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Anarchist/Left-Wing Violent Extremism in American: Trends in Radicalization, Recruitment, and Mobilization

National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center

Program on Extremism, The George Washington University

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The Program on Extremism at George Washington University provides analysis on issues related to violent and non-violent extremism. The Program spearheads innovative and thoughtful academic inquiry, producing empirical work that strengthens extremism research as a distinct field of study. The Program aims to develop pragmatic policy solutions that resonate with policymakers, civic leaders, and the general public. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security or George Washington University. This material is based upon work supported by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security under Grant Award Number 20STTPC00001-01

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Program on Extremism
2000 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20006
www.extremism.gwu.edu

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Anarchist/left wing violent extremism, often referred to in United States government parlance with the catch-all term “anarchist violent extremism” (AVE), has a long-standing history in the U.S. The political climate in recent years has intensified focus, interest, and controversy surrounding the activities of specific left-wing extremist currents. Despite this, there is a dearth of quality, impartial, and non-partisan research on these groups and the individual violent extremists associated with them.

This paper attempts to situate AVE within the broader landscape of domestic violent extremist (DVE) threats facing the U.S. and chart the evolution of violent plots with a nexus to AVEs. A recent Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) joint report that reviewed significant domestic terrorism incidents in the U.S. between 2015 and 2019 found that AVEs were among the extremist groups “presenting the greatest threats of violence.”¹ Reviewing these incidents and charting the potential for future escalation of AVE-related attacks, this paper highlights three trends:

- Violence committed by AVEs in this period was largely locally organized, event-driven, and/or opportunistic. However, individual AVEs inspired by the movement and its ideologies also planned mass-casualty terrorist attacks, predominantly against law enforcement, private property, and those they associate with opposing violent extremist groups.
- Individual AVEs also demonstrated interest in similar activities as other DVE groups—such as foreign fighter travel, disrupting government and/or electoral activities, and terrorism financing.
- Ongoing changes in the political, social, and economic climate in the U.S., as well as changes in the makeup, strength, and doctrines of other American domestic extremist groups, have the potential to escalate the frequency and lethality of violence committed by AVEs in the immediate future.

Introduction

The Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI)'s 2021 threat assessment for domestic violent extremism (DVE) defines anarchist violent extremists (AVE) as “DVEs who oppose all forms of capitalism, corporate globalization, and governing institutions, which are perceived as harmful to society.”² AVE is a term of art utilized by the U.S. government for the specific purpose of distinguishing anarchist violent extremists from those holding constitutionally-protected anarchist views. The government’s definition of AVE encompasses anarchists and those holding other left-wing violent extremist ideologies who conduct or threaten to conduct activities that are harmful to humans in violation of state or federal laws, and otherwise meet the definition of “domestic terrorism” as specified in 18 U.S. Code 2331 (5).³ Within the U.S. government’s classification of domestic violent extremists, AVEs are considered a sub-category of anti-government and anti-authority violent extremists (AGAAVE), along with militia violent extremists (MVE), sovereign citizen violent extremists (SCVE), and several other sub-groups.⁴

The above assessments, and their related definitional bases, do not constitute a major change in the way that U.S. federal law enforcement or the U.S. Intelligence Community view domestic violent extremist threats, but they do clarify several important facets of the current threat picture. First and foremost, the range of domestic extremist ideologies and movements included in the document reflect the fractured nature of the threat.⁵ Concluding that a range of DVE groups pose an “elevated threat” to the homeland in 2021, the document singles out racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists (RMVE) as the most likely movement to conduct mass-casualty attacks against civilians and militia violent extremists as the most likely to target law enforcement and government personnel.⁶ Nevertheless, it argues that a range of factors—including the use of social media, perceived government overreach, and events bringing together multiple, opposing DVE persuasions—have the potential to make all DVE sub-categories more frequent and lethal.⁷ This paper examines the potential for these trends, as well as other developments in the political landscape in the U.S., to affect AVE actors, groups, and movements, resulting in increased violence on behalf of AVEs.

