

Dynamics of Extremism and Violence – Briefing for an Emergency Preparedness Council meeting of the Colorado Federal Executive Board, February 9, 2016.

Michael Barkun

The stand-off at the federal wild-life refuge in Oregon is still going on, although most of the occupiers have either left or been arrested, and the violence could have been a lot worse. Many of those attracted to the occupation had militia affiliations, even though no anti-government organizations were formally involved. In fact, many of these organizations realized the futility of the occupation and condemned it from the start.

Militia movements are on the rise after declining in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing. Some so-called militias are little more than a few people getting together in someone's basement. But others, like the Hutaree Militia in Michigan, have been good size, well organized, and heavily armed. They represent potential danger because they have both the means to use violence and the anti-government ideologies that provide the justification. On the other hand, precisely because they're organized, they're usually easy to identify and track. In many cases, they've been infiltrated as well. So while they constitute a significant potential source of domestic violence, the likelihood that they can act undetected is relatively small.

So what I'd like to do today is concentrate on a different source of violence, a source that's becoming both common and very difficult to detect, the lone wolf – the individual or very small cell operating independently with no organizational connections.

That's the reason I asked you to take a look at the "Leaderless Resistance" essay, which signaled to both law enforcement and academics nearly 25 years ago that there was a new form

of domestic terrorism. The author of that essay, Louis Beam, was a former Klan leader and a Christian Identity believer who became convinced that organized, armed attacks by anti-government groups would inevitably fail, because the groups could be easily infiltrated by law enforcement agencies, and that violence could only work if it came from individuals or small, independent cells attacking targets of opportunity. His essay spread widely among white supremacists and others on the radical right, beginning in 1992. It was quickly picked up by other extremists, such as radical anti-abortion groups, like the Army of God, and others who considered violence an appropriate instrument, inaugurating a new period of domestic terrorism that included sovereign citizens, radical environmentalists, and animal liberation.

In addition, of course, lone wolves have included many people who aren't associated with any group, but simply have some personal, idiosyncratic belief system that might never become known if they didn't commit some act of violence.

And then, superimposed upon all of these has come radical, jihadist Islam after September 11th. We've been fortunate in the very small number of subsequent attacks on American soil, but the recent shootings in San Bernardino make clear that radical Islamist lone wolf attacks remain a possibility.

The Internet has been a great enabler, particularly for violence-prone individuals who aren't affiliated with any organization.

First, it facilitates individual self-radicalization. People with no organizational connection can acquire and reinforce radical beliefs through the Internet alone.

Second, they may well find voices similar to their own on the Net, since people of every ideological persuasion seem to be out there with websites or You Tube channels. If they do find

others like themselves, that may instill a feeling in an individual that he or she is part of a vast unseen army, and that a personal act of violence will somehow be the catalyst for a great uprising.

Third, the Internet is of course a platform where everyone can participate, where your own speech or manifesto can go out along with the websites of the government, the New York Times, the Washington Post, and CNN. And that may suggest that the act of violence will amplify and promote a person's website words and images, so that violence becomes a form of marketing and promotion. In fact, a high proportion of lone wolves produce some web-based artifact, whether it's the 1500 page manifesto of Anders Breivik, who committed the attacks in Norway; or the rambling website suicide note of Joseph Stack, who worked on it for two days before he crashed a plane into IRS offices in Austin, Texas.

Fourth, the Internet has helped to push fringe ideas into the mainstream. Beliefs about plots and conspiracies that twenty years ago would never have gone beyond tiny circles of believers or obscure periodicals, can now be found in mainstream news channels. You only need to think of the Obama birther controversy or the bizarre ideas about the Jade Helm 15 military exercise in Texas, conspiracy beliefs that never would have gained traction in the past. The more such ideas permeate the larger culture, the more legitimacy they give to the personal conspiracy beliefs of individuals.

Numerous attempts have been made to construct profiles of lone wolf terrorists. Unfortunately, the characteristics many of them have seem fairly obvious. For example, they tend to have grievances, be loners, have recently suffered a serious loss, and perhaps a quarter of them have had military experience. The problem, of course, is that grouping people on the basis

of these features can lead to a very large number of false positives, which means they have very little predictive value in identifying users of violence.

Research on individuals who have perpetrated lone wolf acts also indicates that many of them have had mental health problems, and that as a group they may be more marked by such issues than the general population. On the other hand, many others seem psychologically quite normal.

These are people most of whom have self-radicalized. In that sense, the participants in the San Bernardino attack, who spent significant amounts of time in radical circles, were not typical of lone wolves, who tend to be far more solitary and unconnected with other extremists.

Unfortunately, after an event like the San Bernardino attack, people are not only frightened but they also place new demands on government – essentially, a demand to prevent anything like this from ever happening again. Zero-tolerance demands are entirely understandable, but unfortunately, they are impossible to achieve, at least where lone wolf attacks are concerned.

These attacks tend to occur in public places, where people randomly gather or where services are offered – parks, stores, government offices, health clinics.

Some lone wolves – like Ted Kaczynski, Eric Rudolph, and Anders Breivik – planned their attacks meticulously. But they are the exception. Most seem to act at least in part impulsively, triggered by some immediate episode of frustration after a long buildup of anger. What may seem a trivial incident to others is to them the final, climactic confrontation that justifies an ultimate response. Sometimes it's difficult to distinguish the impulsive from the planned. Syed Farook and his wife were clearly planning some kind of attack. Their

accumulation of weapons demonstrated that. But was the staff meeting before the Christmas party in San Bernardino always the intended target, or did Farook hear something that morning that set him off and resulted in a sudden change in plans? We can never be sure.

And what can and should organizations do to prepare for such contingencies? There is little likelihood that intelligence will be available on lone wolf perpetrators before they act. The difficulty, of course, is how to separate truly dangerous people from the much larger number who are harmless – the cranks, the eccentrics, the malcontents, the psychologically troubled who will never be violent. Those who have made threats before are an obvious risk category. Those with particularly inflammatory, publically accessible websites constitute another. Certain kinds of organizations are at greater risk as well: those associated with tax collection, with the provision of abortion services, and, in the West, federal land management.

It might in principle be possible to design a system that would virtually eliminate attacks of this kind. However, it would be a system that would be incompatible with a democratic society, so intrusive that it would create problems greater than those it was supposed to solve. The implication, therefore, is that we may have to accept that there will be attacks of this kind from time to time. The ready availability of firearms increases the probability, since that is the lone wolf's weapon of choice. Since this kind of activity has been spread across so many issue area – from opposition to hydroelectric dams to white supremacy to support for ISIS – it is unlikely to disappear because of some single, identifiable political change.

I wish I could end with optimistic and definitive answers. But as my comments have suggested, this is not a topic that lends itself to quick or easy solutions. We will need to proceed cautiously, on a case-by-case basis in the hope that over time patterns will begin to appear in both the attacks and in effective responses.

