

Assessing the Effectiveness of the Department of Homeland Security, 20 Years After 9/11

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This paper assesses the effectiveness of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the larger United States homeland security enterprise in detecting and preventing terrorist attacks. Has DHS been successful in its mission of counterterrorism? Has it prevented terrorist attacks? And is its focus appropriate for the nature of the terrorism threat today?

The Homeland Security Act of 2002 established DHS, combining 22 separate federal departments and agencies in an attempt to coordinate the nation's homeland security efforts. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the initial counterterror mission was to combat the threat that international terrorism, particularly al Qaeda, presented to the U.S.

This paper is based on an updated original data set that shows that DHS and other security agencies have effectively thwarted 230 terrorist attacks and violent plots in the U.S. since 9/11. By comparison, data from the Center for Strategic and International Studies as analyzed by the Washington Post show that, between 9/11 through the end of 2020, there have been a total of 81 terrorist attacks in the U.S. that caused fatalities to someone other than the attacker, killing a total of 276 people.² DHS deserves a degree of credit for thwarting many attacks, but the bulk of the credit belongs to the larger U.S. national and homeland security enterprise that includes other federal government organizations such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Intelligence Community (IC), as well as state and local law enforcement organizations.³

This paper's data show that the terrorist threat has transformed in the past 20 years from what U.S. government officials perceived as a primarily international threat to a

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² Robert O'Harrow, A. B. T. (2021, April). "The rise of Domestic Extremism in America." *The Washington Post* <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2021/domestic-terrorism-data/?itid=hp-top-table-main>.

³ Department of Homeland Security. (2018, January). "Strengthening the homeland security enterprise." <https://www.dhs.gov/strengthening-homeland-security-enterprise>.

largely domestic one. Yet, DHS has consistently suffered from a blind spot when it comes to domestic terrorism. Until very recently, DHS has continued to focus on international terrorism and failed to adapt its policies and efforts to meet the rising threat of white supremacy and other domestic terror threats from within its own borders.

DHS's responsibilities include such varied tasks as securing the country's borders, enforcing immigration laws, safeguarding against cyber threats, and preparing for natural disasters. But counterterrorism is the job around which the department was created, and DHS leaders have consistently referred to it as the first among the department's missions. The DHS Quadrennial Homeland Security Review in 2014, for example, stated that "Preventing terrorist attacks on the Nation is and should remain the cornerstone of homeland security,"⁴ and, more recently, DHS published a strategic plan that listed as its first goal to "counter terrorism and homeland security threats."⁵

This paper first examines definitions of terrorism and counterterrorism. Next, it proposes that we measure and assess the effectiveness of DHS's counterterrorism efforts through an examination of how many plots and attacks have failed, and through what mechanisms. Then, the majority of the paper provides an overview of the data on which groups and individuals are committing, or attempting to commit, acts of terrorist violence in the U.S., their primary motives for such violence, and how U.S. law enforcement efforts have thwarted many plots and attempts at violence. Because many other agencies and organizations in the homeland security enterprise are also involved in counterterrorism, this assessment will also address those efforts to a certain degree, but will not attempt a comprehensive review of those other government programs.

The paper concludes by arguing that the DHS's slow response to the changing nature of the terrorist threat, and its lack of focus on domestic terrorism, helped create the environment that has produced numerous deadly attacks in recent years, including the assault on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.

Defining terrorism and counterterrorism

Definitions are important, especially when they help establish the legal and policy boundaries within which government agencies act. Although there is no universal consensus on how to define terrorism, the Department of Homeland Security defines it as criminal, violent activity that appears intended to intimidate, coerce, or influence a civilian population or government policy, or to affect the conduct of government through destruction, assassination, or kidnapping.⁶ Other U.S. government definitions are similar,

⁴United States Department of Homeland Security. (2014). "The 2014 Quadrennial Homeland Security Review."

⁵ *United States Department of Homeland Security*. (2019). "The DHS Strategic Plan." https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/19_0702_plcy_dhs-strategic-plan-fy20-24.pdf.

⁶United States Department of Homeland Security. (2019). "Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence."

but add the requirement that terrorism involves actions in support of ideological or political objectives. The U.S. Code of Federal Regulations, for example, states that terrorism involves the unlawful use of force and violence “in furtherance of political or social objectives,”⁷ while the Department of Defense defines terrorism as “The unlawful use of violence or threat of violence, often motivated by religious, political, or other ideological beliefs, to instill fear and coerce governments or societies in pursuit of goals that are usually political.”⁸

Within that broad definition of terrorism, government agencies, scholars, and other terrorism experts offer a number of sub-categories that are often based on the motivations of the actors or the location of the violent acts. For example, terrorism may be described as international or domestic; and terrorists may be described as religious, rightwing, leftwing, or inspired by some other motivation.⁹ The many different terms used can make it difficult to assess U.S. government and DHS efforts to counter terrorism; for example, a conference sponsored by the National Counterterrorism Center in February 2020 that focused on the domestic terrorism (DT) threat found that “there is no whole-of-government DT threat picture, largely because the US Government does not have a common terminology to describe the threat.”¹⁰

The Department of Homeland Security and the FBI have in recent years adopted a four-part framework for understanding terrorism and similar threats, which this paper will use.¹¹

- The first category is that of attacks carried out by or under the direction of *foreign terrorist organizations (FTO)*, such as al Qaeda and ISIS. This threat is also often referred to, from the U.S. perspective, as “international terrorism.”
- *Homegrown violent extremists (HVE)*, who operate primarily within the U.S. and who are inspired by foreign terrorist organizations but are not acting at their direction.¹²

https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/19_0920_plcy_strategic-framework-counterterrorism-targeted-violence.pdf; DHS draws this definition from “Homeland Security Act of 2002” definition of terrorism, which is codified as 6 USC 101(18).

⁷ 28 CFR Section 0.85.

⁸ Joint Publication 3-26. (2014, October). *Counterterrorism*. Note: other DoD publications offer similar, but slightly different definitions.

⁹ For example, the Center for Strategic and International Studies divides terrorism into religious, ethnonationalist, violent far-right, violent far-left, and other; see: Seth Jones; Catrina Doxsee; (2020, October 22) “The War Comes Home: The Evolution of Domestic Terrorism in the United States.” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/war-comes-home-evolution-domestic-terrorism-united-states>.

¹⁰ National Counterterrorism Center. (2020 January). “Domestic Terrorism Conference Report,” https://www.dni.gov/files/2020-01-02-DT_Conference_Report.pdf.

¹¹ United States Department of Homeland Security. (2019). *Strategic Framework*.

¹² Although the FBI and DHS definitions do not point to any particular religion or ideology, to date all FTO and HVE attacks and plots have been inspired by some form of radical Islamism.

- *Domestic terrorism (DT)*, which is a broad category that generally refers to terrorism that takes place primarily within the U.S. and is not inspired by a foreign terrorist group. Domestic terrorism is divided into several sub-categories, including what the DHS and FBI call *racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists (REMVE)*, which encompasses white supremacists, other ethnically-based actors, and other categories involving the use or threat of force for the furtherance of ideological agendas related to anti-government, animal and environmental rights, or abortion-related extremism.¹³
- *Targeted violence*, which includes attacks that do not have a clear motive or do not appear to have an ideological or political motive, and which for that reason are not considered terrorism. Examples include many school shootings and the 2017 mass shooting in Las Vegas.