Violent anarchism is one of the original strains of domestic violent extremism and terrorism in the U.S. and in the West.⁸ At the turn of the 20th century, anarchist violence was an endemic problem in a variety of countries throughout Europe and

North America, constituting what scholars term the “first wave” of modern terrorism.⁹ During the first two decades of the 1900s, anarchist revolutionaries seeking the destruction of modern society conducted dozens of assassinations and terrorist attacks throughout the U.S..¹⁰ Most infamously, anarchists were responsible for the 1901 assassination of President William McKinley and a spree of bombings targeting prominent political figures and businesspeople planned by supporters of the Italian anarchist figure Luigi Galleani between 1914 and 1920.¹¹ The campaign of violence by anarchists also played a fundamental role in the establishment of the modern Federal Bureau of Investigation and its early counterterrorism mission.¹²

At various points in time in the 20th century, the U.S. would face periodic threats from left-wing violent extremist groups, some of which incorporated anarchist thought into their worldview. These groups waxed and waned in popularity in reaction to changes in the American political climate. Notable 20th century examples include the Weather Underground Organization, a splinter from the student-led anti-Vietnam War movement, conducted arsons and bombings of prominent government buildings (including the U.S. Capitol) in opposition to the U.S. war in Vietnam.¹³ Since that time, the FBI has assessed that AVEs—as their name suggests—tends to avoid the traditional hierarchies, leadership structures, and organization that characterizes other DVE groups.¹⁴ Instead, AVEs prefer small-cell activities, organize violence to coincide with or target major events (“political conventions, economic and financial summits, environmental meetings, and the like”), and tend to prefer violence against property.¹⁵ The FBI claims that AVEs “damage and vandalize property, riot, set fires, and perpetrate small-scale bombings.”¹⁶ These preferences are apparent in several AVE-related incidents that occurred in the past several decades—including riots at the 1999 World Trade Organization conference in Seattle, WA, the 2008 Republican National Convention in Minneapolis, and during the “Occupy” movement in the early 2010s.¹⁷

In recent years, violence committed by AVE groups and individuals has become a politically contentious topic. Balancing efforts to counter AVE with other domestic counterterrorism priorities has proven difficult for recent administrations, leading to pushes to either overplay or downplay the nature of the threat posed by AVE groups. These difficulties escalated during the latter years of the Trump presidential administration, which largely labeled the threat from AVE as the provenance of antifascist activists (or, as they are more commonly known, “antifa”).¹⁸ The Trump

administration made constant pledges to designate “antifa” as a terrorist organization, and in the fall of 2020 then-Attorney General William Barr issued a memorandum designating New York City, Portland, Oregon, and Seattle as “anarchist jurisdictions.”¹⁹ Defenders of these proposed policies pointed to violent incidents committed by AVEs; opponents highlighted the relative infrequency of AVE attacks (especially as compared to other DVE groups) and pointed to the infeasibility of designating a domestic ideological movement as a foreign terrorist organization.²⁰

By certain metrics, such as human casualties and frequency of attacks, the violence committed by AVE actors in the past decade pales in comparison to other categories of violent extremists.²¹ Nevertheless, this dynamic is subject to change, and ongoing trends in American society could lead to increased frequency and lethality of AVE attacks. Moreover, understanding how AVE groups and actors interact with other violent extremist elements in the U.S. can aid in understanding the overall domestic terrorism threat picture. To this end, this report attempts to trace a preliminary picture of the threat posed by American AVEs today, with the goal of situating these actors within the broader spectrum of domestic violent extremism in the U.S. Building on existing literature by utilizing federal law enforcement assessments, court documents, and interviews with law enforcement and extremism researchers, it evaluates three trends in contemporary anarchist violent extremism in the U.S. These trends help demonstrate the similarities and differences between AVE and other domestic extremist groups, and chart the potential for movement-level radicalization.

