assault-rifle rounds.<sup>69</sup> Many members claimed that they stayed in touch with Russell while he was in prison. Hatewatch found that Russell released neo-Nazi propaganda while in the United States Penitentiary in Atlanta on at least two occasions.<sup>70</sup> Russell left prison and entered supervised release in June 2021.

However, new charges were outlined in a criminal complaint filed by the FBI on February 2, 2023. The complaint accuses Russell and Sarah Beth Clendaniel (his accomplice and girlfriend) of equipping themselves for attacks on electricity infrastructure in Baltimore, Maryland.<sup>71</sup> According to the complaint, Russell encouraged a confidential human source "to carry out attacks on critical infrastructure" in furtherance of his "racially motivated violent extremist" ideology.<sup>72</sup> The encouragement included sharing a 14-page "white supremacist publication that provided instructions on how to attack critical infrastructure."<sup>73</sup> Special Agent in Charge Thomas J. Sabocinski of the FBI field office in Baltimore said Clendaniel and Russell conspired to inflict "maximum harm" to the power grid.<sup>74</sup> Federal authorities have also described the alleged plot as "racially or ethnically motivated." More than 61% of Baltimore residents are Black.<sup>75</sup> The plans represent a wider spark of extremist activity surrounding domestic infrastructure. The

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<sup>68</sup> Janet Reitman, "How did a Convicted Neo-Nazi Release Propaganda From Prison?" *Rolling Stone* (May 25, 2018), <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/how-did-a-convicted-neo-nazi-release-propaganda-from-prison-628437/>

<sup>69</sup> "Atomwaffen Division," *Southern Poverty Law Center* [https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/atomwaffen-division?gclid=Cj0KCQIAtlCdBhCLARIsALUBFcEh3-Q3G\\_O3l79ybbm3PEJHNj4hNOBCTcjbFULB6x0lgo17tU8P-GEaAjdMEALw\\_wcB](https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/atomwaffen-division?gclid=Cj0KCQIAtlCdBhCLARIsALUBFcEh3-Q3G_O3l79ybbm3PEJHNj4hNOBCTcjbFULB6x0lgo17tU8P-GEaAjdMEALw_wcB)

<sup>70</sup> Hannah Gais and Jason Wilson, "Leaked Chats, Documents Show Atomwaffen Founder's Path to Terror Plot," *Southern Poverty Law Center* (February 23, 2023), <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2023/02/23/leaked-chats-documents-show-atomwaffen-founders-path-terror-plot>

<sup>71</sup> Hannah Gais and Jason Wilson, "Leaked Chats, Documents Show Atomwaffen Founder's Path to Terror Plot," *Southern Poverty Law Center* (February 23, 2023), <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2023/02/23/leaked-chats-documents-show-atomwaffen-founders-path-terror-plot>

<sup>72</sup> Hannah Gais and Jason Wilson, "Leaked Chats, Documents Show Atomwaffen Founder's Path to Terror Plot," *Southern Poverty Law Center* (February 23, 2023), <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2023/02/23/leaked-chats-documents-show-atomwaffen-founders-path-terror-plot>

<sup>73</sup> Hannah Gais and Jason Wilson, "Leaked Chats, Documents Show Atomwaffen Founder's Path to Terror Plot," *Southern Poverty Law Center* (February 23, 2023), <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2023/02/23/leaked-chats-documents-show-atomwaffen-founders-path-terror-plot>

<sup>74</sup> Rachel Weiner, Jasimine Hilton, and Dan Morse, "Duo Accused of Neo-Nazi Plot to Target Maryland Power Stations," *The Washington Post* (February 6, 2023), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2023/02/06/maryland-power-grid-neonazi-brandon-russell/>

<sup>75</sup> Michael Kosnar and David K. Li, "Neo-Nazi Leader Among 2 Arrested in Plot to Attack Baltimore's Power Grid, Feds Say," *NBC News* (February 6, 2023), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/fbi-arrests-2-suspects-accused-planning-attack-baltimore-power-grid-rcna69324>

Department of Homeland Security said there has been a “significant uptick” in online discussion of grid attacks by homegrown extremists and that it should be treated as “domestic terrorism, pure and simple.”<sup>76</sup>

Russell’s arrest was a boon for national security, but raises questions as to why someone who founded a Neo-Nazi accelerationist group, planned an attack on a nuclear power plant, acquired radiological materials, and sought to acquire nuclear weapons to hasten the collapse of society was allowed join the Florida National Guard and remain in service for a year. Russell was known for sharing his extremist views in the workplace, yet his radicalization and extremist discourse was not flagged.<sup>77</sup> Russell’s case is indicative of the challenges posed to identifying and combatting DVE threats in the military. Russell’s rhetoric and activities promoted his extremist belief system, and yet, his fitness for duty was not called into question, as the background investigations and personnel reliability programs in place were insufficient in identifying the threat he posed. Russell’s case serves as an indicator of the vulnerabilities that unmitigated biases produce both within nuclear security, and the broader national security regime.

## Matthew Gebert

In 2013, Matthew Gebert joined the State Department as a Presidential Management Fellow—a prestigious program, focused on developing a “cadre of future government leaders.”<sup>78</sup> On August 7, 2019, in response to a Hatewatch report about Gerbert’s role in the white nationalist movement, the State Department suspended him and launched an investigation. Gebert’s case is important because he had embedded himself within the national security bureaucracy – within an organization that acts as a major stakeholder and decision-maker for U.S. nuclear policy – while organizing events with some of the white power movement’s most prominent figures, like Richard Spencer and Michael Peinovich. Though he was investigated twice by federal officials for his high-level clearance, his online involvement in the white power movement went unnoticed.<sup>79</sup> In fact, as Hannah Gais writes, “[the] year after he marched alongside Klansmen, neo-Nazis, white nationalists, and other far-right extremists at the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, Gebert’s security clearance was renewed.”<sup>80</sup> While at the State Department, Gebert had also posted or reposted thousands of messages on Twitter and the extremist-friendly messaging app Telegram promoting his goal of building a fascist country

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<sup>76</sup> Rachel Weiner, Jasimine Hilton, and Dan Morse, “Duo Accused of Neo-Nazi Plot to Target Maryland Power Stations,” *The Washington Post* (February 6, 2023), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2023/02/06/maryland-power-grid-neonazi-brandon-russell/>

<sup>77</sup> Janet Reitman, “How did a Convicted Neo-Nazi Release Propaganda From Prison?” *Rolling Stone* (May 25, 2018), <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/how-did-a-convicted-neo-nazi-release-propaganda-from-prison-628437/>

<sup>78</sup> “The Opportunity: PMF as a Pathway,” *U.S. Office of Personnel Management, Presidential Management Fellows Program* (Accessed April 10, 2023), <https://www.pmf.gov/opportunity/index.aspx>

<sup>79</sup> Hannah Gais, “A New ‘War on Terrorism’ is the Wrong Way to Fight Domestic Extremists,” *The New Republic* (May 18, 2021), <https://newrepublic.com/article/162229/war-domestic-terrorism-stop-far-right-extremists>

<sup>80</sup> Hannah Gais, “A New ‘War on Terrorism’ is the Wrong Way to Fight Domestic Extremists,” *The New Republic* (May 18, 2021), <https://newrepublic.com/article/162229/war-domestic-terrorism-stop-far-right-extremists>

composed of only white, non-Jewish people.<sup>81</sup> In response, both Spotify and Twitter removed Gebert's podcast and account.

Gebert himself traced his own radicalization back to the immigration bill cosponsored by John McCain and Ted Kennedy in 2006.<sup>82</sup> The bipartisan bill—never voted on in the Senate—was introduced to reform immigration by incorporating legalization, guest worker programs, and border enforcement components. But his most active and public period of radicalization is suggested to have been in 2015, when he was working as a foreign affairs officer assigned to the Bureau of Energy Resources.<sup>83</sup> It was then that he made a post on a white nationalism-focused forum called “The Right Stuff.” Gebert credits “The Right Stuff” and Richard Spencer's white nationalist organization, the National Policy Institute, for introducing him to real-life organizers. Gebert and his wife hosted parties and events for far-right extremists at his home in Leesburg, Virginia. It is alleged that at one gathering, the pair served cookies in the shape of swastikas.<sup>84</sup>

In 2017, Gebert marched alongside Klansmen, neo-Nazis, and white nationalists at the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, VA. The rally occurred amid controversy generated by the removal of Confederate Civil War monuments—the rally ultimately turned violent after protesters clashed with counter-protesters, resulting in more than 30 injuries.

Gebert maintained an active online presence promoting his supremacist views. Under the alias of “Coach Finstock,” he expressed a desire to build a country for whites only: Through that alias, he expressed a desire to build a country for whites only “[Whites] need a country of our own with nukes, and we will retake this thing lickety split,” “Coach Finstock” said on a May 2018 episode of “The Fatherland,” a white nationalist podcast. “That's all that we need. We need a country founded for white people with a nuclear deterrent. And you watch how the world trembles.”<sup>85</sup> “Coach Finstock” also spoke about attending the deadly “Unite the Right” rally; he described himself as wearing a hat and sunglasses that day to avoid being identified. Moreover, as “Coach Finstock,” Gebert helped lead a Washington, D.C., and Northern Virginia-based organizing chapter of Michael Peinovich's The Right Stuff called “D.C. Helicopter Pilots.”<sup>86</sup>

Despite Gebert's Top Secret, Sensitive Compartmented Information clearance—one of the highest levels of authorization that must be renewed every five years, his radical activities went

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<sup>81</sup> Michael Edison Hayden, “White Nationalist State Department Official Still Active in Hate Movement,” *Southern Poverty Law Center* (January 30, 2020), <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2020/01/30/white-nationalist-state-department-official-still-active-hate-movement>

<sup>82</sup> Peter Savodnik, “How Could you Not Connect the Dots?": Inside the Red-Pilling of State Department Official Matthew Gebert,” *Vanity Fair* (February 11, 2020), <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2020/02/inside-red-pilling-of-state-department-official-matthew-gebert-alt-right>

<sup>83</sup> Michael Edison Hayden, “U.S. State Department Official Involved in White Nationalist Movement, Hatewatch Determines,” *Southern Poverty Law Center* (August 7, 2019), <https://www.splcenter.org/gebert>

<sup>84</sup> Petula Dvorak, “Their Northern Virginia Neighbor Apparently Served Swastika Cookies for Special Guests,” *The Washington Post* (September 26, 2019), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/their-northern-virginia-neighbor-apparently-saved-his-swastika-cookies-for-special-guests/2019/09/26/191875d4-e077-11e9-8dc8-498eabc129a0\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/their-northern-virginia-neighbor-apparently-saved-his-swastika-cookies-for-special-guests/2019/09/26/191875d4-e077-11e9-8dc8-498eabc129a0_story.html)

<sup>85</sup> Michael Edison Hayden, “U.S. State Department Official Involved in White Nationalist Movement, Hatewatch Determines,” *Southern Poverty Law Center* (August 7, 2019), <https://www.splcenter.org/gebert>

<sup>86</sup> Michael Edison Hayden, “U.S. State Department Official Involved in White Nationalist Movement, Hatewatch Determines,” *Southern Poverty Law Center* (August 7, 2019), <https://www.splcenter.org/gebert>

undetected and unchecked. In 2020, Amos Hochstein, the former head of President Barack Obama’s special envoy for international energy at the State Department, told the Southern Poverty Law Center’s podcast, *Sounds Like Hate*, that Gebert “had full access to classified information and classified computer systems that would give him access to quite a bit of information outside of the purview of the energy bureau alone.”<sup>87</sup>

Gebert was reported by his brother, Michael Gebert on July 2, 2019. “I saw so much evil in my brother, I could not f----- deal with it,” Michael Gebert told Hatewatch.<sup>88</sup> On August 7, 2019, in response to Michael Edison Hayden’s reporting at the Southern Poverty Law Center, the State Department placed Gebert on immediate administrative leave. Investigations were subsequently launched and Gebert’s neighbors also responded with alarm, one neighbor taking the time to reach out to Hayden, saying that they had spotted Gebert standing in his lawn with a handgun on his waist.<sup>89</sup>

As revelations about Gebert proliferated, further blind spots in the security clearance system emerged. Over the course of the federal investigations into his background, no information was uncovered about his extremist affiliations. Hannah Gais has argued that there were questions on Standard Form 86—the form used by the government to facilitate background checks for those seeking a security clearance—that should have turned up evidence of Gebert’s involvement in white supremacist organizations, or his involvement in groups that sought to dismantle the U.S. government.<sup>90</sup> However, it seemed that no one asked the right questions during his clearance interviews.