Within the U.S. government, *counterterrorism* is typically seen as involving a proactive and offensive approach, while *antiterrorism* is seen as involving defensive measures. This distinction is most commonly found within the Department of Defense, which defines counterterrorism as “activities and operations taken to neutralize terrorists and their organizations and networks in order to render them incapable of using violence to instill fear and coerce governments or societies to achieve their goals.”¹⁴ In practice this means DoD counterterrorism operations are primarily conducted overseas, often by special operations forces. The DoD defines antiterrorism, on the other hand, as “defensive measures used to reduce the vulnerability of individuals and property to terrorist acts.”¹⁵ Such actions could include the preparation of threat and vulnerability assessments, establishing security measures such as security cameras and barriers, and conducting training and exercises.

DHS does not make such a distinction, and most often uses the terms counterterrorism or countering terrorism to describe efforts to combat the threat of terrorism. For example, it describes counter terrorism as requiring “a proactive approach ... to identify, detect, and prevent attacks against the U.S.”¹⁶ This paper follows DHS use of the term counterterrorism to refer to the wide range of actions taken by DHS and other government agencies to combat and defend against terrorism.

¹³ FBI. (2020 November). “Domestic Terrorism: Definitions, Terrorism: Definitions, Terminology, and Methodology,” <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/fbi-dhs-domestic-terrorism-definitions-terminology-methodology.pdf/view>.

¹⁴ Joint Publication 3-26. (2014, October). *Counterterrorism*.

¹⁵ Joint Publication 3-07.2. (2010, November). *Antiterrorism*.

¹⁶ Department of Homeland Security. (2021, February). “Counter Terrorism and Homeland Security Threats,” <https://www.dhs.gov/counter-terrorism-and-homeland-security-threats>.

Assessing counterterrorism effectiveness

Assessing the effectiveness of counterterrorism programs is difficult because it is a problem of small numbers—because the number of terrorist attacks in the U.S. is low, it is a difficult problem to analyze statistically.¹⁷ But only a few incidents can have outsized effects, and for that reason it is not enough to only consider the sheer number of terrorist attacks that occur, or the number of deaths. Instead, we must also look at near-misses, or failed attempts, as they can be strong indicators of continued threat.¹⁸ Counting negatives, terrorist attacks that do not happen, is of course difficult; and even if it is possible to count the number of unsuccessful attacks, it is difficult to determine how to define success. As stated by a recent study, “Does the system work if, every so often, a near-miss occurs? If 99 out of 100 potential attacks are prevented?”¹⁹

Despite these difficulties, this paper recognizes that preventing attacks has been a key mission—perhaps *the* key mission— of the Department of Homeland Security. For that reason, the first measure of effectiveness used in this paper is the record of the department, and of the broader U.S. counterterrorism enterprise, in preventing terrorist attacks.²⁰

Preventing attacks, however, cannot be the sole criteria used to determine success or failure. For example, if counterterrorism efforts were able to reduce attacks, but at the same time diverted attention and resources such that other threats were allowed to multiply, this could hardly be considered an overall success. Accordingly, this paper also looks more broadly at whether the department’s counterterrorism policy, strategy, and level of effort are appropriate for the terrorism threat faced in the U.S. today. As DHS prepares to face the terrorism threat of tomorrow, it is vital to determine whether it is focused appropriately today.

Measuring DHS effectiveness in preventing violent attacks

My study of failed terrorist plots indicates that there have been many more attempted and plotted attacks prevented in the U.S. since 9/11 than there have been deadly attacks successfully completed. In an earlier work, I identified a total of 109 unsuccessful attacks and plots against people in the U.S. during the years following 9/11 through 2012.²¹ The vast majority of these attempts were prevented through the use of traditional law

¹⁷ Daniel Benjamin. (2008, May 30). "What Statistics Don't Tell Us About Terrorism." *Brookings*, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/what-statistics-dont-tell-us-about-terrorism/>.

¹⁸ Erik J. Dahl. (2011, August 1). "The Plots That Failed: Intelligence Lessons Learned from Unsuccessful Terrorist Attacks Against the United States," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2011.582628>.

¹⁹ Chappell Lawson; Alan Bersin. (2020). "Homeland Security Comes of Age," *Beyond 9/11: Homeland Security for the Twenty-First Century*.

²⁰ This paper focuses on what might be called kinetic, or traditional terrorist attacks, because that is the primary terrorist threat upon which DHS was founded; it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine DHS's performance in other important areas of counterterrorism such as cyber and biological terrorism.

²¹ Erik Dahl. (2013). "Intelligence and Surprise Attack: Failure and Success from Pearl Harbor to 9/11 and Beyond," *Georgetown University Press*.

enforcement tools, such as undercover operatives and tips from the public. This paper updates that data set, and shows a total of 230 unsuccessful attacks or plots against the U.S. through the end of 2020.²²

These more recent cases continue to show that plots and attacks are typically prevented through the use of traditional law enforcement methods. In 2020, of the 16 unsuccessful domestic terrorism attacks, 14 were prevented through action by law enforcement, most often with the FBI or the Joint Terrorism Task Force in the lead.²³ Plots are often foiled by these organizations because members of the public report violent posts that individuals make online. This occurred when a man from Cleveland, Ohio was arrested in May 2020 for plotting to ambush law enforcement officers in order to start an uprising against the government. The FBI learned about him after he made several posts about his plans in an online chatroom.²⁴ In a number of cases, the plotters attempt to carry out attacks using fake explosives provided to them by undercover officers or informants. Such sting operations are often controversial and give rise to charges of entrapment, but federal courts have dismissed few terrorism cases on the grounds of entrapment.²⁵ For example, in 2017 an Oklahoma man was arrested after he tried to blow up a bank in Oklahoma City. But the bomb was inert, provided to him by the FBI, who had been monitoring him for months after an informant revealed Varnell's desire to blow up a different building.²⁶ Based on my careful examination of the circumstances of each case to assess whether the case involved a genuine attempt to commit a violent attack, my data set of thwarted attacks includes many such instances in which attackers were foiled by FBI sting operations.

Of the 230 unsuccessful domestic terrorist attacks or plots since 9/11 that I have documented, 28 were directed by foreign terrorist organizations, 118 were committed by homegrown violent extremists, and 84 were committed by what the U.S. government terms domestic terrorists. Figures 1, 2, and 3 (below) display this data, which I discuss further in the next section.

These data suggest that the counterterrorism effort in the U.S. has been relatively effective in preventing terrorist violence. It may have prevented, or contributed to

²² Data is available from the author, and is drawn from numerous sources including news accounts, law enforcement and court reporting, and studies by scholars and think tanks including CSIS, New America, and the Global Terrorism Database maintained by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism at the University of Maryland.

²³ One plot failed as a result of the actions of the perpetrator: the would-be bomber was caught after his bomb exploded prematurely and blew off his hand. Another attack was carried out against Naval Air Station Corpus Christi, Texas, but it failed when the attacker was shot and killed after he crashed his car into an entry barrier and fired shots that injured a guard.

²⁴ (2021, May 7). "Cleveland Man Found Guilty in Plot to Kidnap and Ambush Law Enforcement Officers," *WOIO*, <https://www.cleveland19.com/2021/05/07/cleveland-man-found-guilty-plot-kidnap-ambush-law-enforcement-officers/>.

²⁵ Eric Halliday and Rachel Hanna, "How the Federal Government Investigates and Prosecutes Domestic Terrorism," *Lawfare Blog*, February 16, 2021, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/how-federal-government-investigates-and-prosecutes-domestic-terrorism>.