Roadblocks to Effective Research on American Anarchist/Left-Wing Violent Extremism

After September 11, 2001, academic research on terrorism and violent extremism in the U.S. increasingly narrowed its focus towards jihadist extremism and, albeit to a lesser extent and more recently, racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism.²² Evaluating the state of the global terrorism research agenda by the subjects of research, Bart Schuurman found that this shift substantially decreased the number of studies on other forms of violent extremism.²³ From 2007 to 2016, the least-researched trends in terrorism included paramilitary and criminal groups using terrorism as a method, ecoterrorists, and single-issue terrorism.²⁴ Notably, while left-wing terrorism was the third-most researched trend, Schuurman claims that the

bulk of studies in this field cover pre-2001 left-wing terrorism (e.g., contemporary studies of Marxist-Leninist terrorist organizations during the Cold War or 19th-century Russian anarchist terrorism) and/or do not focus on left-wing terrorism in the U.S.²⁵

This trend in global research on terrorism and extremism leave a dearth of quality analyses on post-2001 left-wing extremism in the U.S.—including anarchist violent extremism—in its wake. Even fewer examine more contemporary trends, focusing on the development of these groups in the past five years. Indeed, a handful of scholars have recently conducted studies on anarchist extremism, using primary-source material to assess the potential for group- or individual-level radicalization to violence. Recent studies and commentaries by Copsey and Merrill, Kenney and Clarke, Windisch et al., Logan and Ligon, Koch, Fritz and Young, Hwang, and Gartenstein-Ross et. al. explore various aspects of anarchist violent extremism in the U.S. in recent years, from the trajectories of radicalization and deradicalization to the potential for AVE to participate in violence, attack-planning, and foreign fighter travel.²⁶

Sadly, some research on contemporary American AVE movements in recent years has been heavily impacted by partisan polemics, partiality, and the political environment under which the research took place. This has particularly been the case with several recent books on anarchist violent extremism which clearly follow the authors' political agendas. On one hand, several recent popular books extol the virtues of anarchist groups in the U.S. by painting them as necessary to respond to right-wing extremist groups' increased violent activity while denying outright any linkage between the groups and violent actors.²⁷ Their authors are not neutral adjudicators, but rather long-time participants in the movements. On the other hand, right-wing commentators have authored their own texts that heavily inflate the threat from anarchism and left-wing terrorism, and often attempt to tie these movements to their partisan adversaries.²⁸

Meanwhile, four issues are potentially driving researchers of terrorism and political violence in the U.S. away from studying AVE and other left-wing violent extremist causes. First, the toxic political dynamics of the past few years in the U.S. are at least in part to blame. Many researchers consider study of AVE to be a “third rail,” entailing ostracization, backlash, or other negative perceptions against those who

assess AVE as part of a multivalent threat picture from violent extremism in the U.S.²⁹ Unfortunately, there is a perception that the negative repercussions for researchers studying left-wing extremism may not only involve smear campaigns, loss of professional reputation, or social isolation within academic circles, but also may provoke harmful responses by left-wing extremists themselves.³⁰ Like other categories of domestic violent extremists, AVE groups and movements have doxed, targeted, and threatened retaliation against those who attempt to conduct research on the threat.³¹

This dynamic appears to be mainly limited to the American political climate; in many European countries academic researchers are largely able to study left-wing extremism without significant political backlash.³² Relatedly, there is a stronger consensus within European law enforcement and intelligence agencies that left-wing extremism constitutes a significant domestic terrorism threat.³³ For instance, each edition of Europol's yearly public terrorism threat assessment dedicates an entire chapter to left-wing and anarchist extremism.³⁴ The 2021 Terrorism Situation and Trends (TE-SAT) report assessed that "left-wing and anarchist extremist groups and individuals [continue] to pose a threat to public order in a number of EU Member States" and that several countries' intelligence services expected an escalation in the violent activities of left-wing extremists, particularly violent anarchists.³⁵

Second, some studies suggest that personal biases of researchers and the organizations they represent may be causing analysts to underestimate or downplay the threat from anarchist violent extremism. In a concerning trend that may be affecting the overall research agenda to examine the diverse nature of the extremist threat to the U.S., some signs show that these political dynamics have seeped into some of the major databases that researchers use to evaluate incidents of terrorism in the U.S.³⁶ In a recent study, Allison found that several datasets on terrorism and political violence since 9/11 either systematically omitted cases of left-wing violence or alternatively, miscoded their perpetrators under other ideological categories even when some evidence suggests they were partially driven by left-wing or AVE-related motivations.³⁷ While it is important to note that this does not invalidate the overall trendline in the data—that right-wing extremist groups currently pose the largest threat of conducting mass-casualty attacks in the U.S.