Gebert’s case serves to illustrate vulnerabilities in the national security regime’s ability to detect DVE threats through clearance investigations, personnel surety programs, or continuous evaluation mechanisms. Though the Department of State is more of a stakeholder for nuclear security in the U.S. than an implementer, the agency plays a significant role as a policymaker, informing Presidential Administration positions both at home and abroad. Gebert’s accelerationist position advocating for white supremacists to secure a nuclear deterrent is troubling when placed in the context of his high rank at the Department of State working on energy issues. Had he not been caught, Gebert’s role as a decision-maker may have enabled him to damage nuclear security, should he have used his privileged position and access to secure information to give his fellow extremists information on how to access nuclear materials or technology.

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<sup>87</sup> Hannah Gais, “A New ‘War on Terrorism’ is the Wrong Way to Fight Domestic Extremists,” *The New Republic* (May 18, 2021), <https://newrepublic.com/article/162229/war-domestic-terrorism-stop-far-right-extremists>

<sup>88</sup> Michael Hayden, “Brother Says He Reported White Nationalist State Department Official to the FBI,” in Hatewatch, (August 15, 2019), <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2019/08/14/brother-says-he-reported-white-nationalist-state-department-official-fbi>

<sup>89</sup> Hannah Gais, “A New ‘War on Terrorism’ is the Wrong Way to Fight Domestic Extremists,” *The New Republic* (May 18, 2021), <https://newrepublic.com/article/162229/war-domestic-terrorism-stop-far-right-extremists>

<sup>90</sup> Hannah Gais, “A New ‘War on Terrorism’ is the Wrong Way to Fight Domestic Extremists,” *The New Republic* (May 18, 2021), <https://newrepublic.com/article/162229/war-domestic-terrorism-stop-far-right-extremists>

## Sharif Mobley

Sharif Mobley was alleged to have had ties to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the Yemeni al-Qaeda affiliate that emerged in January 2009.<sup>91</sup> Mobley was a U.S.-born 26-year old Muslim man of Somali heritage from New Jersey.<sup>92</sup> Prior to being rounded up by Yemeni authorities in a sweep of terrorist suspects, he had worked at various nuclear power plants in New Jersey from 2002-2008.<sup>93</sup> He had also begun to show signs of radicalization. Following his radicalization timeline reveals the easewith which people in the United States can convert to online extremism and the difficulty that comes with profiling possible militants within the United States.

Mobley graduated from high school in 2002 in rural southern New Jersey. After graduating, he worked for several contractors at three nuclear power plants run by PSEG Nuclear. Mobley carried supplies and did maintenance work at the plants on Artificial Island in Lower Alloways Creek, and worked at other plants in the region as well. In order to do his job, Mobley satisfied several federal background checks, the last one in 2008.<sup>94</sup>

Mobley had strong Muslim views as early as high school, but an old friend said that he had only begun to radicalize around 2006. The friend and high school colleague, Roman Castro also reported that when he returned back form duty in Iraq that Mobley yelled at him, “Get the hell away from me you Muslim killer.”<sup>95</sup>

Gregory Shuck writes in “Online Jihadism,” “Although it cannot be substantiated with solid evidence, it is conceivable that Mobley’s radicalization occurred online as a troubled Muslim youth growing up in a difficult time in America, while struggling to find a sense of identity and purpose.”<sup>96</sup> Shuck suggests that Mobley began to radicalize after meeting and becoming a pupil of Anwar Al Awlaki. Awlaki, who was an al-Qaida propagandist and English-language preacher, never met or talked to Mobley before his travels to Yemen, suggesting Mobley began to radicalize through exposure to Awlaki’s messages over the internet.<sup>97</sup> Notably, Awlaki had also been in contact with three of the 9/11 attackers, the Christmas Day Bomber, and Nidal Malik Hasan of Fort Hood infamy.

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<sup>91</sup> Germain Difo, “Sharif Mobley and Yemen,” *American Security Project* (March 15, 2010), <https://www.americansecurityproject.org/sharif-mobley-and-yemen/>

<sup>92</sup> Germain Difo, “Sharif Mobley and Yemen,” *American Security Project* (March 15, 2010), <https://www.americansecurityproject.org/sharif-mobley-and-yemen/>

<sup>93</sup> Dan Amira, “New Jersey Man Accused of Al Qaeda Ties in Yemen,” *New York Magazine* (March 12, 2010), [https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2010/03/new\\_jersey\\_man\\_accused\\_of\\_terr.html](https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2010/03/new_jersey_man_accused_of_terr.html)

<sup>94</sup> “Pal: Sharif Mobley Radicalized Years Ago,” *CBS* (March 12, 2010), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/pal-sharif-mobley-radicalized-years-ago/>

<sup>95</sup> Peter A. Olsson, *The Making of a Homegrown Terrorist: Brainwashing Rebels in Search of a Cause* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2014).

<sup>96</sup> Gregory Shuck, “Online Jihadism: Propaganda, Recruitment, and Homegrown Radicalization,” PhD. Dissertation (Baltimore, Maryland, 2015).

<sup>97</sup> Peter A. Olsson, *The Making of a Homegrown Terrorist: Brainwashing Rebels in Search of a Cause* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2014).

Over the next six years, Mobley worked at 6 operational nuclear power plants. Mobley had unescorted access to the interior of the plants. To have secure access, employees are required to undergo a background investigation, a criminal record check, and a psychological investigation. However, the rules did not apply to temporary workers who migrate from plant to plant, as Mobley did.<sup>98</sup>

Around the time of the Iraq war—it is not clear when—Mobley allegedly referred to non-Muslims as “infidels” and he once told labor union colleagues that “we are brothers in the Union, but when the holy war comes, look out.”<sup>99</sup> Fellow nuclear plant workers said Mobley had referred to non-Muslims as “infidels” and had visited “unusual” websites on his personal computer, including one showing a mushroom cloud, the report said.<sup>100</sup>

He left for Yemen 2008 with his family after writing to Anwar al-Awlaqi for advice on schools. In Yemen, Mobley is believed to have studied at the Dar al-Hadith Dammaj Institute, a Salafist school in Saada. U.S. officials claim his language class attendance was infrequent and he spent his days “doing things like facilitating the movement of extremists to Yemen on behalf of AQAP.”<sup>101</sup>

Mobley first came to public attention when Yemeni authorities reported that he had grabbed a guard's gun during a medical visit after being arrested in a sweep of suspected al-Qaeda militants.<sup>102</sup> Yemen's defense ministry described him as “an al-Qaeda member involved in several terrorist attacks” since his arrival. In January 2009, he was shot and arrested by Yemen's secret police.<sup>103</sup> Mobley has been detained in Yemen since January 26, 2010.<sup>104</sup> He was later

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<sup>98</sup> “Regulators: NJ Nuclear Plant Employee was an Islamic Jihadist,” *Homeland Security News Wire* (October 6, 2010), <https://www.homelandsecuritynewswire.com/regulators-nj-nuclear-plant-employee-was-islamic-jihadist>

<sup>99</sup> Matthew Bunn and Scott Sagan, *A Worst Practice Guide to Insider Threats: Lessons from Past Mistakes* (Cambridge, U.S.A.: American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2014), <https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/insiderThreats.pdf>

<sup>100</sup> “Regulators: NJ Nuclear Plant Employee was an Islamic Jihadist,” *Homeland Security News Wire* (October 6, 2010), <https://www.homelandsecuritynewswire.com/regulators-nj-nuclear-plant-employee-was-islamic-jihadist>

<sup>101</sup> Matthew Bunn and Scott Sagan, *A Worst Practice Guide to Insider Threats: Lessons from Past Mistakes* (Cambridge, U.S.A.: American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2014), <https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/insiderThreats.pdf>

<sup>102</sup> Karen De Young, “U.S. Citizen Accused in Yemen Killing Had Been Under FBI Watch,” *The Washington Post* (March 13, 2010).

<sup>103</sup> Matthew Bunn and Scott Sagan, *A Worst Practice Guide to Insider Threats: Lessons from Past Mistakes* (Cambridge, U.S.A.: American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2014), <https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/insiderThreats.pdf>

<sup>104</sup> Sharif Mobley, *et al.* Plaintiffs, v. Central Intelligence Agency, *et al.* Defendants, United States District Court for the District of Columbia, 806 F.3d 568 (D.C. Cir. 2015). <https://casetext.com/case/mobley-v-cent-intelligence-agency-2>

charged with murder after being accused of killing a hospital guard during an attempted escape.<sup>105</sup> Neither the U.S, nor Yemen has brought terrorism charges against Mobley.

Scholars have debated whether Mobley planned to return to the U.S. from Yemen to attack U.S. nuclear plants due to inspiration from Awlaki. His practical knowledge of U.S. nuclear power plants had been extensive. The situation emphasizes the critical importance of careful screening and continuous supervision of nuclear power plant employees at every level of activity at nuclear and other power plants and grids.<sup>106</sup> Scholars Matthew Bunn and Scott Sagan note that Mobley is often seen as the closest thing to an al-Qaeda infiltration of a U.S. nuclear facility—but that the information surrounding his case is still unclear.

Following his case, U.S. Senator Charles Schumer called for an immediate federal probe by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) Inspector General into the background checks conducted on new and transferred employees at U.S. nuclear plants.<sup>107</sup> Senator Schumer said that the Mobley case “showed that we had to devise and implement a much tougher security system to protect our nuclear plants from infiltration.”<sup>108</sup> In light of Mobley and in response to Senator Schumer, the NRC evaluated its access authorization process and the Office of Nuclear Security and Incident Response (NSIR) interface with the FBI Terrorist Screening Center. NRC has made some initial enhancements to certain aspects of the access authorization program.<sup>109</sup> The report recommended improving plant employee training on how to detect and report “behaviors associated with terrorist intent.”<sup>110</sup> It proposed that regulatory commission officials should get direct access to a nuclear industry personnel database and suggested more frequent matching of employee names against terrorist watch lists. The inspector general also suggested requiring disclosure of any foreign travel by nuclear plant employees so that they could be questioned about their destinations and activities abroad.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Kareem Fahim, “American Prisoner in Yemen Said to Face Death Sentence,” *The New York Times* (November 9, 2015), <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/10/world/middleeast/yemen-prisoner-sharif-mobley.html>

<sup>106</sup> Peter A. Olsson, *The Making of a Homegrown Terrorist: Brainwashing Rebels in Search of a Cause* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2014).