²⁶ Manny Fernandez. (2017, August 14). "Bombing Plot in Oklahoma City is Thwarted With Arrest, F.B.I. Says," *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/14/us/oklahoma-van-bomb-domestic-terrorism.html>.

preventing, the worst-case scenario that many government officials and outside experts warned about in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks: another attack on the scale of 9/11, or an even worse attack with a weapon of mass destruction such as a nuclear or biological weapon. However, it is important to note that despite the warnings that additional al Qaeda cells were waiting to carry out attacks, it appears that no such cells existed.²⁷ Some experts have argued that there never was a real threat of another such major attack,²⁸ while others see the lack of another 9/11 style attack as a success of U.S. counterterrorism on the home front. Experts disagree on the role intelligence and military operations conducted overseas by the U.S. and its allies have played in reducing the terrorist threat.²⁹ My data show that there have been attacks and plots by al Qaeda and ISIS within the U.S. since the 9/11 attacks, and because of law enforcement efforts, the great majority of these plots have failed, with none coming close to the destructiveness of the 9/11 attacks.³⁰

Although some of the credit for these counterterrorism efforts goes to DHS and its many sub-organizations and agencies, most of these attempted plots were prevented by law enforcement, especially at the state and local levels, using the traditional tools of police.³¹ DHS itself, although created because of a terrorist act and with counterterrorism continuing to be seen as its primary mission, actually plays only a secondary role in U.S. counterterrorism. It serves as a sort of umbrella agency for organizations with key counterterrorism roles, such as the Transportation Security Administration, Secret Service, and Customs and Border Protection. It also plays an important function in providing support and guidance to the 80 state and local intelligence fusion centers that have been established throughout the U.S. since 9/11.³²

While DHS is the lead federal agency for ensuring America's domestic security, it is not actually in charge of American counterterrorism, nor does it have the lead on counterterrorism intelligence. The primary frontline counterterrorism effort in the U.S. is the Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) system, led by the FBI, and the key counterterrorism intelligence organization in the U.S. government is the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), under the Director of National Intelligence, which has the lead on all terrorism

²⁷ Scott Shane. (2011, September 8). "Al Qaeda's Outsize Shadow," *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/08/us/sept-11-reckoning/qaeda.html>.

²⁸ See John Mueller; Mark G. Stewart. (2010, April 2). "Hardly Existential: Thinking Rationally About Terrorism," *Foreign Affairs*, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-america/2010-04-02/hardly-existential>.

²⁹ International Crisis Group, *Overkill: Reforming the Legal Basis for the U.S. War on Terror*, September 17, 2021, pp. 23-24, https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/005-us-counter-terrorism_1.pdf; Daniel Byman, "Why There Hasn't Been Another 9/11," *Wall Street Journal*, September 11, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-there-hasnt-been-another-9-11-11631332860>.

³⁰ For an assessment of the current terror threat against the United States; See Bruce Hoffman; Jacob Ware. (2021, January). "Terrorism and Counterterrorism Challenges for the Biden Administration," *CTC Sentinel*.

³¹ Erik Dahl. (2020, February 24). "The Localization of Intelligence: A New Direction for American Federalism," *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2020.1716563>.

³² See: Homeland Security. "Fusion Centers," <https://www.dhs.gov/fusion-centers>. Fusion centers have been controversial, with critics arguing they violate civil liberties and are an example of the militarization of policing. I discuss these arguments in my article "The Localization of Intelligence," cited above.

intelligence except for purely domestic terrorism. For domestic terrorism intelligence, the FBI has the lead, not DHS. The DHS's Intelligence and Analysis (I&A) office has long struggled to find its place in the huge U.S. intelligence community,³³ and as stated by Stevan Bunnell in *Beyond 9/11*, "DHS does both a lot more and a lot less in the fight against terrorism than many people realize."³⁴

Rising threat from domestic terrorism

Despite the lack of another 9/11-scale attack, the U.S. has seen many smaller, but still deadly, attacks carried out in the past two decades. Nonetheless, in the 20 years since 9/11, the nature of this violence has shifted. Although the number of deaths from international terrorism has remained much lower than most experts would have expected, the number of attacks and deaths from other types of terrorism—most notably domestic terrorism—has been growing.

The U.S. government first viewed the terror threat as emanating from attacks planned by al Qaeda itself, then shifted its focus to threats from al Qaeda affiliate organizations around the world, and then further shifted to viewing a broader Islamist terrorism threat, planned or guided by other organizations that the U.S. government categorizes as foreign terrorist organizations, including ISIS. A subsequent change in U.S. government perceptions of threat shifted to plots and attacks inspired but not directed by those foreign organizations—a threat which the FBI and DHS now term "homegrown violent extremism." And more recently, as the data in this paper indicates, the threat has increased from domestic terrorists who are motivated by a wide variety of causes and ideologies, including white supremacy and animosity toward government in general.

This changing threat picture can be seen in the history of attacks and plots against the U.S. that have been either directly coordinated by foreign terrorist organizations (what DHS and the FBI call FTO threats), or inspired by such organizations (HVE threats). Such attacks and plots are often referred to by terrorist experts as "jihadist" or "radical Islamist," because to date all such attacks have claimed the mantle of some form of radical Islam. A recent study by the New America think tank, for example, found that in the two decades since 9/11, a total of 107 people have been killed in the U.S. by attackers inspired by "jihadist" ideology.³⁵

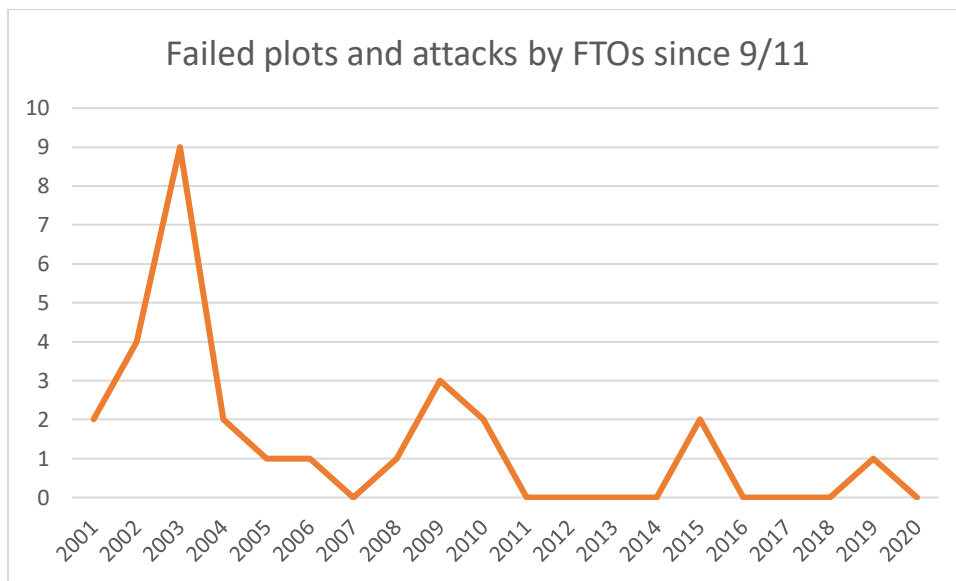
³³ Christian Beckner. (2021, May 25). "Reassessing Homeland Security Intelligence: A Review of the DHS Office of Intelligence and Analysis" *Center for a New American Security*, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/reassessing-homeland-security-intelligence>.