—“the disproportionate under- and miscoding of left-wing attacks... highlights analysts’ duty to guard against bad data and personal bias.”³⁸

Third, commentary by several analysts of domestic violent extremism on AVE during the past few years is overwhelmingly concentrated on one specific issue: responding to comments made by the Trump administration that it was planning to designate antifa as a terrorist organization.³⁹ The arguments made in response to the proposed policy detail why the administration did not have a legal mechanism to designate a domestic terrorist organization, that Antifa was a movement and not a concrete organization, and that little evidence existed that Antifa as a group encouraged its followers to conduct terrorist attacks or mass-casualty violence.⁴⁰

These arguments, however, are non sequiturs to determining the threat posed by AVE, and when evaluated in tandem with some of the same analysts’ commentary on other DVE groups and threats, it raises concerns that they are prone to analytical error or bias in evaluating AVE. For instance, the increase in violence from racially/ethnically motivated violent extremists in recent years coincided with the decentralization of the movements they represent; the most lethal attacks of the past several years were all perpetrated by individuals who lacked connections to any single group but instead were inspired by the movement’s ideas to conduct violence.⁴¹ If as a whole, anarchist violent extremism is “just an idea” or “a movement, not an organization” as some commentators have claimed in their response to potential terrorism designations, most studies of DVE movements would suggest that these factors would make AVE increasingly lethal.⁴² Missing from many of these commentaries is also a differentiation between the threat posed by anarchist groups and the movement as a whole—which may still be minor—and the threat from individual violent extremists inspired by anarchist ideologies.

In addition, aspects of the nature of AVE violence also entail difficulties for researchers in comparing the threat to other DVE groups. AVE, like other groups within the AGAAVE category (e.g. anti-government militias and sovereign citizens), have historically been less likely to pose a threat of conducting mass-casualty terrorist attacks—although the ideas that they propagate and tactics they espouse can sometimes result in sporadic campaigns of violence that leave destruction in their wake.⁴³ This is due to a difference in orientation and the formation of us/them dichotomies: AGAAVEs view the main targets of their struggle as governmental

actors, whereas other categories of extremists select groups within the public as targets. Therefore, the comparison between AVE and RMVE that is present in many commentaries that evaluate AVE can unintentionally distort the nature of AVE activity by comparing it to an unlike group. Similar analytic problems emerge when comparing unlike targets. While few would argue that property destruction, a popular method of AVE violence, is morally or ethically equivalent to murder or maiming human beings, its effects still must be included in threat calculus.⁴⁴ This creates an additional barrier to situating AVE within the broader scope of DVE.

Current Trends in Anarchist Violent Extremism in the United States

Trend 1: Increased mass-casualty attack planning by AVEs

During the past 20 years, violent activities conducted by anarchist extremists typically have not occurred in the form of mass-casualty terrorist attacks. Instead, violence on behalf of AVE causes usually involves one of three prominent strategies used by groups and individuals within the anarchist movement. The first is violent direct action, or the utilization of force against persons or property in order to disrupt the normal proceedings of institutions (such as capitalism, the state, or opposing ideological movements) that are in opposition to anarchist causes.⁴⁵ In addition, AVE groups employ self-defense and alternative policing components, most commonly seen in their use of the autonomous zone tactic. Anarchists create autonomous zones to “[liberate] an area (of land, of time, of imagination)” and restrict access to government authorities, especially law enforcement, through physical force.⁴⁶ Finally, AVEs engage in violent confrontations at protests, especially mobilizing in increasing numbers against right-wing extremist rallies and counter-protests as part of “black blocs” in which protestors wear all black clothing to prevent identification.⁴⁷

As a result of the prominence of these tactics, violence by AVE groups tends to be localized to particular geographic areas with longstanding histories of violent anarchism, driven by major political or social events, and more often occurs during protests, rallies, and other organized non-violent activities. Data show that exceptions to this norm during the past ten years were rare, but still occurred. For instance, a 2021 joint Strategic Intelligence Assessment from the FBI and DHS that provides data on over 80 FBI-designated significant domestic terrorism incidents that occurred in the U.S. between 2015 and 2019 assesses that there were seven

related significant domestic terrorism incidents with a nexus to anarchist extremism during the period.⁴⁸ This confirms that AVE-related significant terrorism incidents during this timeframe were relatively infrequent, especially in comparison to other DVE categories.