<sup>107</sup> Press Release, “Schumer: Federal Background Checks for Nuclear Workers Inadequate – Calls for Immediate Beefing Up of Background Check System for Employees at U.S. Nuclear Plants After Reports of a Man with Al Qaeda Ties Worked at NJ Plant,” *Charles E. Schumer* (April 7, 2010), <https://www.schumer.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/schumer-federal-background-checks-for-nuclear-workers-inadequate-calls-for-immediate-beefing-up-of-background-check-system-for-employees-at-us-nuclear-plants-after-reports-of-a-man-with-al-qaeda-ties-worked-at-nj-plant>

<sup>108</sup> Scott Shane, “Worker Spoke of Jihad, Agency Says,” *The New York Times* (October 4, 2010), <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/05/us/05mobley.html>

<sup>109</sup> Semi-Annual Report to Congress, NRC, (April 1, 2010-September 30, 2010), p. 25 [https://www.google.com/books/edition/Semiannual\\_Report\\_to\\_Congress\\_by\\_the\\_Uni/525LATn5eWAC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=sharif+mobley&pg=PA25&printsec=frontcover](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Semiannual_Report_to_Congress_by_the_Uni/525LATn5eWAC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=sharif+mobley&pg=PA25&printsec=frontcover)

<sup>110</sup> Scott Shane, “Worker Spoke of Jihad, Agency Says,” *The New York Times* (October 4, 2010), <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/05/us/05mobley.html>

<sup>111</sup> Scott Shane, “Worker Spoke of Jihad, Agency Says,” *The New York Times* (October 4, 2010), <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/05/us/05mobley.html>

Although Mobley’s case lacks substantive evidence, it represents a concerning example where an employee was radicalized at his nuclear job, apparently without coworkers reporting his statements or authorities noticing shifts in his views. His case also demonstrates the vulnerabilities, not only in the personnel surety loopholes for roving nuclear power plant employees, but the security culture within the broader nuclear industry. As a Black man, Mobley did not fit the image of a typical victim of Islamist radicalization, and despite fellow employees noting behaviors of concern, he remained undetected as a potential threat by the nuclear security regime. In the post-9/11 nuclear environment, culturally essentialist assumptions about a demographic’s behavior, ideological leanings, or perceived risk are insufficient. In an evolving threat landscape, nuclear security implementers must develop nuanced understandings of how behaviors or misbehaviors inform risk and threat to nuclear weapons, materials, facilities, and personnel in order to mitigate the full range of DVE insider threats.

## Ashli Babbitt

Ashli Babbitt was an Air Force veteran who spent more than a decade in military service. However, she came to public attention on January 6, 2021, when she was shot and killed during the insurrection at the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. The U.S. Attorney’s Office for the District of Columbia and the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice launched an investigation into the 35-year-old’s death, but ultimately decided not to pursue charges against the U.S. Capitol Police officer who shot her.<sup>112</sup> The investigation determined that Babbitt had joined a crowd of people that gathered on the U.S. Capitol grounds to protest the results of the 2020 presidential election. The investigation further determined that Babbitt was a member of the mob that entered the Capitol building and gained access to a hallway outside “Speaker’s Lobby,” which leads to the Chamber of the U.S. House of Representatives.<sup>113</sup> Babbitt proceeded to attempt to climb through one of the doors where glass was broken by members of the mob. An officer inside the Speaker’s Lobby fired one round from his service pistol in defense, fatally striking Babbitt. The U.S. Capitol Police’s investigation also concluded that the officer “potentially saved members and staff from serious injury and possible death.”<sup>114</sup>

Babbitt became radicalized online after leaving the Air Force, where she served for two wars and 14 years. While in the Air Force, she exhibited a history of insubordinate behavior that prevented her from rising through the ranks.<sup>115</sup> After the Air Force, she returned to settle near a working-class San Diego suburb where she was raised. She was also briefly employed as a security guard

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<sup>112</sup> United States Attorney’s Office, District of Columbia, “Department of Justice Closes Investigation into the Death of Ashli Babbitt,” *United States Department of Justice* (April 14, 2021), <https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/pr/departement-justice-closes-investigation-death-ashli-babbitt>

<sup>113</sup> United States Attorney’s Office, District of Columbia, “Department of Justice Closes Investigation into the Death of Ashli Babbitt,” *United States Department of Justice* (April 14, 2021), <https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/pr/departement-justice-closes-investigation-death-ashli-babbitt>

<sup>114</sup> Scott MacFarlane, Rebecca Kaplan, “Mother of Ashli Babbitt Meets with House Speaker Kevin McCarthy,” *CBS News* (March 23, 2023), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ashli-babbitt-mother-meets-kevin-mccarthy/>

<sup>115</sup> Jamison, P. et. al. “‘The storm is here’: Ashli Babbitt’s journey from capital ‘guardian’ to invader,” *Washington Post*, (January 10, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/01/09/ashlibabbitt-capitol-shooting-trump-qanon/>; Sneha Nair, “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Nuclear Security Culture: Insider Threat Assessments at Nuclear Facilities,” *Stimson Center* (July 2022) <https://www.stimson.org/2022/diversity-equity-and-inclusion-in-nuclear-security-culture-insider-threat-assessments-at-nuclear-facilities/>

at Calvert Cliffs Nuclear Power Plant in Maryland from 2015-2017.<sup>116</sup> During this time, she also had two protective orders filed against her, one in 2016 and the other in 2017. The first was filed after she allegedly rammed her car into her husband's ex-girlfriend. The conflict between the women was a product of Babbitt's affair with the alleged victim's then-boyfriend – who later became Babbitt's husband. The second was filed after she allegedly harassed the same woman by following her home and verbally assaulting her with calls and messages.<sup>117</sup> No transcript from the hearing was available, but the ex-girlfriend said the lawyer defending Babbitt made repeated references to her employment at the local nuclear power plant and years of military service; Babbitt was acquitted of the criminal charges.<sup>118</sup> What is troubling, is that despite all of these signs, and her avid social media support for debunked conspiracy theories as early as 2016, Babbitt stayed on as an employee at the Calvert Cliffs Nuclear Power Plant from 2015 to 2017.<sup>119</sup> Babbitt's role as an employee at a nuclear power plant, in combination with her ideological beliefs, is troubling – especially when considering the appeal of nuclear infrastructure as a target for extremists. In 2015, a suspect linked to the Paris attacks was found with surveillance footage of a top official at a nuclear facility in Belgium. Authorities were concerned the Islamic State was potentially plotting to kidnap the official to obtain radioactive material for the terrorist attacks.<sup>120</sup>

After Babbitt's death, her social media was scoured for insights into her radicalization. In one furious 2018 monologue, Babbitt blamed California politicians for “refusing to choose America” and for criticizing Trump.<sup>121</sup> “You can consider yourself put on notice by me and the American people,” she yelled.<sup>122</sup> In another video, posted on Twitter a month later, she echoed Trump's language on immigration. “The border is an absolute sh-t show,” she ranted. “There's riots, there's arrest, there's rapes, there's drugs.”<sup>123</sup> Her Twitter, in the months leading up to January 6,

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<sup>116</sup> Ellen Barry, Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs, and Dave Philipps, “Woman Killed in Capitol Embraced Trump and QAnon,” *The New York Times* (August 23, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/08/us/who-was-ashli-babbitt.html>; Sneha Nair, “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Nuclear Security Culture: Insider Threat Assessments at Nuclear Facilities,” *Stimson Center* (July 2022) <https://www.stimson.org/2022/diversity-equity-and-inclusion-in-nuclear-security-culture-insider-threat-assessments-at-nuclear-facilities/>

<sup>117</sup> Michael Biesecker, “Ashli Babbitt a Martyr? Her Past Tells a More Complex Story,” *Associated Press* (January 3, 2022), <https://apnews.com/article/ashli-babbitt-capitol-siege-a15c7e52a04d932972b7a284c7a8f7df>

<sup>118</sup> Michael Biesecker, “Ashli Babbitt a Martyr? Her Past Tells a More Complex Story,” *Associated Press* (January 3, 2022), <https://apnews.com/article/ashli-babbitt-capitol-siege-a15c7e52a04d932972b7a284c7a8f7df>

<sup>119</sup> Price, L. and Prudente, T., “Woman fatally shot during riot at U.S. Capitol formerly lived in Annapolis, worked at Calvert Cliffs nuclear plant,” (2021); Earnhardt, R. L., Hyatt, B., Roth, N., “A threat to confront: far-right extremists and nuclear terrorism,” (2021); Sneha Nair, “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Nuclear Security Culture: Insider Threat Assessments at Nuclear Facilities,” *Stimson Center* (July 2022) <https://www.stimson.org/2022/diversity-equity-and-inclusion-in-nuclear-security-culture-insider-threat-assessments-at-nuclear-facilities/>

<sup>120</sup> Ann Thompson, “How Right-Wing Extremists Pose a Nuclear Threat,” *WVXU* (July 12, 2021), <https://www.wvxu.org/local-news/2021-07-12/how-right-wing-extremists-pose-a-nuclear-threat>

<sup>121</sup> Vera Bergengruen, “‘Our First Martyr.’ How Ashli Babbitt is Being Turned into a Far-Right Recruiting Tool,” *Time* (January 10, 2021), <https://time.com/5928249/ashli-babbitt-capitol-extremism/>

<sup>122</sup> Vera Bergengruen, “‘Our First Martyr.’ How Ashli Babbitt is Being Turned into a Far-Right Recruiting Tool,” *Time* (January 10, 2021), <https://time.com/5928249/ashli-babbitt-capitol-extremism/>

<sup>123</sup> Vera Bergengruen, “‘Our First Martyr.’ How Ashli Babbitt is Being Turned into a Far-Right Recruiting Tool,” *Time* (January 10, 2021), <https://time.com/5928249/ashli-babbitt-capitol-extremism/>

showed her to be a devoted adherent of conspiracy theories promoted by Trump.<sup>124</sup> Babbitt also posted long diatribes on social media about Democrats, COVID-19 mask mandates, and illegal immigration.<sup>125</sup> Her Twitter account, which was taken down after her death, made multiple mentions of the QAnon conspiracy theory, which centers on the belief that Trump has secretly battled deep-state enemies and a cabal of Satan-worshipping cannibals that includes prominent Democrats who operate a child sex trafficking ring.<sup>126</sup> “Nothing will stop us,” Babbitt tweeted January 5. “They can try and try and try but the storm is here and it is descending upon DC in less than 24 hours...dark to light!”<sup>127</sup>

Babbitt’s case provides an interesting framework with which to highlight vulnerabilities in nuclear security personnel reliability programs and its ability to identify insider threats. Each piece of the Babbitt case seems somewhat unassuming until they are pieced together to form a disturbing picture of an individual who should not have been anywhere near a nuclear facility, but managed to slip through the protective framework put in place by both the national security infrastructure and the nuclear security regime.