³⁴ Stevan Bunnell. (2020). "Increasing Security While Protecting Privacy," *Beyond 9/11: Homeland Security for the Twenty-First Century*.

³⁵ David Serman; Peter Bergen; Melissa Salyk-Virk.; (2020, September). "Terrorism in America 19 Years After 9/11." *New America*, https://d1y8sb8igg2f8e.cloudfront.net/documents/Terrorism_in_America_19_Years_After_9_11_N6yekZJ.pdf. Note that "jihadist" terrorism is typically defined as involving individuals using radical Islam or Islamism as justification for their acts, while "far right" or "rightwing" terrorism is generally considered a broad category that can include racial or ethnic hatred, or opposition to government authority. Because these terms are

This type of threat remains, as illustrated by the December 2019 shooting at Naval Air Station Pensacola, Florida, in which a Saudi Arabian Air Force officer who was coordinating with al Qaeda killed three sailors. But it is significant that this was the only case since 9/11 in which a foreign terrorist organization has directed or provided operational advice for a deadly attack on U.S. soil. U.S. law enforcement efforts have thwarted a number of other attacks against the U.S. directly planned or coordinated by FTOs since 9/11. Examples include two plots foiled in 2015: one by a naturalized American citizen from Ohio who had trained with a terrorist group in Syria and who planned to kidnap and execute U.S. soldiers, only to be arrested following a routine traffic stop,³⁶ and a Maryland man who accepted money from ISIS to carry out an attack within the U.S., but was arrested following an FBI investigation that tracked his finances and online communications.³⁷ My own research shows there have been 28 such failed plots in the years since the 9/11 attacks, with the number of attempted attacks declining dramatically after a surge in the years immediately following 9/11. Figure 1 shows the trend line of these “FTO” failed plots.

Figure 1. Failed Plots and Attacks by “Foreign Terrorist Organizations” Since 9/11



imprecise and often controversial, this report focuses instead on the terminology and definitions used by DHS and FBI.

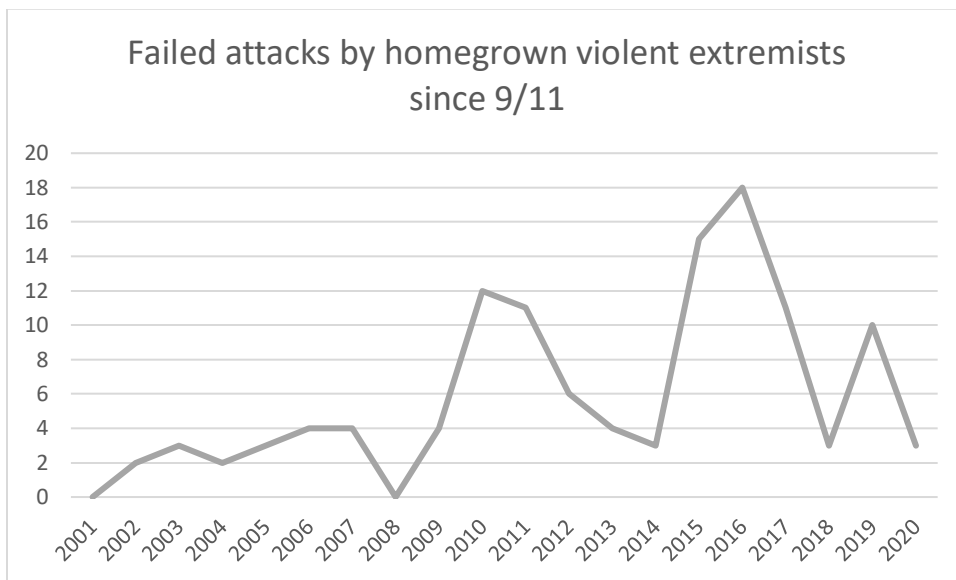
³⁶ Alissa Widman Neese. (2018, January 22). “Columbus Man Sentenced to 22 Years in Terror Plot,” *The Columbus Dispatch*, <https://www.dispatch.com/news/20180122/columbus-man-sentenced-to-22-years-in-terror-plot>.

³⁷ Eric Lichtblau. (2015, December 14). “Maryland Man Accused of Tapping Money From ISIS Operatives for a U.S. Attack,” *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/15/us/politics/maryland-man-accused-of-tapping-money-from-isis-operatives-for-a-us-attack.html>.

Although almost all attacks since 9/11 directed by foreign terrorist organizations have been unsuccessful, attacks conducted by what the government calls homegrown violent extremists, have been more deadly. The year 2009 might be considered the high-water mark for this kind of terrorism in the U.S., with a number of significant HVE attacks and plots, including at Fort Hood, Texas.³⁸ Experts outside government and former government officials recognized that the nature of the threat was changing. They saw Al Qaeda and its affiliates as less likely to be able to carry out large-scale attacks, in part because of the death of Osama bin Laden in 2011. Former CIA Director Michael Hayden, for example, wrote in October 2010 about the changing al Qaeda threat from large, centrally planned attacks to smaller plots “homegrown” within the U.S. that were inspired and encouraged but not directed by al Qaeda.³⁹

The government has continued to view the HVE threat as high in recent years. However, local and federal law enforcement efforts have rendered the great majority of these plots and attacks unsuccessful. Often these cases involve either undercover law enforcement officers or informants, such was the case in 2020, when a Tampa, Florida, man who wanted to carry out a mass shooting on behalf of ISIS was arrested after trying to buy weapons through an FBI informant.⁴⁰ My research shows there have been 118 failed HVE attacks from 9/11 through 2020, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Failed Plots and Attacks by “Homegrown Violent Extremists” Since 9/11



³⁸ Peter Bergen; Bruce Hoffman; Katherine Tiedemann. (2011, January 24). “Assessing the Jihadist Terrorist Threat to America and American Interests,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2011.538830>.

³⁹ Michael V. Hayden. (2010, October 21). “Are we ready for new form of terror?” *CNN* CNN.com, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/OPINION/10/21/hayden.security.terrorism/index.html?iref=allsearch>.

⁴⁰ Jack Evans. (2020, May 27) “Tampa Supporter of Islamic State Terror Group Nabbed in Undercover Sting, FBI Says,” *Tampa Bay Times*, <https://www.tampabay.com/news/crime/2020/05/27/tampa-supporter-of-islamic-state-terror-group-nabbed-in-undercover-sting-fbi-says/>.

While the FTO threat has been relatively low, and the HVE threat has been high but has largely resulted in failed plots and attacks, the threat from domestic terrorism has grown. As noted above, “domestic terrorism” refers to attacks and plots that take place primarily within the U.S., and are neither directed nor inspired by foreign terrorist organizations. This is a broad category that includes white supremacists, anti-government and militia groups, anti-Semitic groups and individuals, and those inspired by other beliefs and ideologies. Although most of these plots and attacks are often categorized by terrorism experts as “right-wing,” there have been several serious acts of domestic terrorism perpetrated by far-left extremists in recent years, such as the killing of a pro-Trump demonstrator in Portland in August 2020, and the 2017 shooting at a baseball practice held by Republican members of Congress. The DT threat includes what might be considered left-wing threats such as anarchist, anti-fascist, and animal or environmental rights extremism. Of the 84 failed DT plots since 9/11, all but three can be categorized as far-right wing. In one case the motivation for the plan was unclear,⁴¹ while two cases stemmed from far-left wing ideologies or beliefs.⁴²

Terrorism experts outside of government have been warning for some time of this growing domestic terrorist threat. A 2017 study sponsored by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy argued the threat was increasing, both from homegrown jihadist violence and from rightwing ideologies.⁴³ In September 2019 Peter Bergen called the threat from jihadist terrorism “relatively limited,” but said that “white supremacist extremism is increasingly inspiring deadly violence” because the 9/11 attackers were inspired by jihadist ideology and had killed 104 people in the US, but those inspired by far-right ideology had killed 109.⁴⁴ The ADL Center on Extremism has described a trend in increasingly lethal attacks by domestic extremists in recent years, and noted that rightwing extremists carried out all but one of the 17 domestic extremist attacks in 2019.⁴⁵

Other studies have also found that the threat from domestic terrorism has been growing—well before the January 6, 2021 assault on the Capitol that placed DT at the top of the American agenda. A September 2019 report from the New America think tank found that 109 people had been killed since 9/11 by what they describe as far rightwing

⁴¹ This was the case of a couple arrested in 2012 after authorities found bombmaking materials and a “terrorist encyclopedia” in their Greenwich Village, New York apartment.