Overall, AVE violence appeared to be less lethal than other groups. None of the seven AVE-related incidents resulted in deaths, although collectively, the actions resulted in several dozen injuries and significant property damage.⁴⁹ *Figure 1* situates the number of AVE significant domestic terrorism incidents between 2015 and 2019 alongside those perpetrated by other DVE groups.⁵⁰ From this analysis, it is clear that AVE violence during this time period cannot compare in frequency or lethality to violent attacks committed by RMVE groups.⁵¹ For instance, 42 significant domestic terrorism incidents between 2015 and 2019 were perpetrated by RMVEs, more than half of the FBI’s database.⁵² While the FBI does not include casualty figures, another assessment finds that RMVE-inspired attacks in the same time period killed over 60 people.⁵³

Figure 1: FBI-Designated Significant Domestic Terrorism Incidents by Ideology, 2015-2019⁵⁴

Domestic Violent Extremism (DVE) Category	Number of Incidents
Racially/Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremism (RMVE)	42
Anti-Government/Anti-Authority Violent Extremism (AGAAVE)	31
● Militia Violent Extremism (MVE)	12
● Sovereign Citizen Violent Extremism (SCVE)	10
● <i>Anarchist Violent Extremism (AVE)</i>	7
● Other AGAAVE	2
Animal Rights/Environmental Violent Extremism	7
Abortion-Related Violent Extremism	1
Other DVE	4
Total	85

Yet, as the chart above shows, comparing AVE to other extremist sub-groups of the AGAAVE category may be potentially more helpful. The FBI report includes 31 significant domestic terrorism incidents related to a litany of AGAAVE causes, including 12 related to sovereign citizen violent extremism (SCVE), 10 related to militia violent extremism (MVE), and one related to the Puerto Rican nationalist movement.⁵⁵ AVE incidents do not only occur at similar frequencies to other types of AGAAVE-motivated violence, but are directed at similar targets—namely, individuals and property associated with government, law enforcement, or members of opposing extremist movements.⁵⁶

A review of the seven AVE domestic terrorism incidents between 2015 and 2019, depicted in Figure 2 below, shows a variety of methods, tactics, and targets amongst American AVEs. While several of these incidents appear to display classic event-driven hallmarks of American anarchist violent activities, such as deploying force during protests and rallies, destroying property, or targeting violence against law enforcement, there are multiple instances of mass-casualty attack planning by American anarchist extremists during this time period.

In 2015, local West Virginia anarchist Jonathan Leo Schrader (a.k.a “Hobo John”) was arrested for possessing stolen C-4 explosives.⁵⁷ The cooperating witness that sold Schrader the materiel told investigators that he mentioned a laundry list of potential targets, including a local bank, a music festival at a state forest, and a federal courthouse in Elkins, WV. He also told the witness that he planned to multiply the potential casualties from the attack by modifying an assault rifle to use on first responders at the sites of attack.⁵⁸ In trial runs to gauge law enforcement response, Schrader used C-4 to detonate a tree stump, and planted a fake explosive device near the West Virginia State Police barracks. After his arrest in February 2015, Schrader pleaded guilty later that year and was sentenced to eight months in prison on a federal explosives charge.⁵⁹