A history of violence, infidelity, and insubordination is clear red flag for fitness for duty. While details on Babbitt’s time at the Calvert Cliffs nuclear power plant have been limited, there is no evidence that she was placed on leave or had her clearance suspended or revoked after being accused of committing vehicular assault while being an employee at the facility.<sup>128</sup> Violent behaviors can be indicative of other problems that could ultimately affect the security of a nuclear facility – either through the threat posed by the individual, or their inability to do their job as a result of these problems.<sup>129</sup> Biases that inform who or what constitutes a threat often underestimate the role of women as violent actors – an assumption that undermines efforts to accurately assess threats to both national and nuclear security.<sup>130</sup> The fact that the nuclear security infrastructure in place did not consider Babbitt, a woman with protective orders issued

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<sup>124</sup> Lois Beckett and Vivian Ho, “‘She was Deep Into It’: Ashli Babbitt, Killed in Capitol Riot, was Devoted Conspiracy Theorist.” *The Guardian* (January 9, 2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/09/ashli-babbitt-capitol-mob-trump-qanon-conspiracy-theory>

<sup>125</sup> Michael Biesecker, “Ashli Babbitt a Martyr? Her Past Tells a More Complex Story,” *Associated Press* (January 3, 2022), <https://apnews.com/article/ashli-babbitt-capitol-siege-a15c7e52a04d932972b7a284c7a8f7df>

<sup>126</sup> Michael Biesecker, “Ashli Babbitt a Martyr? Her Past Tells a More Complex Story,” *Associated Press* (January 3, 2022), <https://apnews.com/article/ashli-babbitt-capitol-siege-a15c7e52a04d932972b7a284c7a8f7df>

<sup>127</sup> Michael Biesecker, “Ashli Babbitt a Martyr? Her Past Tells a More Complex Story,” *Associated Press* (January 3, 2022), <https://apnews.com/article/ashli-babbitt-capitol-siege-a15c7e52a04d932972b7a284c7a8f7df>

<sup>128</sup> Earnhardt, R. L., Hyatt, B., Roth, N., “A threat to confront: far-right extremists and nuclear terrorism,” *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, (January 14, 2021), [https://thebulletin.org/2021/01/a-threat-to-confront-far-right-extremists-and-nuclear-terrorism/#\\_ftn8](https://thebulletin.org/2021/01/a-threat-to-confront-far-right-extremists-and-nuclear-terrorism/#_ftn8)

<sup>129</sup> Matthew Bunn and Scott Sagan, *A Worst Practice Guide to Insider Threats: Lessons from Past Mistakes* (Cambridge, U.S.A.: American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2014), <https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/insiderThreats.pdf>

<sup>130</sup> Bigio, J. and Vogelstein, R. B., *Women and Terrorism: Hidden Threats, Forgotten Partners*, (Washington, D.C., U.S.: Council on Foreign Relations, 2019), [https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/Discussion\\_Paper\\_Bigio\\_Vogelstein\\_Terrorism\\_OR.pdf?\\_gl=1\\*bop\\_iuz\\*\\_ga\\*MjA4NTU1NDk4LjE2NzAyMDk2NDY.\\*\\_ga\\_24W5E70YKH\\*MTY3MDIwOTY0Ni4xLjAuMTY3MDIwOTY0Ni4wLjAuMA..](https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/Discussion_Paper_Bigio_Vogelstein_Terrorism_OR.pdf?_gl=1*bop_iuz*_ga*MjA4NTU1NDk4LjE2NzAyMDk2NDY.*_ga_24W5E70YKH*MTY3MDIwOTY0Ni4xLjAuMTY3MDIwOTY0Ni4wLjAuMA..)

against her for alleged acts of violence, a threat in the workplace indicates the need for bias mitigation in both the nuclear security framework.

The Babbitt case further indicates the need for thorough social media analysis by security clearance investigations and personnel reliability programs, when it comes to individuals espousing extremist ideologies. As an employee she was espousing conspiracy theories and mass delusions that undermined the foundation of U.S. democracy and shared problematic falsehoods about individuals with different viewpoints than her own. These behaviors are clear indicators of Babbitt's incompatibility with core American principles, and should have been cause for concern during routine screening, and yet, she stayed on at the facility for another year after displaying extremist behaviors. The Babbitt case demonstrates the need for clearer guidance for nuclear facilities and national security practitioners when it comes to checking and evaluating social media use by practitioners in a way that is compatible with First Amendment protections, as a means of strengthening both national and nuclear security threat mitigation efforts.

Babbitt's violent tendencies and social media use were clear red flags that should have precluded her from access to a nuclear facility, and yet the personnel screening failed to identify her as a potential threat. Her knowledge of facility protocols, experience from her time in the military, and radicalization by the far right were a perfect storm in which an insider threat could be born.<sup>131</sup> The Ashli Babbitt case illustrates that the screening process for new and existing employees has failed to capture behaviors and tendencies of individuals who pose significant threats to nuclear security.

## Government Approaches and Challenges in Addressing DVE

Following the reorientation towards domestic threats in the wake of January 6<sup>th</sup>, U.S. Government leaders and institutions critically examined the vulnerabilities exposed by the insurrection in the nation's national security infrastructure to consider how DVE actors had remained in sensitive roles, and the potential options to combat the threat from within and protect not only national interests but strengthen nuclear security implementation.

U.S. public officials and federal law enforcement have similarly followed suit and repeatedly identified the need for renewed vigilance in confronting domestic extremism as a threat to national security.<sup>132</sup> Marred by the pre-inaugural events of January 6<sup>th</sup>, the Biden Administration spent its first year in office crafting a policy plan for addressing DVE threats, and finding ways to prevent homogeneity in the national and nuclear security workforce.

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<sup>131</sup> International Nuclear Security Forum, *Protecting Against Insider Threats* webinar, (Washington, D.C., U.S.: Stimson Center, March 24, 2021), <https://www.stimson.org/event/protecting-against-insider-threats/>; Sneha Nair, "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Nuclear Security Culture: Insider Threat Assessments at Nuclear Facilities," *Stimson Center* (July 2022) <https://www.stimson.org/2022/diversity-equity-and-inclusion-in-nuclear-security-culture-insider-threat-assessments-at-nuclear-facilities/>

<sup>132</sup> "Fact Sheet: National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism," White House (June 15, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/15/fact-sheet-national-strategy-for-countering-domestic-terrorism/>

## Challenges Combatting the DVE Threat

Historically, the US government's security clearance processes and counter-intelligence concerns are oriented towards foreign-based actors that desire to exploit US citizens, especially those with access to restricted information. Part of this orientation may be due to the foundational Constitutional rights for U.S. citizens, primarily the First and Fourth Amendments. Many national security related laws, executive orders, and policy guidance documents require coordination with legal counsel and with civil liberties and privacy officials to ensure civil liberties and rights to privacy are observed during investigations and monitoring actions.

The First Amendment guarantees freedoms concerning religion, expression, assembly, and the right to petition. It forbids Congress from both promoting one religion over others and also restricting an individual's religious practices. It guarantees freedom of expression by prohibiting Congress from restricting the press or the rights of individuals to speak freely. It also guarantees the right of citizens to assemble peaceably and to petition their government.

The Fourth Amendment originally enforced the notion that "each man's home is his castle," secure from unreasonable searches and seizures of property by the government. It protects against arbitrary arrests, and is the basis of the law regarding search warrants, stop-and-frisk, safety inspections, wiretaps, and other forms of surveillance, as well as being central to many other criminal law topics and to privacy law. The tension between protecting Constitutional rights and the government's interest in monitoring for threats is a tension that is inherent in US law, executive orders, and policies, all the way down to the supervisor level.

While there are "catch-all" clauses regarding anarchic activity or any attempt to overthrow the government, focusing on foreign threats has traditionally been the primary or only lens really needed for agencies to protect national security information. However, there is less clarity in how agencies and supervisors ought to differentiate between a U.S. citizen's free speech and activities that are pre-cursors to anarchic intent. For example, this gray area created challenges for the FBI in monitoring, assessing and responding to indicators leading up to the events of January 6. As changes in social media and domestic politics evolve, it is worth considering if the assumptions about whether foreign or domestic threats are the most likely and the balance of protecting civil liberties is appropriate in the current national security environment.

## Government Actions to Combat DVE

### *White House Actions*

A key development in insider threat prevention emerged from Executive Order 13587, which in 2011 established the National Insider Threat Task Force (NITTF) under the joint leadership of the Attorney General and the Director of National Intelligence. E.O. 13587 directed federal departments and agencies with access to classified information to establish insider threat detection and prevention programs, with assistance from the NITTF.<sup>133</sup> The primary mission of the NITTF is to develop a government-wide insider threat program for deterring, detecting, and

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<sup>133</sup> "National Insider Threat Task Force (NITTF) Mission," *The National Counterintelligence Security Center* (Accessed April 16, 2023), <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/ncsc-how-we-work/ncsc-nitff>

mitigating insider threats.<sup>134</sup> In June 2021 the White House and National Security Council published the National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism, a framework of Executive Branch-led actions and initiatives to identify, prevent, intervene, and measure extremist activities earlier rather than later.<sup>135</sup> While there was no explicit reference to domestic nuclear or radiological terrorism, publication of this document can be taken as an indicator that the Biden Administration aims to take DVE risk and insider threats as a serious vulnerability in the national security framework. Key commitments included:

- The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has designated “Combatting Domestic Violent Extremism” as a National Priority Area within FEMA grant programs, a first for the DHS.<sup>136</sup> Over \$77 million will be allocated to state, local, tribal, and territorial partners to prevent, protect against, respond to, and recover from domestic violent extremism.<sup>137</sup>
- DHS replaced its Office for Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention with the Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships to help build local prevention frameworks to provide communities with the tools they need to combat DVE.<sup>138</sup>
- The National Counterterrorism Center, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and DHS have committed to publicly releasing a new edition of the *Federal Government’s Mobilization Indicators* booklet that will include, for the first time, potential indicators of domestic terrorism–related mobilization.<sup>139</sup>
- The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has committed to improving employee screening to enhance methods for identifying domestic terrorists who might pose insider threats. OPM will consider updates to the forms used to apply for sensitive roles in the Federal Government that could assist investigators in identifying potential domestic terrorism threats. DOD, DOJ, and DHS are similarly pursuing efforts to ensure domestic

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<sup>134</sup> “National Insider Threat Task Force (NITTF) Mission,” *The National Counterintelligence Security Center* (Accessed April 16, 2023), <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/ncsc-how-we-work/ncsc-nitff>

<sup>135</sup> National Security Council, *National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism*, (Washington D.C.: The White House, June 15, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/National-Strategy-for-Countering-Domestic-Terrorism.pdf> (accessed November 9, 2021)

<sup>136</sup> National Security Council, *National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism*, (Washington D.C.: The White House, June 15, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/National-Strategy-for-Countering-Domestic-Terrorism.pdf> (accessed November 9, 2021)

<sup>137</sup> Department of Homeland Security, *DHS Creates New Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships and Additional Efforts to Comprehensively Combat Domestic Violent Extremism* (May 11, 2021), <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2021/05/11/dhs-creates-new-center-prevention-programs-and-partnerships-and-additional-efforts> (accessed November 9, 2021)

<sup>138</sup> Department of Homeland Security, *DHS Creates New Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships and Additional Efforts to Comprehensively Combat Domestic Violent Extremism* (May 11, 2021), <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2021/05/11/dhs-creates-new-center-prevention-programs-and-partnerships-and-additional-efforts> (accessed November 9, 2021)

<sup>139</sup> National Security Council, *National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism*, (Washington D.C.: The White House, June 15, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/National-Strategy-for-Countering-Domestic-Terrorism.pdf> (accessed November 9, 2021).

terrorists are not employed within our military or law enforcement ranks and improve screening and vetting processes.<sup>140</sup>

On March 2, 2023, President Biden signed National Security Memorandum (NSM) 19 to Counter Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) Terrorism and Advance Nuclear and Radioactive Material Security worldwide. The strategy aims to protect the U.S. and the international community from “existential threats posed by WMD terrorism and preventing non-state actors from using chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons.”<sup>141</sup> Biden’s actions represent the first comprehensive policy for securing radioactive materials, while also including new domestic guidelines for the management and security of nuclear material.<sup>142</sup> The plan sets out comprehensive guidelines for Departments and Agencies in the Federal government to prepare to prevent, mitigate, and respond to WMD terrorist attacks—including those carried out by domestic actors.