⁴² In July 2019 a self-proclaimed member of Antifa attempted to bomb a US Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention facility in Tacoma, Washington, but was killed by police. In November 2014 two men were charged with plotting to bomb the St. Louis Gateway Arch and kill the police chief of Ferguson, Missouri, and a prosecutor, in response to the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson.

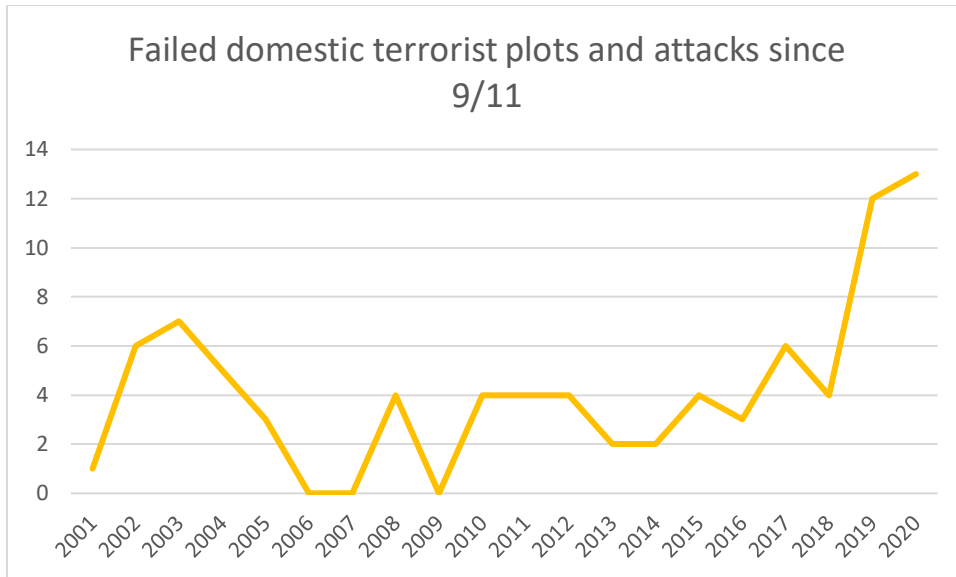
⁴³ Policy Notes for the Trump Administration. (2017, March). “Defeating Ideologically Inspired Violent Extremism: A Strategy to Build Strong Communities and Protect the U.S. Homeland,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/defeating-ideologically-inspired-violent-extremism>.

⁴⁴ Peter Bergen. “Global Terrorism: Threats to the Homeland, Part 1,” *House Committee on Homeland Security*.

⁴⁵ (2020, February). “Murder and Extremism in the United States in 2019” *Center on Extremism*, <https://www.adl.org/murder-and-extremism-2019>.

terrorists, compared with 104 who had been killed by what the report termed jihadist ideology.⁴⁶ A report released in October 2020 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies found that white supremacists and other domestic actors were responsible for 67 percent of terrorist attacks and plots carried out up to that point in 2020.⁴⁷

Figure 3. Failed Plots and Attacks by “Domestic Terrorists” Since 9/11



The data show that the threat from domestic terrorists who are not inspired by foreign terrorist organizations has increased sharply in the past two years, with 12 unsuccessful attacks and plots in 2019, and 13 in 2020—including such high-profile plots as the attempt to kidnap the governor of Michigan, and threats against other public figures such as the mayor of Wichita, Kansas, and New York Senator Chuck Schumer.

All of these data indicate that the U.S. faces a number of terrorism threats, including continuing threats from foreign terrorist organizations and individuals inspired by such groups, and a growing threat from a wide array of domestic terrorists. The U.S. is not alone in facing a wide variety of threats. The head of the British domestic intelligence service MI5 recently stated the UK has disrupted 29 plots in the past four years, ten of which were from extreme right-wing terrorism.⁴⁸

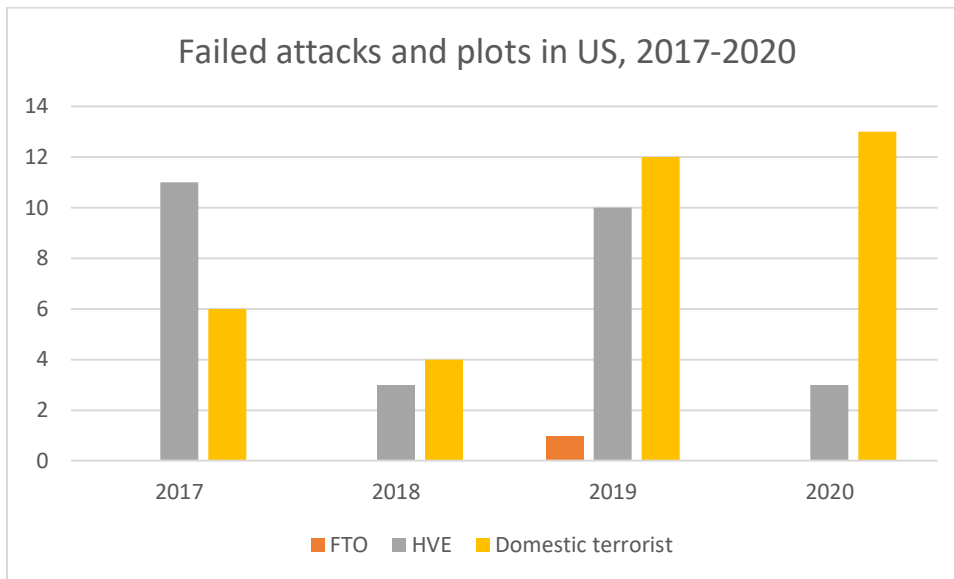
⁴⁶ Peter Bergen; David Sterman; Melissa Salyk-Virk. (2019). “Terrorism in America 18 Years After 9/11” *New America*, p. 25, <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/terrorism-america-18-years-after-911/>.

⁴⁷ Seth G. Jones. (2020, October). “The War Comes Home: The Evolution of Domestic Terrorism in the United States” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/war-comes-home-evolution-domestic-terrorism-united-states>.

⁴⁸ Stephen Fidler. (2021, July 14). “U.K.’s MI5 Cites Growing Threats From Russia, China, Iran--and Right-Wing Extremists,” *Wall Street Journal*, https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-k-s-mi5-cites-growing-threats-from-russia-china-iranand-right-wing-extremists-11626287193?mod=hp_listb_pos4.