In December 2018, a Toledo, Ohio couple planned a series of attacks using explosive devices, targeting a local bar, a livestock farm, gas pipelines, and their workplace.⁶⁰ Self-identified anarchists Elizabeth Lecron and Vincent Armstrong’s cases are especially unique within the dataset as they appeared to draw from a variety of violent extremist and other ideological sources as influences. Lecron, for instance, glorified the 1999 Columbine high school shootings and corresponded

with the convicted white supremacist Dylann Roof, who murdered nine in a 2015 shooting at a historically Black church in Charleston, SC.⁶¹ Nevertheless, the couple told an FBI undercover employee that they were looking to “form a team” of anarchists that would be dedicated to carrying out the attack plots.⁶² The varied ideological motivations for Lecron and Armstrong’s attack planning are reminiscent of what the FBI refers to as “salad bar” extremism, wherein violent extremists form individualized blends of multiple seemingly-competing extremist ideologies to justify violence.⁶³ Thus, while on first glance AVE and other DVE categories would seem mutually exclusive (particularly at the group level), plots like Lecron and Armstrong’s suggest that at the individual level AVEs may be susceptible to other DVE groups’ ideological viewpoints on violence and mass-casualty attacks

Figure 2: Anarchist Violent Extremism-related Significant Domestic Terrorism Incidents, 2015-2019⁶⁴

Date	Location	Perpetrator(s)	FBI Description
February 2015	Elkins, WV	Jonathan Leo Schrader	"An individual was arrested and federally charged with knowing possession of stolen explosives in interstate commerce. In April 2015, the subject pleaded guilty, and in July 2015, was sentenced to eight months."
March 2015	St. Louis, MO	David Michael Hagler	"An individual was arrested and federally charged with knowing possession of a machine gun. In November 2015, the subject pleaded guilty, and in February 2016, was sentenced to one year and one day."
May 2016	Seattle, WA	Wil Casey Floyd	"An individual was arrested and federally charged with unlawful possession of destructive devices for throwing an improvised incendiary device at law enforcement officers, injuring one officer, at a May Day protest. In February 2018, the subject pleaded guilty, and in June 2018, was sentenced to 37 months."
February 2017	Berkeley, CA	Multiple	"Individuals allegedly damaged property and assaulted law enforcement officers and attendees at an event featuring a political commentator."
December 2018	Toledo, OH	Elizabeth Lecron, Vincent Armstrong	"Two individuals were arrested and federally charged for their involvement in planning terrorist attacks against a local bar and an interstate pipeline. The subjects pleaded guilty and in November and December 2019, they were sentenced to 15 years and 6 years, respectively."

April 2019	San Diego, CA	Daniel Hector Mackinnon	"An individual was arrested and federally charged with malicious destruction of a building by means of fire for driving a vehicle into a building occupied by a cleared defense contractor and then setting the vehicle on fire. In June 2019, the subject pleaded guilty, and in November 2019, was sentenced to seven years. The subject was also ordered to pay \$93,633 to the victim."
July 2019	Tacoma, WA	Willem Van Spronsen	"An individual threw incendiary devices at vehicles and outbuildings at a federal detention center and engaged responding law enforcement officers with an AR-style rifle. The subject died as a result of engagement with law enforcement."

In conjunction with the finding that individual AVEs are targeting people in addition to property, the plots above also challenge the notion that AVEs are tied to particular methods of carrying out their attack. Some plots—such as the April 2019 arsons committed by Daniel Hector MacKinnon in San Diego—bear the classic hallmarks of AVE-related violence. At the time of his 2019 arrest, MacKinnon was already a longstanding participant in violent anarchist activity, having been arrested at least twice in the 2000s for participating in a riot at the Southern Kalifornia Anarchist Alliance May Day demonstration and damaging a media vehicle during an environment protest.⁶⁵ On the morning of April 24, 2019, MacKinnon set two fires in the San Diego area—one at the private residence of a real estate developer and another at the offices of a military contractor. After the arsons, MacKinnon fled to Mexico.⁶⁶ When he attempted to return to the U.S., MacKinnon was apprehended, and was later convicted of arson and sentenced to seven years in federal prison.⁶⁷