### *Department of Defense Actions*

Following the stand-down day in February 2021 to understand the scope of the problem of extremist activity within the military following the January 6<sup>th</sup> Insurrection, The Department of Defense (DOD) updated its guidance dealing with DVE threats in the military. DOD guidance states that military personnel must not “actively advocate...extremist...doctrine, ideology, or causes, including those that advance, encourage, or advocate illegal discrimination...or those that advance, encourage, or advocate the use of force, violence, or criminal activity or otherwise advance efforts to deprive individuals of their civil rights.”<sup>143</sup> The DOD revised its definition of ‘extremist participation’ in 2021 in *Instruction 1325.06*, to more effectively identify extremism within military ranks.<sup>144</sup> The new definition now includes “Advocating widespread unlawful discrimination based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex (including pregnancy), gender

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<sup>140</sup> National Security Council, *National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism*, (Washington D.C.: The White House, June 15, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/National-Strategy-for-Countering-Domestic-Terrorism.pdf> (accessed November 9, 2021)

<sup>141</sup> Press Release, “FACT SHEET: President Biden Signs National Security Memorandum to Counter Weapons of Mass Destruction Terrorism and Advance Nuclear and Radioactive Material Security,” *White House* (March 2, 2023), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/03/02/fact-sheet-president-biden-signs-national-security-memorandum-to-counter-weapons-of-mass-destruction-terrorism-and-advance-nuclear-and-radioactive-material-security/>

<sup>142</sup> Press Release, “FACT SHEET: President Biden Signs National Security Memorandum to Counter Weapons of Mass Destruction Terrorism and Advance Nuclear and Radioactive Material Security,” *White House* (March 2, 2023), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/03/02/fact-sheet-president-biden-signs-national-security-memorandum-to-counter-weapons-of-mass-destruction-terrorism-and-advance-nuclear-and-radioactive-material-security/>

<sup>143</sup> Department of Defense, *Instruction 1325.06* (November 2009), <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/132506p.pdf>

<sup>144</sup> Department of Defense, *Instruction 1325.06*, (December 20, 2021), <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/132506p.PDF?ver=ckT436s6Q40EVtLn-Fe7g%3d%3d>

identity, or sexual orientation.”<sup>145</sup> Which explicitly targets the insider threat posed by violent white supremacist ideologies.

The definition of ‘active participation’ in extremist activities was also expanded in the updated DOD guidance, to include prohibiting participation in extremist events or activities with the knowledge that the meetings or activities intend to violate the law or likely to result in violence.<sup>146</sup> The new guidance also goes on to forbid active-duty personnel to “engage in electronic and cyber activities regarding extremist activities, or groups... Military personnel are responsible for the content they publish on all personal and public Internet domains, including social media sites, blogs, websites, and applications.”<sup>147</sup> Given that radicalization increasingly happens online, with 52.22% of extremists involved in DVE activities actively used social media, and the trend of DVE groups actively seeking out potential members with military backgrounds – the AWD serving as a good example of this – updating DOD guidance serves to strengthen the prevention of and response to insider threats, reducing the risk of DVE activity by current military personnel.<sup>148</sup>

The DOD released the *Report on Countering Extremist Activity Within the Department of Defense* in December 2021, which seeks to provide an update on the implementation status of the Secretary of Defense’s four directed actions from the DOD 60-day Leadership Stand-Down to Address Extremism in the Force program and describes the six additional recommendations and associated actions developed by the Countering Extremist Activity Working Group (CEAWG) that will be implemented by the DOD.<sup>149</sup>

Of the Secretary of Defense’s four directed actions, all have been partially or fully implemented. *DOD Instruction 1325.06* updated its definition of ‘extremist activities’ in 2021, though the policy for civilian DOD employees and contractors still requires revision.<sup>150</sup> The DOD had also announced that it will begin incorporating training for servicemembers separating or retiring from the military on potential targeting of those with military training by violent extremist

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<sup>145</sup> Department of Defense, *Instruction 1325.06*, (December 20, 2021), <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/132506p.PDF?ver=ckT436s6Q40EVtgLn-Fe7g%3d%3d>

<sup>146</sup> Department of Defense, *Instruction 1325.06*, (December 20, 2021), <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/132506p.PDF?ver=ckT436s6Q40EVtgLn-Fe7g%3d%3d>

<sup>147</sup> Department of Defense, *Instruction 1325.06*, (December 20, 2021), <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/132506p.PDF?ver=ckT436s6Q40EVtgLn-Fe7g%3d%3d>

<sup>148</sup> Rachel Goldwasser, “Extremism Among Active-Duty Military and Veterans Remains a Clear and Present Danger,” *Southern Poverty Law Center* (October 12, 2021), <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2021/10/12/extremism-among-active-duty-military-and-veterans-remains-clear-and-present-danger>

<sup>149</sup> Department of Defense, *Report on Countering Extremist Activity Within the Department of Defense*, (December 20, 2021), <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Dec/20/2002912573/-1/-1/0/REPORT-ON-COUNTERING-EXTREMIST-ACTIVITY-WITHIN-THE-DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE.PDF> (accessed January 3, 2022)

<sup>150</sup> Department of Defense, *Report on Countering Extremist Activity Within the Department of Defense*, (December 20, 2021), <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Dec/20/2002912573/-1/-1/0/REPORT-ON-COUNTERING-EXTREMIST-ACTIVITY-WITHIN-THE-DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE.PDF> (accessed January 3, 2022).

actors.<sup>151</sup> Language in the Service Member Transition Checklist was updated, with additions to direct transitioning service members to law-enforcement reporting methods for extremist activities, and DOD-wide training on extremist activity to combat recruitment.<sup>152</sup> Recruitment of veterans by extremist groups remains a priority, but requires further collaboration with the Department of Veterans Affairs to be implemented.<sup>153</sup> Military services also updated their screening forms to include questions on membership in racially biased groups and participation in violent acts – preceding a series of standardized questions for use across all military services.<sup>154</sup> However, CNAS assesses that these efforts by the DOD to review, screening, management, and post-service transition processes to address the presence of DVE ideologies and behaviors within their ranks have been “reactionary, sporadic, and inconsistent.”<sup>155</sup>

Additional CEAWG recommendations from the DOD report include: identifying funding for critical areas related to insider threat analysis and response; developing a comprehensive education and training plan based on the new definitions of ‘extremist activity’ and ‘active participation’ for DOD military and civilian personnel; reviewing and updating relevant policies related to prohibited activities – specifically defining and establishing policy for ‘extremist activities’ applicable to DOD civilian employees in DOD *Instruction 1438.06*, “Workplace Violence Prevention and Response Policy,” within 90 days of the publication of the updated ‘extremist activities’ definition in *Instruction 1325.06*; commissioning a study on information sharing and risk prioritization on insider threats; modernizing and improving the Insider Threat program to improve requirements, information review, and capacity building for the program; and to develop and implement an outreach and education plan related to the Insider Threat Program within 90 days of the report’s publication.<sup>156</sup>

To supplement the DOD 60-day Leadership Stand-Down to Address Extremism in the Force program launched in February 2021, the Office of the Secretary of Defense sponsored research by the RAND National Security Research Division to create a framework for the DOD to reduce the risk of extremism in the military, and recommendations for community-based approaches that leverage existing DOD extremist risk reduction programs.<sup>157</sup> These recommendations

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<sup>151</sup> National Security Council, *National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism*, p. 20

<sup>152</sup> Department of Defense, *Report on Countering Extremist Activity Within the Department of Defense*, (December 20, 2021), <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Dec/20/2002912573/-1/-1/0/REPORT-ON-COUNTERING-EXTREMIST-ACTIVITY-WITHIN-THE-DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE.PDF> (accessed January 3, 2022).

<sup>153</sup> Department of Defense, *Report on Countering Extremist Activity Within the Department of Defense*, (December 20, 2021), <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Dec/20/2002912573/-1/-1/0/REPORT-ON-COUNTERING-EXTREMIST-ACTIVITY-WITHIN-THE-DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE.PDF> (accessed January 3, 2022).

<sup>154</sup> Department of Defense, *Report on Countering Extremist Activity Within the Department of Defense*, (December 20, 2021), <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Dec/20/2002912573/-1/-1/0/REPORT-ON-COUNTERING-EXTREMIST-ACTIVITY-WITHIN-THE-DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE.PDF> (accessed January 3, 2022).

<sup>155</sup> Carrie Cordero, Katherine L. Kuzminski, Arona Baigal, and Josh Campbell, “Protecting the Protectors: Preventing and Mitigating Domestic Violent Extremism in the Military, Veteran, and Law Enforcement Communities,” *CNAS* (December 6, 2022), <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/protecting-the-protectors-preventing-and-mitigating-domestic-violent-extremism-in-the-military-veteran-and-law-enforcement-communities>

<sup>156</sup> Department of Defense, *Report on Countering Extremist Activity Within the Department of Defense*, p. 15 -18

<sup>157</sup> Marek Posard, Leslie Payne, Laura Miller,

“Reducing the Risk of Extremist Activity in the U.S. Military,” *RAND Corporation* (September 2021) <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA1447-1.html>

included expanding engagement to combat extremism to include the broader the military community beyond service members, emphasis on community-based approaches that leverage existing programs, information sharing between different law enforcement agencies, use of emerging technologies to detect trends of extremism targeted at military members, and continuous monitoring and data collection related to measuring extremism in the military community.<sup>158</sup>

On May 12, 2022 the DOD released a report: “Evaluation of Department of Defense Efforts to Address Ideological Extremism Within the Armed Forces,” that sought to determine the extent to which the DOD and Military Services have implemented policy and procedures that prohibit active advocacy and active participation related to supremacist, extremist, or criminal gang doctrine, ideology or causes by active duty military personnel.<sup>159</sup> The report found that DoDI 1325.06 does not have sufficiently detailed and easily understood definitions of extremism-related terminology, including the terms “extremist,” “extremism,” “active advocacy,” and “active participation.” Officials from the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security, and the Military Services consistently stated that Service members and commanders do not know what behaviors constitute extremism or extremist activity. As a result, the DoD cannot fully implement policy and procedures to address extremist activity without clarifying the definitions of “extremism,” “extremist,” “active advocacy,” and “active participation.”<sup>160</sup>

The Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency (DCSA)’s Trusted Workforce 2.0 initiative is the whole-of-government approach to reform the personnel security process and establish a single vetting system for the U.S. government. In September 2022, the government completed its enrollment of the national security workforce into its Trusted Workforce 1.5 continuous vetting capability.<sup>53</sup> The continuous record checks means that issues of risk and concern regarding an individual’s trustworthiness can, in principle, be identified and addressed in real time.<sup>161</sup> However, the reality of implementation differs. The notion of continuous evaluation has merits as a managerial tool, but by securitizing the process, there is the risk of eroding workforce trust to the detriment of the security culture of national security regimes and nuclear security organizations. The reliance on self-reporting aims to shift away from the security culture model that relies on peer reporting, but government officials have acknowledged that despite these requirements “the majority of issues were not previously reported. Of the approximately

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<sup>158</sup> Marek Posard, Leslie Payne, Laura Miller, “Reducing the Risk of Extremist Activity in the U.S. Military,” *RAND Corporation* (September 2021) <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA1447-1.html>

<sup>159</sup> “Evaluation of Department of Defense Efforts to Address Ideological Extremism Within the Armed Forces (DODIG-2022-095,” *Department of Defense* (May 12, 2022), <https://www.dodig.mil/reports.html/article/3028919/evaluation-of-department-of-defense-efforts-to-address-ideological-extremism-wi/>

<sup>160</sup> “Evaluation of Department of Defense Efforts to Address Ideological Extremism Within the Armed Forces (DODIG-2022-095,” *Department of Defense* (May 12, 2022), <https://www.dodig.mil/reports.html/article/3028919/evaluation-of-department-of-defense-efforts-to-address-ideological-extremism-wi/>

<sup>161</sup> Tony Bertuca, “All DOD Clearance Holders Enrolled in Continuous Vetting Program,” *InsideDefense* (October 5, 2021), <https://insidedefense.com/share/212864>

190,000 continuous vetting alerts received by the Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency in FY 2022, well over half (approximately 110,000) were issues that were not previously known.”<sup>162</sup> Furthermore, as noted earlier, the continuous vetting capability of Trusted Workforce 2.0 is still vulnerable to the biased assessments of a homogenous pool of investigators. While Trusted Workforce 2.0 is a government-wide personnel security program, its implementation in agencies responsible for nuclear security has broad-ranging impacts on how effectively these agencies are able to screen for DVE radicalization of their workforce.