By comparison, my data shows that the U.S. has seen 62 failed plots from 2017-2020, including one directed by a foreign terrorist organization, 27 committed by homegrown violent extremists, and 35 cases of domestic terror. Of those 35 DT cases, one was far left wing, while 34 were far right wing. The data is displayed in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Failed Attacks and Plots in the U.S., 2017-2020



Assessing DHS's counterterrorism focus

The terrorist threat in the U.S. has transformed in the past 20 years from what officials perceived as a primarily international threat, dominated by al Qaeda and affiliated groups, to a now largely domestic one. While many violent attacks in the years after 9/11 were largely inspired by what DHS would categorize as international terrorism or homegrown violent extremism, today this type of violence is more amorphous, involving individuals inspired by a wide variety of ideologies and beliefs including racial and other hatreds. And yet DHS and other federal agencies—with the exception of the FBI—have been slow to recognize and address the domestic threat, and until only very recently have continued to focus primarily on international terrorism.

Ever since it was created, DHS has focused on past threats, much like a general preparing to fight the last war. A focus on international terrorism was certainly appropriate in its first years, when memories of 9/11 were fresh and when terrorism experts generally understood the primary terrorist threat against the U.S. continued to be from al Qaeda. But DHS was slow to adapt its assessments to meet the changing nature of the threat. For example, in 2014 the DHS's *Quadrennial Homeland Security Review* stated that al Qaeda and its affiliates continued to pose the most significant threat, although the

review acknowledged the threat was increasing from lone offenders motivated by al Qaeda or inspired by other religious, political, or ideological beliefs.⁴⁹

This focus on international terrorism has continued to dominate the department's counterterrorism efforts until only very recently, despite the evidence that has shown the rising threat from domestic terrorism. In 2017, acting DHS Secretary Elaine Duke said that the threat was rising from domestic terrorism, but she nonetheless testified that "The primary international terror threat facing the U.S. is from violent global jihadist groups, who try to radicalize potential operatives within our homeland and seek to send operatives to our country."⁵⁰

This international focus has been reflected not only in the language used by DHS leaders, but also in a wide range of policies and actions, perhaps most significantly in the effort to expand DHS presence overseas. These efforts are intended to better protect Americans at home by extending security outward, but they are not focused on addressing the domestic terrorism threat. Examples include stationing Customs and Border Protection officers at major airports around the world, and at U.S. embassies and consulates where they serve as attaches and advisors. DHS offices work closely with other government agencies that have traditionally externally-focused missions, such as the State Department and Department of Defense, and with foreign intelligence and law enforcement counterparts. A senior DHS official explained the effort this way: "We can no longer view our border as the first line of defense, but rather as a last line of defense."⁵¹ This effort has given DHS the third largest overseas footprint of any civilian U.S. agency, behind only the State Department and the CIA.⁵²

Individual DHS analysts and officials have understood the rising domestic threat, and have warned about what in the past has been described as rightwing extremism, a category that includes white supremacists, members of anti-government militia groups, and others motivated by a variety of issues including racial hatred and anger at gun control legislation. But DHS leaders have been reticent about the subject of domestic terrorism because of fears of a political backlash. When DHS published a report about the rightwing terrorism threat in 2009 that warned returning veterans that they might be targeted for recruitment by domestic extremists, it faced a firestorm of criticism from conservative groups and was forced to rescind the report.⁵³

⁴⁹ "The 2014 Quadrennial Homeland Security Review," 18.

⁵⁰ Elaine C. Duke. (2017, September 27). "Threats to the Homeland," Testimony before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs, <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Testimony-Duke-2017-09-27.pdf>.

⁵¹ John Wagner. (2015, June 2). "Testimony before the House Committee on Homeland Security Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security, *The Outer Ring of Border Security: DHS's International Security Programs*.

⁵² Chappell Lawson; Alan Bersin. (2020). "The Future of Homeland Security," *Beyond 9/11: Homeland Security for the Twenty-First Century*.

⁵³ Daryl Johnson. (2017, August 21) "I warned of right-wing violence in 2009. Republicans objected. I was right," *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2017/08/21/i-warned-of-right-wing-violence-in-2009-it-caused-an-uproar-i-was-right/>.

Although DHS issued its first strategy document identifying domestic terrorism as a major threat in 2019, the primary focus has remained on international terrorism. For example, when the then-chief of DHS intelligence testified before the Senate on “threats to the homeland” in November 2019, he began his testimony by discussing international terrorism, including “the threat posed by Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs), which remain a core priority of DHS’s counterterrorism efforts.”⁵⁴

The continued focus at DHS on the threat of international terrorism reflects a larger tendency among U.S. government intelligence and counterterrorism agencies for assessments and emphasis to lag behind the evidence of a change in the nature of the threat. For example, in January 2012, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper began his annual threat testimony by discussing the continued threat from al Qaeda and like-minded groups, although he did describe core al Qaeda as in decline. He discussed the homegrown violent extremist threat, but described it as characterized by lone actors or small groups without the capability to conduct sophisticated attacks.⁵⁵ More recently the U.S. government’s *National Strategy for Counterterrorism*, published in October 2018, stated that “Radical Islamist terrorists remain the primary transnational terrorist threat to the U.S. and its vital national interests,” and devoted three pages to that threat, adding only two paragraphs on the domestic terror threat.⁵⁶ The 2019 *National Intelligence Strategy* made no mention of domestic terrorism at all.⁵⁷ And still today, the last publicly released National Intelligence Estimate on the domestic terrorism threat, issued in 2007, assessed that “Al-Qa’ida is and will remain the most serious terrorist threat to the Homeland.”⁵⁸

The tendency within the federal government to downplay the domestic terror threat, and especially the threat from white supremacists, is a phenomenon also seen within U.S. law enforcement more generally.⁵⁹ Critics argue that American law enforcement—where most officers are white—has a “blind spot” toward white supremacy and other aspects of far-right violence, where the perpetrators tend to be overwhelmingly white.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ David Glawe. (2019, November 5). “Testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs,” *Threats to the Homeland*.

⁵⁵ James Clapper. (2012, January 31)., January 31, 2012 *US Intelligence Community Worldwide Threat Assessment*.

⁵⁶ (2018, October). “National Strategy for Counterterrorism” *Washington, DC: The White House*.

⁵⁷ (2019, January). “National Intelligence Strategy of the United States of America” *Office of the Director of National Intelligence*, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/reports-publications/item/1943-2019-national-intelligence-strategy>.

⁵⁸ (2007, July). “The Terrorist Threat to the US Homeland,” *National Intelligence Estimate*.

⁵⁹ Janet Reitman. (2018, November 3). “U.S. Law Enforcement Failed to See the Threat of White Nationalism. Now They Don’t Know How to Stop It,” *New York Times Magazine*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/03/magazine/FBI-charlottesville-white-nationalism-far-right.html>.

⁶⁰ Adam Malka. (2019, August 12). “Why Law Enforcement Has a Blind Spot for White Male Violence,” *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/08/12/why-law-enforcement-has-blind-spot-white-male-violence/>. See also Michael German. (2020, August 27). “Hidden in Plain Sight: Racism, White Supremacy, and Far-Right Militancy in Law Enforcement” *The Brennan Center*, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/hidden-plain-sight-racism-white-supremacy-and-far-right-militancy-law>.