### *Department of Homeland Security Actions*

In January 2022, DHS published its Equity Action Plan pursuant to Executive Order 13985. The plan was crafted in line with President Biden’s Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government. DHS plans to “augment efforts to address domestic violent extremism and targeted violence by enhancing programs to empower communities to prevent targeted violence and terrorism, build resilience among communities, and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of ongoing domestic violent extremism programs,” according to the Equity Action Plan.<sup>163</sup> To determine the effectiveness of these initiatives, the department says it will assess how targeted underserved communities “report that they feel that DHS, and the government generally, has taken action that makes them feel that the DVE threat against them has diminished.”<sup>164</sup>

In March 2022, at Secretary Alejandro N. Mayorkas’ direction, a cross-Departmental working group of senior officials conducted a comprehensive review of how to best prevent, detect, and respond to potential threats related to domestic violent extremism within DHS. The Domestic Violent Extremism Review Working Group found very few instances of the DHS workforce having been engaged in domestic violent extremism. However, the Working Group identified significant gaps in the Department’s ability to prevent, detect, and respond to potential threats related to DVE within DHS. DHS is working to address the absence of an official definition of “domestic violent extremist” and what constitutes violent extremist activity, and an established list of behaviors that may be indicators. There is also a deficiency of workforce training specific to identifying and reporting violent extremist activity, and a lack of training for those best suited to identify violent extremist activity or behaviors that may be indicators. DHS currently lacks a centralized, interoperable investigative case management system, as well as standardized reporting and information sharing mechanisms for investigating allegations of DVE activity.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Lindy Kyzer, “Culture of Self Reporting Potential Issues Critical to Trusted Workforce Effort,” *ClearanceJobs* (November 21, 2022), <https://news.clearancejobs.com/2022/11/21/culture-of-self-reporting-potential-issues-critical-to-trusted-workforce-effort/>

<sup>163</sup> Bridget Johnson, “DHS Unveils Measures to Counter Domestic Violent Extremism in New Equity Action Plan,” *Homeland Security Today* (April 19, 2022), <https://www.hstoday.us/federal-pages/dhs/dhs-unveils-measures-to-counter-domestic-violent-extremism-in-new-equity-action-plan/>

<sup>164</sup> Bridget Johnson, “DHS Unveils Measures to Counter Domestic Violent Extremism in New Equity Action Plan,” *Homeland Security Today* (April 19, 2022), <https://www.hstoday.us/federal-pages/dhs/dhs-unveils-measures-to-counter-domestic-violent-extremism-in-new-equity-action-plan/>

<sup>165</sup> “Report to the Secretary of Homeland Security Domestic Violent Extremism Internal Review Observations, Findings, and Recommendations,” *Department of Homeland Security* (March 11, 2022), <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/dhs-report-domestic-violent-extremism-internal-review>

However, despite the March 2022 report confirming that there was little DVE within DHS, on December 12, 2022 the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) and the Project on Government Oversight (POGO) asserted that more than 300 people identifying themselves as current or former employees of DHS or affiliated agencies appeared on an internal roster of Oath Keepers.<sup>166</sup> One hundred eighty-four identified themselves as having served in the Coast Guard, 67 as having worked in DHS itself, 40 at Customs and Border Protection or the Border Patrol, 11 at Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and seven at the U.S. Secret Service, the agency charged with protecting the president, vice president, and visiting heads of state.<sup>167</sup> It is unclear if DHS has analyzed or even obtained the leaked records of Oath Keeper members.<sup>168</sup>

DHS has supported DVE countering and prevention activities throughout 2022. DHS's Nonprofit Security Grant Program (NSGP) provided over \$250 million in funding in 2022 to support target hardening and other physical security enhancements to non-profit organizations at high risk of terrorist attack.<sup>169</sup> The Department also works with public and private sector partners, as well as foreign counterparts, to identify and evaluate DVE, including false or misleading narratives and conspiracy theories spread on social media and other online platforms that endorse or could inspire violence.<sup>170</sup> DHS's Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships (CP3) awarded about \$20 million in grants through its Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention (TVTP) Grant Program.<sup>171</sup> CP3 educates and trains stakeholders on how to identify indicators of radicalization to violence, where to seek help, and the resources available to prevent targeted violence and terrorism.

DHS recognized that some DVEs have expressed grievances based on perceptions of government overstep, failure to perform duties, and social issues like immigration, abortion, and LBTQI+ rights.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Kevin G. Hall, "Hundreds of Members of Extremist Group Oath Keepers Worked For U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Leaked Roster Shows," *OCCRP* (December 12, 2022), <https://www.occrp.org/en/investigations/hundreds-of-members-of-extremist-group-oath-keepers-worked-for-us-department-of-homeland-security-leaked-roster-shows>

<sup>167</sup> Kevin G. Hall, "Hundreds of Members of Extremist Group Oath Keepers Worked For U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Leaked Roster Shows," *OCCRP* (December 12, 2022), <https://www.occrp.org/en/investigations/hundreds-of-members-of-extremist-group-oath-keepers-worked-for-us-department-of-homeland-security-leaked-roster-shows>

<sup>168</sup> Nick Schwellenbach, "Hundreds of Oath Keepers have Worked for the DHS, Leaked List Shows," *POGO* (December 12, 2022), <https://www.pogo.org/investigation/2022/12/hundreds-of-oath-keepers-have-worked-for-dhs-leaked-list-shows>

<sup>169</sup> "Summary of the Terrorism Threat to the United States," *National Terrorism Advisory System Bulletin* (June 7, 2022), <https://www.dhs.gov/ntas/advisory/national-terrorism-advisory-system-bulletin-june-7-2022>

<sup>170</sup> "Summary of the Terrorism Threat to the United States," *National Terrorism Advisory System Bulletin* (June 7, 2022), <https://www.dhs.gov/ntas/advisory/national-terrorism-advisory-system-bulletin-june-7-2022>

<sup>171</sup> "Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention Grant Program," *Department of Homeland Security* (Accessed January 4, 2023), <https://www.dhs.gov/tvtpgrants>

<sup>172</sup> "Summary of the Terrorism Threat to the United States," *National Terrorism Advisory System Bulletin* (November 30, 2022), <https://www.dhs.gov/ntas/advisory/national-terrorism-advisory-system-bulletin-november-30-2022>

## Department of Energy Actions

The Department of Energy's (DOE) National Nuclear Security Agency (NNSA) released *Prevent, Counter, and Respond—NNSA's Plan to Reduce Global Nuclear Threats (FY 2022-FY 2026)*, an annual report outlining NNSA's activities to address the risk of nuclear terrorism and proliferation.<sup>173</sup> The report highlighted NNSA's global efforts to “prevent state and non-state actors from developing nuclear weapons or improvised nuclear devices (IND) or acquiring weapons-usable nuclear or radiological materials, equipment, technology, and expertise.”<sup>174</sup>

Specific to DVE, NNSA global threat reduction initiatives focus on material minimization efforts and implementing sustainable global material security frameworks to reduce the availability of nuclear materials for non-state actors with nuclear ambitions.<sup>175</sup> Additional threat reduction efforts include countering the proliferation of expertise and components of nuclear and radiological devices to non-state actors, as well as strengthening responses to nuclear or radiological attacks.<sup>176</sup> NNSA has also integrated emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, to provide advance warning of proliferation activities among non-state actors.<sup>177</sup>

The NNSA report also highlighted the importance of identifying insider threats as part of strengthening nuclear security frameworks on both a domestic and international level.<sup>178</sup> NNSA led international efforts at the IAEA, working with foreign partners to establish an international working group steering committee to implement the goals of Information Circular 908: “Joint Statement on Mitigating Insider Threats.”<sup>179</sup> These include committing to support the IAEA's development and implementation of an advanced, practitioner-level training course on insider threat mitigation and implementing measures to mitigate insider risk through a risk-informed, graded approach.<sup>180</sup>

In an event assessing DVE threats to nuclear facilities, experts from NNSA and DOE labs provided insights into necessary mitigation steps. Dr. John Landers, a licensed clinical psychologist and senior research and development staff member at Oak Ridge National Laboratory, suggested that workplaces move away from a “profiling” model for insider threat prevention and instead develop a “risk mitigation” model, which interprets concerning behavior

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<sup>173</sup> Department of Energy, *Prevent, Counter, and Respond—NNSA's Plan to Reduce Global Nuclear Threats (FY 2022-FY 2026)*, December 21, 2021, <https://www.energy.gov/nnsa/articles/prevent-counter-and-respond-strategic-plan-reduce-global-nuclear-threats-npcr> (accessed January 3, 2022)

<sup>174</sup> Department of Energy, *Prevent, Counter, and Respond—NNSA's Plan to Reduce Global Nuclear Threats (FY 2022-FY 2026)*, pp. 2.

<sup>175</sup> Department of Energy, *Prevent, Counter, and Respond—NNSA's Plan to Reduce Global Nuclear Threats (FY 2022-FY 2026)*, pp. 1-4 – 1-5

<sup>176</sup> Department of Energy, *Prevent, Counter, and Respond—NNSA's Plan to Reduce Global Nuclear Threats (FY 2022-FY 2026)*, pp. 1-5

<sup>177</sup> Department of Energy, *Prevent, Counter, and Respond—NNSA's Plan to Reduce Global Nuclear Threats (FY 2022-FY 2026)*, pp. 2-14

<sup>178</sup> Department of Energy, *Prevent, Counter, and Respond—NNSA's Plan to Reduce Global Nuclear Threats (FY 2022-FY 2026)*, pp. 2-6 – 2-7

<sup>179</sup> Department of Energy, *Prevent, Counter, and Respond—NNSA's Plan to Reduce Global Nuclear Threats (FY 2022-FY 2026)*, pp. 2-7

<sup>180</sup> Department of Energy, *Prevent, Counter, and Respond—NNSA's Plan to Reduce Global Nuclear Threats (FY 2022-FY 2026)*, pp. 2-7

as a signal of something that could happen in the future. Dr. Leesa Duckworth, a national security specialist at Pacific Northwest National Lab, highlighted the need for organizational initiatives to address insider threats not only from a security perspective, but also from a human perspective. Individuals who feel socially excluded from teams may self-isolate, potentially becoming susceptible to misinformation and detachment from their organization’s vision and goals. Dallas Boyd, the executive director and chief of staff in NNSA’s Office of Counterterrorism and Counterproliferation, maintained that NNSA has a multilayered defense posture to protect nuclear facilities, weapons, and materials from foreign and domestic adversaries, including trusted insiders. NNSA has created an environment where security measures require employees to work in groups to prevent individuals from accessing materials, helping to detect concerning behaviors.<sup>181</sup>

NNSA’s 2022-2026 annual report, “Prevent, Counter, and Respond—NNSA’s Plan to Reduce Global Nuclear Threats” was issued to Congress in December 2021. The report highlights current challenges and how NNSA will work to “prevent state and non-state actors from developing nuclear weapons or improvised nuclear devices (IND) or acquiring weapons-usable nuclear or radiological materials, equipment, technology, and expertise.”<sup>182</sup>

Specific to DVE, NNSA global threat reduction initiatives focus on material minimization efforts and implementing sustainable global material security frameworks to reduce the availability of nuclear materials for non-state actors with nuclear ambitions.<sup>183</sup> Additional threat reduction efforts include countering the proliferation of expertise and components of nuclear and radiological devices to non-state actors, as well as strengthening responses to nuclear or radiological attacks.<sup>184</sup> NNSA has also integrated emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, to provide advance warning of proliferation activities among non-state actors.<sup>185</sup>

Radioactive materials play a part in cancer therapy, blood irradiation, medical and food sterilization, structure and equipment testing, geologic exploration and instrument calibration. Yet the prolific presence of radioactive material can become a risk factor if stolen or misplaced. In 2017 alone, according to a report from the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, there were 171 “incidents of nuclear or other radioactive materials outside of regulatory control,”

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<sup>181</sup> Esther Ko, “Homegrown Violent Extremists: A Threat to Nuclear Facilities?” *Nuclear Threat Initiative* (August 22, 2022), <https://www.nti.org/atomic-pulse/homegrown-violent-extremists-a-threat-to-nuclear-facilities/> (Accessed December 15, 2022).