The FBI has, however, been an exception to the general lack of focus on domestic terrorism. As we have seen above, the FBI has the lead among federal government agencies on domestic terrorism-related intelligence, and its Joint Terrorism Task Forces have been the most important operational entity in combating terrorism within the homeland, so the bureau's focus on the domestic threat is not surprising. Its leaders have often warned about domestic terrorism, both from individuals inspired by global jihad who are radicalized primarily in the U.S., and from right-wing extremists, including white supremacists. For example, two senior FBI officials testified in June 2019 about the threat posed by domestic terrorists and hate crimes.⁶¹ In February 2020, FBI Director Christopher Wray testified that "More deaths were caused by domestic violent extremists than international terrorists in recent years."⁶² Another organization that has focused on domestic attacks is the Secret Service—a part of DHS, but one with a very specialized mission of protecting the president and other senior leaders. Beginning in 2017, the Secret Service has published a very useful series of annual reports on *Mass Attacks in Public Spaces*.⁶³

In the past several years, DHS has in fact begun to put more focus on domestic terrorism, including violent white supremacists.⁶⁴ But these efforts were largely blocked by the Trump administration. For example, a study by the Atlantic Council noted that the department had difficulty getting resources and support for combating white supremacy.⁶⁵ DHS's focus on domestic extremism has also been derailed by pressure from senior officials to emphasize instead other concerns including immigration and border security.⁶⁶

Several senior DHS officials who encouraged a focus on domestic terrorism, including white supremacy, either left the department or were fired. Kevin McAleenan, who, as the acting secretary of homeland security beginning in April 2019, pushed to broaden the department's focus to include white supremacy, resigned in November 2019.⁶⁷ In February 2020, Elizabeth Neumann, then the Assistant Secretary for Threat Prevention and Security Policy at DHS, testified before a House committee hearing on anti-Semitic and white supremacist terrorism that "every counterterrorism professional I speak to in the federal government and overseas feels like we are at the doorstep of another 9/11, maybe

⁶¹ Michael McCarrity; Calvin Shivers. (2019, June 4). "Confronting White Supremacy," *Statement for the Record before the House Oversight and Reform Committee, Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties*, <https://www.fbi.gov/news/testimony/confronting-white-supremacy>

⁶² Christopher Wray. (2020, February 5). "Statement Before the House Judiciary Committee" *Washington D.C.*, <https://www.fbi.gov/news/testimony/fbi-oversight-020520>.

⁶³ United States Secret Service. <https://www.secretservice.gov/protection/ntac/>.

⁶⁴ Department of Homeland Security. <https://www.dhs.gov/blog/2017/08/16/did-you-know-four-ways-dhs-working-prevent-terrorism-home>.

⁶⁵ Thomas Warrick; Caitlin Durkovich. (2020 September). "Future of DHS Project: Key Findings and Recommendations" *Atlantic Council*, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/future-of-dhs/future-of-dhs-project-final-report/>.

⁶⁶ Betsy Woodruff Swan. (2020, August 26) "They tried to get Trump to care about right-wing terrorism. He ignored them," *Politico*, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/08/26/trump-domestic-extemism-homeland-security-401926>.

⁶⁷ Alex Kingsbury. (2019, September 23). "Rethinking Counterterrorism," *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/23/opinion/dhs-domestic-terrorism.html?searchResultPosition=7>.

not something that catastrophic in terms of the visual or the numbers, but that we can see it building and we don't quite know how to stop it.”⁶⁸ But Neumann left DHS in April 2020, and later complained that the department had not done enough to focus on domestic extremism, including anti-Semitic hate crimes, white supremacy, and other right-wing violence.⁶⁹

In September 2020, the former head of DHS's intelligence organization filed a whistle-blower complaint alleging that top DHS leaders had ordered intelligence assessments to be modified to make the white supremacist threat “appear less severe” and to include more information on left-wing violence.⁷⁰ Reportedly, a draft DHS assessment identified white supremacists as the most serious terror threat facing the U.S., but the report's release was delayed, and the language about white supremacy was softened in later drafts.⁷¹ When the report was finally released in October 2020, however, it did not appear to be watered down, and in a forward to the report, then-acting DHS Secretary Chad Wolf wrote that “I am particularly concerned about white supremacist violent extremists who have been exceptionally lethal in their abhorrent, targeted attacks in recent years.”⁷²

The most striking demonstration of the rise of the domestic terrorism threat—and the lack of focus on that threat—was the January 6, 2021, assault on the U.S. Capitol. There is a debate over how January 6 should be defined: was it an attempted coup,⁷³ an insurrection,⁷⁴ sedition,⁷⁵ or something else? But the events of January 6 clearly meet DHS's definition of terrorism, which, as noted above, includes actions intended to affect the conduct of government through destruction, assassination, or kidnapping. FBI Director

⁶⁸ Bridget Johnson. (2020, March 1). “Extremism Building to the ‘Doorstep of Another 9/11,’ DHS Official Tells Anti-Semitism Hearing,” *Homeland Security Today*, <https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/infrastructure-security/extremism-building-to-the-doorstep-of-another-9-11-dhs-official-tells-anti-semitism-hearing/>.

⁶⁹ Betsy Woodruff Swan. (2020, August 26). “They Tried to Get Trump to Care about Right-Wing Terrorism. He Ignored Them,” *Politico*, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/08/26/trump-domestic-extemism-homeland-security-401926>; Zolan Kanno-Youngs. (2020, September 1). “Trump Administration Promise to Focus on Extremism Remains Unfulfilled,” *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/01/us/politics/trump-homeland-security-extremism.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

⁷⁰ Zolan Kanno-Youngs and Nicholas Fandos. (2020, September 9). “D.H.S. Downplayed Threats from Russia and White Supremacists, Whistle-Blower Says,” *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/09/us/politics/homeland-security-russia-trump.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage§ion=Politics>.

⁷¹ Betsy Woodruff Swan. (2020, September 4). “DHS draft document: White supremacists are greatest terror threat,” *Politico*, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/04/white-supremacists-terror-threat-dhs-409236>.

⁷² Department of Homeland Security. (2020) *Homeland Threat Assessment*.

⁷³ Dana Milbank. (2021, July 15). “This historian predicted Jan. 6. Now he warns of greater violence,” *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/07/15/american-democracy-survived-its-reichstag-fire-jan-6-threat-has-not-subsided/>.

⁷⁴ Aaron Blake. (2021, July 13). “Yes, it was an insurrection,” *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/07/13/yes-it-was-an-insurrection/>.

⁷⁵ Jonathan Tepperman. (2021, January 6). “Why This Wasn't a Coup,” *ForeignPolicy.com*, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/06/why-this-wasnt-a-coup-capitol-2020-election-trump/>.