<sup>182</sup> Department of Energy, *Prevent, Counter, and Respond—NNSA’s Plan to Reduce Global Nuclear Threats (FY 2022-FY 2026)*, December 21, 2021, <https://www.energy.gov/nnsa/articles/prevent-counter-and-respond-strategic-plan-reduce-global-nuclear-threats-npcr>

<sup>183</sup> Department of Energy, *Prevent, Counter, and Respond—NNSA’s Plan to Reduce Global Nuclear Threats (FY 2022-FY 2026)*, December 21, 2021, <https://www.energy.gov/nnsa/articles/prevent-counter-and-respond-strategic-plan-reduce-global-nuclear-threats-npcr>

<sup>184</sup> Department of Energy, *Prevent, Counter, and Respond—NNSA’s Plan to Reduce Global Nuclear Threats (FY 2022-FY 2026)*, December 21, 2021, <https://www.energy.gov/nnsa/articles/prevent-counter-and-respond-strategic-plan-reduce-global-nuclear-threats-npcr>

<sup>185</sup> Department of Energy, *Prevent, Counter, and Respond—NNSA’s Plan to Reduce Global Nuclear Threats (FY 2022-FY 2026)*, December 21, 2021, <https://www.energy.gov/nnsa/articles/prevent-counter-and-respond-strategic-plan-reduce-global-nuclear-threats-npcr>

based on open source reports, 104 of which happened in the U.S.<sup>186</sup> Experts suggest that there is an increased risk of violent extremist groups stateside obtaining radioactive materials.<sup>187</sup> NNSA’s Office of Radiological Security (ORS) has an initiative called RadSecure 100, which aims to remove or better secure energetic material in 100 U.S. cities.<sup>188</sup> Though there is no public evidence that any stateside extremist group could carry out a sophisticated attack with an actual nuclear bomb, a dirty bomb containing the sorts of material RadSecure wants to secure does not require as much sophistication.

### *Nuclear Facilities’ Actions*

Nuclear facilities have elaborate programs to screen candidates and monitor employees who could potentially pose a threat. Yet the January 6 attack revealed critical vulnerabilities in the U.S. government’s security systems. Both commercial nuclear plants and government-run nuclear facilities responsible for weapons research, production, and deployment in the U.S. have not revealed what, if any, steps they have taken in recent years to enhance their protection against insider threats.<sup>189</sup> Regulators and political leaders have similarly failed to call for greater security.

An additional point of concern emerges considering the trend of online radicalization of military personnel in the context of hiring practices for nuclear power plants. All holding companies that own five or more nuclear power plants in the U.S. have veteran-specific hiring initiatives.<sup>190</sup> Veterans are attractive hires given their military experience, security expertise, and the fact that they are ‘pre-vetted’ by the nature of their previous employment.<sup>191</sup> However, the nature of vetting, given the lack of focus on extremist recruitment of veterans, calls into question the effectiveness of personnel surety programs.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) made a positive step in February 2023, when it updated its cyber guidance to help nuclear facilities plan and respond to incidents.<sup>192</sup> Cyber-attacks can be facilitated by both unwitting insiders and malicious actors aiming to do harm, and

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<sup>186</sup> “CNS Global Incidents and Trafficking Database,” *James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies* (July 2018), Accessed January 4, 2023.

<sup>187</sup> Sarah Scoles, “Radioactive Material is Basically Everywhere and That’s a Problem,” *Scientific American* (March 11, 2022), <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/radioactive-material-is-basically-everywhere-and-thats-a-problem/>

<sup>188</sup> Sarah Scoles, “Radioactive Material is Basically Everywhere and That’s a Problem,” *Scientific American* (March 11, 2022), <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/radioactive-material-is-basically-everywhere-and-thats-a-problem/>

<sup>189</sup> Scott Roecker and Nickolas Roth, “Why al-Zawahiri's Death Should Focus Attention on Nuclear Terrorism—Foreign and Domestic,” *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist* (August 15, 2022), <https://thebulletin.org/2022/08/why-al-zawahiris-death-should-focus-attention-on-nuclear-terrorism-foreign-and-domestic/> (Accessed December 15, 2022).

<sup>190</sup> Scott Sagan, *Protecting Against Insider Threats*, International Nuclear Security Forum presentation at the Stimson Center (March 24, 2021), <https://www.stimson.org/event/protecting-against-insider-threats/>

<sup>191</sup> Scott Sagan, *Protecting Against Insider Threats*, International Nuclear Security Forum presentation at the Stimson Center (March 24, 2021), <https://www.stimson.org/event/protecting-against-insider-threats/>

<sup>192</sup> Nuclear Regulatory Commission, “Cyber Security Programs for Nuclear Power Reactors,” *Federal Register*, 88 FR 9117 (February 13, 2023), <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2023/02/13/2023-02941/cyber-security-programs-for-nuclear-power-reactors>

have posed significant nuclear security threats in 2022.<sup>193</sup> On the other hand, threats still remain – a recent proposal was put forth within the NRC to transfer more security responsibility away from plant owners and give greater responsibility to local law enforcement.<sup>194</sup> Given the problem of extremism in law enforcement and the military, as well as the hurdle of coordinating with external security actors during a crisis, navigating these challenges and attempting to develop solutions can create new security vulnerabilities that can be taken advantage of by insiders.

### *Department of Justice Actions*

The Department of Justice's (DOJ) investigations into the perpetrators of the Capitol attack are currently ongoing and may be one of the most visible efforts of the federal government to confront DVE. Over 900 people have been criminally charged as of December 2022.<sup>195</sup>

DOJ national headquarters required all ninety-four U.S. Attorney Offices to immediately provide an accounting of ongoing domestic terrorism cases. Up until this point, certain cases involving identified domestic violent extremists who were arrested on charges unrelated to extremism or terrorism (for example, firearms violations, drug charges, etc.) were oftentimes siloed within US Attorney offices and not counted towards the departmental total of domestic terrorism prosecutions. Without a methodologically complete count, there was often a lack of knowledge within the DOJ about how many ongoing domestic terrorism cases were being investigated and prosecuted.<sup>196</sup> Creating legal precedent for including DVE cases within domestic terrorism prosecutions creates norms for national security infrastructures to hold DVE actors to account, in a way that percolates to nuclear security norms and implementation.

The DOJ also announced that it was forming a unit that will be part of the National Security Division to combat domestic terrorism as a threat to national security as officials warn of “persistent and evolving” threat of violent extremism within the US. The new unit was unveiled after the first anniversary of January 6.<sup>197</sup>

### *Department of State Actions*

The Department of State published the *Country Reports on Terrorism 2020*, highlighting the increase in racially or ethnically motivated violent extremism, for the first time designating a

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<sup>193</sup> James Pearson and Christopher Bing, “Exclusive: Russian hackers targeted U.S. nuclear scientists,” *Reuters* (January 6, 2023), <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-hackers-targeted-us-nuclear-scientists-2023-01-06/>

<sup>194</sup> Greg Harmon, “Rising Nazi Terror and Nuclear Power Risk: A Conversation with Edwin Lyman of the Union of Concerned Scientists,” *Deceleration* (February 13, 2023), <https://deceleration.news/2023/02/13/rising-nazi-terror-and-nuclear-power-risk/>

<sup>195</sup> Alan Feuer, “In Capitol Attack, Over 900 People Have Been Criminally Charged,” *The New York Times* (December 19, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/19/us/politics/jan-6-capitol-attack-charges.html>

<sup>196</sup> Seamus Huges, Ilana Krill, “Assessing US Domestic Extremism in Light of Capitol Riot Investigations,” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism* (June 30, 2022), <https://icct.nl/publication/assessing-us-domestic-extremism-in-light-of-capitol-riot-investigations/>

<sup>197</sup> Kevin Breuninger, “DOJ unveils new domestic terror unit as U.S. faces ‘persistent and evolving’ threats a year after Jan. 6, officials warn,” *CNBC* (January 11, 2022), <https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/11/doj-unveils-new-domestic-terror-unit-says-threats-rising-a-year-after-jan-6.html>

white supremacist group as a terrorist organization.<sup>198</sup> While foreign white supremacist terror organizations are not the focus in analyzing DVE threats, this designation by the State Department is indicative of a broader acknowledgement and shift by the U.S. government of the potential security threat posed by white nationalist groups.

### *Congressional Actions*

This awareness of DVE insider threats also prompted Congressional interest in the screening procedures for sensitive government roles, and broader awareness of the inefficiencies within the screening process.<sup>199</sup> Given the central role of screening as the first line of personnel surety in nuclear security, the Congressional actions and mandates implemented since January 6, 2021, will have ripple effects beyond the national security space. The House Appropriations Committee has required the Pentagon to report on the method and status of implementation of proposals made to keep violent extremists out of the U.S. military.<sup>91</sup> Proposals included improving DOD security clearance screening to keep out extremists, use of FBI databases of extremist tattoos and symbols by military services, Pentagon contractors being hired to surveil social media, and requiring that all military discharge forms note expulsion due to extremist actions.<sup>200</sup>

H.R. – Domestic Terrorism Prevention Act of 2022 also established new requirements to expand the availability of information on domestic terrorism, as well as the relationship between domestic terrorism and hate crimes. It authorizes the domestic terrorism components within the DHS, DOJ, and FBI to monitor, analyze, investigate, and prosecute domestic terrorism. It passed in the House on May 18, 2022, and creates more data points with which to link DVE activities and identify potential threats to nuclear security.<sup>201</sup>

In November 2022, U.S. Senator Gary Peters (D-MI), Chairman of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, released a report detailing the results of his investigation into the rise of domestic terrorism, including white supremacist and anti-government violence. The report found that the DHS and the FBI have failed to effectively track and report data on the domestic terrorism threat despite being required to do so by a 2019 law spearheaded by Peters.<sup>202</sup> The investigation also found that while independent experts and national security officials call white supremacist and anti-government violence the most

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<sup>198</sup> Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2020*, (December 16, 2021), [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Country\\_Reports\\_on\\_Terrorism\\_2020.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Country_Reports_on_Terrorism_2020.pdf), (accessed January 3, 2022).

<sup>199</sup> Zolan Kanno-Youngs, “White House Unveils Strategy to Combat Domestic Extremism,” *The New York Times*, (June 15, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/15/us/politics/biden-domestic-terrorism-extremists.html> (accessed November 15, 2021); Marek N. Posard, Leslie Adrienne Payne, Laura L. Miller, *Reducing the Risk of Extremist Activity in the U.S. Military*, (Santa Monica: RAND National Security Research Division, September 2021); <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA1447-1.html> (accessed November 9, 2021)

<sup>200</sup> John M. Donnelly, “House Appropriators Want Pentagon to Get Tough on Extremists in the Ranks,” *Roll Call* (July 13, 2021), <https://rollcall.com/2021/07/13/house-appropriators-want-pentagon-to-get-tough-on-extremists-in-the-ranks/>

<sup>201</sup> United States Congress "H.R.350 - 117th Congress (2021-2022): Domestic Terrorism Prevention Act of 2022." May 26, 2022. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/350>.

<sup>202</sup> “SENS. PETERS & JOHNSON INTRODUCE DOMESTIC TERRORISM LEGISLATION,” *Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs* (December 20, 2019). <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/media/dems/sens-peters-and-johnson-introduce-domestic-terrorism-legislation/>

significant terrorist threat facing our nation today, this lack of data has limited Congress' ability to determine whether counterterrorism agencies are allocating resources to effectively address the growing threat posed by domestic terrorism.<sup>203</sup> The report also disclosed that extremist content continues to proliferate on social media platforms, at least partially driven by companies' own business models, which prioritize engagement, profits, and growth over safety.

Section 562 of the House of Representatives Report of the Committee on Armed Services on H.R. 7900 (National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023), would direct the DOD to establish a Transition Assistance Program module for deradicalization training for members of the armed services who have violated Department of Defense Instructions 1325.06.<sup>204</sup> The passed National Defense Authorization Act included the provision that the member who violated instructions 1325.06 would receive counseling developed by the Secretary of Defense in consultation with the Secretary of Homeland Security that includes “information regarding why extremist activity is inconsistent with service in the armed forces and with national security; information regarding the dangers associated with involvement with an extremist group; and methods for the member to recognize and avoid information that may promote extremist activity.”<sup>205</sup>

However, the lawmakers who finalized the defense authorization bill for FY2023 deleted or diluted all eight House-passed NDAA provisions pertaining to extremism in the U.S. military or American society.<sup>206</sup> The final bill added just one section related to domestic extremism: a requirement for the director of national intelligence to assess how social media posts are used in screening personnel.

Efforts to address DVE within the military have been met with pushback from some members of Congress who cite the efforts as wasteful.<sup>207</sup> Republicans and Democrats are split over U.S. military officials' estimates of the time and money that they have spent attempting to counter extremism and promote diversity. Army General Mark Milley, indicated in a letter that the armed

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<sup>203</sup> “The Rising Threat of Domestic Terrorism, A Review of the Federal Response to Domestic Terrorism and the Spread of Extremist Content on Social Media” *U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs* (November 16, 2022), <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/media/majority-media/peters-investigative-report-shows-dhs-and-fbi-are-not-adequately-addressing-domestic-terrorism-threat>

<sup>204</sup> “H. Rept. 117-397 - NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT FOR FISCAL YEAR 2023,” 117<sup>th</sup> Congress, (July 1, 2022). <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-report/117th-congress/house-report/397/1?overview=closed>

<sup>205</sup> Congressional Research Service, “House Committee Print 117-54 - TEXT OF H.R. 7900, NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT FOR FISCAL YEAR 2023,” (June 8, 2022), <https://www.congress.gov/event/117th-congress/house-event/114816?s=1&r=7>

<sup>206</sup> John M. Donnelly, “Final NDAA Removes most House Provisions on Hate Groups,” *Roll Call* (December 14, 2022), <https://rollcall.com/2022/12/14/final-ndaa-removes-most-house-provisions-on-hate-groups/>

<sup>207</sup> John M. Donnelly, “Senate NDAA to Pentagon: ‘Immediately’ Halt Fight against Extremism,” *The Hill* (July 20, 2022), <https://rollcall.com/2022/07/20/senate-ndaa-to-pentagon-immediately-halt-fight-against-extremism/>

forces dedicated nearly 6 million hours and about \$1 million in additional expenses in training sessions focused on these issues since January 2021.<sup>208</sup>

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) has also been conducting ongoing investigations into nuclear security and DVE. Recent security threats have raised concern that terrorists or other bad actors could target radioactive material for theft and use in a domestic attack. There were 4,512 nuclear materials events, including lost or stolen radioactive materials, radioactive leaks, and radiation overexposures from 2011 through 2020, according to the NRC.<sup>209</sup> On July 14, 2022, GAO published a Report to the Chairman, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives, entitled “Preventing a Dirty Bomb: Vulnerabilities Persist in NRC’s Controls for Purchase of High-Risk Radioactive Materials.” The report found that the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's current system for verifying licenses for people and organizations that need to possess radioactive materials did not adequately protect against fraudulent purchases. Using shell companies with fraudulent licenses, GAO successfully purchased a category 3 quantity of radioactive material of concern from two different vendors in the U.S. A category 3 quantity of radioactive material can result in billions of dollars of socioeconomic costs if dispersed using a dirty bomb. GAO recommended that the Chairman of the NRC add security features to its licensing process to mitigate vulnerabilities to forged licenses.<sup>210</sup> Rep. Bennie G. Thompson, chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, who requested the GAO investigation, pointed to the terrorism threat posed by White racist extremists, saying: “This is a clear national security issue that the federal government must remedy.”<sup>211</sup>

## Conclusion

Assessing who or what is a threat in the U.S. nuclear space is increasingly challenging in a world filled with disinformation, shifting priorities, and evolving risk. What exacerbates these efforts to identify individuals who pose a risk to nuclear security is the flaw in the underlying framework for how the U.S. identifies insider threats at home.

For decades, the U.S. has constructed the notion of a ‘threat’ to fit the visual of someone who doesn’t present as an ‘American.’<sup>212</sup> This carefully constructed ‘American’ image is almost always representative of the lived experiences of white people in the U.S., with people who fail to present in this way being subject to additional scrutiny – irrespective of the status of

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<sup>208</sup> John M. Donnelly, “GOP Decries Cost of Pentagon Anti-Extremism and Diversity Training,” *Roll Call* (February 15, 2022), <https://rollcall.com/2022/02/15/gop-decries-cost-of-pentagon-anti-extremism-and-diversity-training/>

<sup>209</sup> Joe Davidson, “A Watchdog Lied to Get Radioactive Materials. Terrorists could, too,” *The Washington Post*, (July 27, 2022), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/07/27/gao-nrc-radioactive-materials-report/>

<sup>210</sup> “Preventing a Dirty Bomb: Vulnerabilities Persist in NRC’s Controls for Purchase of High-Risk Radioactive Materials,” *U.S. Government Accountability Office* (July 14, 2022), See full report. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-103441>

<sup>211</sup> Joe Davidson, “A Watchdog Lied to Get Radioactive Materials. Terrorists could, too,” *The Washington Post*, (July 27, 2022), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/07/27/gao-nrc-radioactive-materials-report/>

<sup>212</sup> Sneha Nair, “Reimagining U.S. foreign policy as an anti-racist endeavor,” in *Equality and Racial Justice: Where Do They Fit in a National Security Strategy?* (Washington, D.C., U.S.: New America, 2022) <https://www.newamerica.org/political-reform/reports/equity-and-racial-justice-where-do-they-fit-in-a-national-security-strategy/reimagining-us-foreign-policy-as-an-anti-racist-endeavor-by-sneha-nair/>

citizenship, criminal background, or threat to the U.S.<sup>213</sup> This ‘othering’ of non-white and otherwise ‘non-American’ presenting individuals reinforces problematic biases in national and nuclear security frameworks, creating an ‘us’ vs ‘them’ dynamic.<sup>214</sup> Given the historically homogenous nature of the nuclear security field dominated by white men in the United States, this has often placed women, people of color, and other historically marginalized groups under undue scrutiny by decision-makers in the field.

Insider threat assessments focus on personnel reliability programs and effective training, and existing literature is quick to acknowledge that there are flaws in frameworks designed to identify red flags, but what isn’t discussed is the underlying bias determining not only what constitutes a red flag at the organizational level, but also the individual biases that come into play when determining who or what is reported as ‘suspicious’ under these schemes.<sup>215</sup>

Crucially, the national security field has been pushed to re-examine how ‘threat’ and by extension, ‘security’ are defined by the dominant culture, in contrast to the perception of ‘threat’ and ‘security’ faced by people of color, which are “deep-rooted in American society and culture.”<sup>216</sup> The discomfort that emerges from questioning traditional definitions of national security has received pushback, but new definitions are necessary, given “[the] way the U.S. defines threat does not adequately capture the challenges many people of color feel in America[,]” by largely failing to account for the security threats posed by individuals, governments, or crime.<sup>217</sup>

This call for antiracism has echoed in the nuclear field as well. While important work has been done to draw connections between the importance of redefining national security and inequity in the nuclear policy space, one area that has received considerably less attention is the nuclear security field. The inequalities in the national security field caused by unilateral and biased understandings of who, or what is considered a ‘threat’ by the system writ large are directly connected to the notion of how ‘threat’ and ‘security’ are perceived by nuclear security implementers. These biases that originate in the overarching national security architecture are reflected in every aspect of U.S. nuclear security structure: from security clearance background checks, to personnel reliability programs, to how personnel security is implemented at a facility.

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<sup>213</sup> Smith, R. M. and King, D., “White Protectionism in America” in *Perspectives on Politics*, Volume 19, Issue (2, June 2021), pp. 460 – 478, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/perspectives-on-politics/article/white-protectionism-in-america/466CB9F794DBC364C79B401EA81ADDD5>

<sup>214</sup> German, M., *Disrupt, Discredit, Divide: How the New FBI Damages Democracy*, (New York, U.S.A., The New Press, 2019), pp. 65-88

<sup>215</sup> Matthew Bunn and Scott Sagan, *A Worst Practice Guide to Insider Threats: Lessons from Past Mistakes* (Cambridge, U.S.A.: American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2014), <https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/insiderThreats.pdf>

<sup>216</sup> Bonnie Jenkins, “Redefining Our Concept of Security,” in *Order from Chaos*, (Washington, D.C., U.S.A.: Brookings Institution, 2019), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/12/04/redefining-our-concept-of-security/>

<sup>217</sup> Bonnie Jenkins, “Redefining Our Concept of Security,” in *Order from Chaos*, (Washington, D.C., U.S.A.: Brookings Institution, 2019), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/12/04/redefining-our-concept-of-security/>

Because nuclear security culture and personnel reliability programs are driven by individual, organizational, and institutional structures, acknowledging that these structures can – intentionally or unintentionally – reflect the biases of the people and environment that create them, is crucial to reimagining the field. Nuclear security culture in the U.S. and around the world is intimately tied to the counterterrorism efforts that were put into place following the September 11, 2001, attacks. Nuclear security priorities reflect national security concerns, thus the conceptualization of ‘threat’ continues to place a disproportionate focus on foreign actors and movements, reproducing the ‘us’ vs ‘them’ distinction in security practices, even as threats facing national security evolve.<sup>218</sup> Even decades after the attacks, guidance for preventing radicalization relating to nuclear security focuses largely on “Jihadist” organizations or separatist movements.<sup>219</sup>

While focus on foreign threats and radicalization must be maintained, the guidance and framework for assessing threats must remain flexible enough to adapt to an evolving threat environment.

Maintaining disproportionate focus on foreign or externally influenced threats, when domestic actors presently pose a much larger concern in the domestic threat environment, demonstrates the institutionalized biases and exclusionary behaviors that can exacerbate the risks posed by insider threats. Understanding the limitations of the national and nuclear security as being designed to provide security for only some – mostly white-passing Americans – at the expense of people of color and those with foreign ties, can allow for a more nuanced understanding of the vulnerabilities facing the nuclear security field today. Looking ahead, a framework is needed to help revamp nuclear security systems and procedures to adapt to evolving threats and assess risk factors, not only more effectively, but more equitably to produce a more resilient and sustainable U.S. nuclear security regime.

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<sup>218</sup> Cynthia Miller-Idriss, “The War on Terror Supercharged the Far Right,” *Foreign Affairs*, (October 2021), [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-08-24/war-on-terror-911-jan6?utm\\_medium=promo\\_email&utm\\_source=lo\\_flows&utm\\_campaign=registered\\_user\\_welcome&utm\\_term=mail\\_1&utm\\_content=20211115](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-08-24/war-on-terror-911-jan6?utm_medium=promo_email&utm_source=lo_flows&utm_campaign=registered_user_welcome&utm_term=mail_1&utm_content=20211115)

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