Christopher Wray testified to Congress “that siege was criminal behavior, plain and simple, and it’s behavior that we, the F.B.I., view as domestic terrorism.”⁷⁶ Terrorism experts such as Bruce Hoffman have also labelled it as domestic terrorism.⁷⁷

Another debate about January 6 concerns whether or not the assault resulted from a failure of intelligence. A number of experts and leaders have called it an intelligence failure, including former Capitol Police chief Steven A. Sund, who said that the “entire intelligence community seems to have missed” warning signs.⁷⁸ Others, however, have argued that because multiple agencies (including DHS) had produced warnings about violent extremism in general and about the January 6 demonstration in particular, no intelligence failure existed.⁷⁹

DHS’s intelligence office published an assessment on December 30, 2020, that warned white supremacists could carry out “mass casualty” attacks, but it did not warn about an attack on the Capitol.⁸⁰ A Senate staff report noted that “DHS I&A never produced an intelligence product, bulletin, or warning specific to the January 6 Joint Session of Congress,”⁸¹ and on January 5 a national summary report from I&A stated “Nothing significant to report.”⁸² As Mitchell D. Silber has written, the intelligence failure of January 6 appears to be mostly one of analysis, and not collection, as there were plenty of warnings available that large numbers of potentially violent extremists would be gathering at the Capitol, but there was little analysis and assessment as to what this meant.⁸³ The lack of analysis and understanding of the threat on the part of DHS and many other agencies suggests strongly that they did not understand the growing threat posed by domestic extremism. No matter what term we use to define January 6, it seems clear that, as

⁷⁶ Adam Goldman. (2021, March 7). “New Report Warns of Rising Threat of Domestic Terrorism,” *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/17/us/politics/domestic-terrorism.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

⁷⁷ Bruce Hoffman. (2021, January 7). “Domestic Terrorism Strikes U.S. Capitol, and Democracy,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/domestic-terrorism-strikes-us-capitol-and-democracy>.

⁷⁸ Mark Mazzetti; Adam Goldman. (2021, February 5). “Muddled Intelligence Hampered Response to Capitol Riot,” *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/05/us/politics/capitol-riot-domestic-terrorism.html>.

⁷⁹ Michael J. Ard. (2021, July 1). “Contrary to the Senate Report, Jan. 6 Was Not an Intelligence Failure,” *Discourse*, <https://www.discoursemagazine.com/politics/2021/07/01/contrary-to-the-senate-report-jan-6-was-not-an-intelligence-failure/>.

⁸⁰ Adam Goldman; Katie Benner; Zolan Kanno-Youngs. (2021, January 30). “How Trump’s Focus on Antifa Distracted Attention From the Far-Right Threat,” *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/30/us/politics/trump-right-wing-domestic-terrorism.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

⁸¹ U.S. Senate Staff Report. “Examining the U.S. Capitol Attack: A Review of the Security, Planning, and Response Failures on January 6,” <https://www.rules.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Jan%20%20HSGAC%20Rules%20Report.pdf>.

⁸² Rachael Levy, Dan Frosch, and Sadie Gurman, “Capitol Riot Warnings Weren’t Acted On as System Failed,” *Wall Street Journal (Online)*, February 8, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/capitol-riot-warnings-werent-acted-on-as-system-failed-11612787596>.

⁸³ Mitchell D. Silber, “Domestic Violent Extremism and the Intelligence Challenge” (Atlantic Council, May 2021), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/domestic-violent-extremism-and-the-intelligence-challenge/>.

terrorism expert Martha Crenshaw has written, “Our preoccupation since the Sept.11 attacks with the Islamist and jihadist threat may have blinded us to the fact that terrorism can start at home, with familiar ideologies.”⁸⁴

Conclusion

Today, the evidence shows that the direct threat posed by international terrorist groups against the U.S. has significantly receded. However, since the 9/11 attacks, DHS has consistently failed to adapt to the changing nature of the terrorist threat. In particular, it failed to properly address the rising threat of domestic terrorism until it was too late to help prevent the assault on the Capitol by a mob emboldened by years of neglect toward white supremacist and other forms of domestic terror. Part of the blame for this lack of focus lies with the Trump administration and its insistence on focusing on other threats, such as the southern border, and its unwillingness to acknowledge the rising threat of domestic terror. But DHS lagged behind in its assessment of the terrorist threat well before Trump took office; the failure to recognize and respond effectively to the changing terrorist threat preceded the Trump administration, and the reasons for the failure extend beyond any one president.

The fundamental problem may lie in the inability of large government bureaucracies to adjust and adapt to changing threats and challenges. As Amy Zegart noted, this problem was one of the basic causes for the intelligence failure that led to the 9/11 attacks.⁸⁵ Nearly 20 years after those terrorist attacks shocked America and the world, the events of January 6, 2021 again shook Americans’ sense of security and forced a reexamination of where the focus should be in counterterrorism. More recent efforts by DHS under the Biden administration are promising, such as the issuance of bulletins warning of the continuing threat from what it called domestic violent extremists,⁸⁶ and a joint report with the FBI providing a strategic intelligence assessment on domestic terrorism.⁸⁷ The White House ordered the Director of National Intelligence to review the domestic terrorism threat in coordination with the DHS and FBI,⁸⁸ and it produced a new *National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism*.⁸⁹ DHS has made other positive steps, such as appointing

⁸⁴ Martha Crenshaw, “I’ve Studied Terrorism for Over 40 Years. Let’s Talk About What Comes Next.,” *New York Times*, February 10, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/10/opinion/capitol-terrorism-right-wing-proud-boys.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

⁸⁵ Amy B. Zegart, *Spying Blind: The CIA, the FBI, and the Origins of 9/11* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

⁸⁶(2021, May 14). National Terrorism Advisory System Bulletin, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/ntas/alerts/21_0514_ntas_bulletin_all-sectors.pdf

⁸⁷(2021, May). FBI; DHS. “Strategic Intelligence Assessment and Data on Domestic Terrorism” (FBI and DHS, May 2021), <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/strategic-intelligence-assessment-and-data-domestic-terrorism>.

⁸⁸ Julian Barnes; Hailey Fuchs. (2021, January 22). “White House Orders Assessment on Violent Extremism in U.S.,” *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/22/us/politics/capitol-riot-domestic-extremism.html>.

⁸⁹ (2021, June). The White House, “National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism,” June 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/National-Strategy-for-Countering-Domestic-Terrorism.pdf>.

John Cohen, a well-respected official, as the interim chief of I&A, and establishing a new domestic terrorism unit within its intelligence office.⁹⁰ This increased focus was long overdue, but the question going forward will be: is this new emphasis on domestic terrorism sufficient? And when the nature of the threat changes again, will DHS and other agencies be able to adapt, or will they again lag behind in their assessments of the threat?

We might also ask: in the face of these continuing problems, and in recognition that even in the job of counterterrorism DHS tends to play a secondary role behind organizations such as the FBI and the National Counterterrorism Center, is the Department of Homeland Security even necessary? Critics have called for DHS to be reorganized or disbanded ever since its founding.⁹¹ But as the problem of domestic terrorism increases, it will continue to be necessary for DHS to coordinate the actions of agencies such as the Transportation Security Administration, Customs and Border Protection, and the Secret Service. And DHS's own intelligence organization, although struggling to find its identity among the larger agencies of the U.S. intelligence community, still serves an important function in coordinating with and supporting state local intelligence and counterterrorism efforts.

It is also important to remember that countering terrorism is only one of DHS's many missions. For example, although DHS does not have the lead role combating infectious disease, it does have a number of very important responsibilities concerning health security, including coordinating the whole of government pandemic response through the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The wide variety of threats and challenges facing the U.S. in the present suggests that DHS is more important today than ever, although it should consider refocusing its missions around threats such as pandemics, critical infrastructure, and climate change.⁹²

⁹⁰ Geneva Sands. (2021, July 9). "New DHS intel chief installed at office plagued by Trump-era controversy," *CNN*, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/09/politics/dhs-intel-office-trump-era-controversy/index.html>.

⁹¹ Matt Ford. (2018, February 21). "Dismantle the Department of Homeland Security," *The New Republic*, <https://newrepublic.com/article/147099/dismantle-department-homeland-security>.

⁹² Warrick; Durkovich. *Future of DHS Project: Key Findings and Recommendations*.