But other plots, particularly those involving improvised explosive devices and firearms, show a potential methodological convergence with other DVE categories, who historically rely on these methods in a much greater proportion of cases than anarchists. The only AVE attack between 2014 and 2019 that resulted in death was carried out by Willem Van Spronsen, a Dutch-born Washington state anarchist in his late 60s who went by the pseudonym “Emma Durutti” on social media.⁶⁸ On July 13, 2019, Van Spronsen, who was armed with a homemade, unregistered assault rifle, launched flares and threw Molotov cocktails at a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facility in Tacoma, WA.⁶⁹ After he attempted to detonate a large propane tank near the facility and pointed his gun at law enforcement, the police

opened fire and killed Van Spronsen. He had previously been arrested during a protest at the same detention facility a year prior, and was a self-declared anarchist who participated in the Occupy Wall Street protests and the Puget Sound John Brown Gun Club, a left-wing militia group.⁷⁰ A manifesto authored by Van Spronsen, which circulated on anarchist social media prior to the attack, claims that he “[was] antifa” and that he would “regret...[missing] the rest of the revolution.”⁷¹

Overall, while mass-casualty attack planning by AVEs did not occur at the same rate as other categories of DVE groups or result in similar casualty figures between 2014 and 2019, it is a phenomenon that still requires observation. As political and societal factors drive other domestic violent extremist groups towards large-scale attack planning, it is incumbent upon analysts of domestic terrorism to understand whether these factors will also affect anarchist violent extremists. While the data do not cover activity in 2020 or 2021, subsequent studies within the past two years have documented upticks in flashpoints for violence that mobilized AVE to conduct violence.⁷² In conjunction, aspects of the recent cases above suggest that individuals within AVE milieus may be increasingly likely in the future to consider planning mass-casualty attacks, given the societal and political factors at play.

Trend 2: Increased foreign fighter travel, disruption of government activities, and financing by AVEs

While cases of AVE engaging in these types of activities, typically associated with other DVE threats in the U.S., are few and far between, their growing frequency raises the potential that certain conditions could cause group-level radicalization. During the past few years, AVE actors utilized “playbooks” that appear to mirror the *modi operandi* of their counterparts in other extremist groups. For instance, select cases involve longtime participants in the anarchist movement traveling overseas to join militant groups as foreign fighters, a trend that is most commonly associated with homegrown violent extremists but also to a more limited extent in U.S. RMVE groups.⁷³ Others involve AVE staging attacks on government and law enforcement targets or forming armed militant groupings with the goal of disrupting the normal procedure of the American political system or to foment the collapse of society altogether. These methods run parallel to attempts by AGAAVE groups—particularly militia violent extremists and the so-called “boogaloo” movement, which believes in the prosecution of violence as a catalyst for a broader societal conflict.⁷⁴ To support

these activities, AVE use social media and online financing tools, oftentimes in a similar way as other DVEs.⁷⁵

One recent example synthesizes each of these elements in a single case. In May 2021, Daniel Alan Baker was found guilty by a federal court in Florida of multiple counts of transmitting interstate threats, including threats to kill or injure.⁷⁶ He was sentenced in October 2021 to 44 months in prison. Baker, a self-described “anarchist...[who] want[s] to watch capitalist society burn,” attempted to recruit others to arm themselves against right-wing protestors, militias, and state and federal law enforcement presence who were planning to protest at the Florida state Capitol building in the wake of the January 6, 2021 siege of the U.S. Capitol.⁷⁷ Envisioning a similar riot in Tallahassee, Baker intended to provoke right-wing demonstrators to “let them fight the cops and take the building,” at which point an armed direct action group led by Baker would encircle their opponents and open fire.⁷⁸

An FBI investigation uncovered several unique facets of Baker’s history that set his case apart from many AVE investigations. First, Baker had military experience, both in the U.S. armed forces as well as for a foreign non-state actor.⁷⁹ He received an other-than-honorable discharge in 2007 after enlisting as an airborne infantryman, but went AWOL before he was scheduled to be deployed to Iraq.⁸⁰ The FBI found that after the discharge, Baker was “homeless and unemployed” between 2008 and 2017, working occasional shifts as a security guard in the Tallahassee area.⁸¹

In 2017, however, Baker traveled to Syria to join the People’s Protection Units (YPG), a Kurdish militant group. At the time Baker joined, the YPG was primarily fighting against the Turkish military after its 2017 incursion into Syria.⁸² Baker claimed that he was responsible for training YPG militants and that he served as a sniper; sources told the FBI that when Baker returned to the U.S. in the spring of 2019, he was planning to kill Turkish soldiers that were stationed in the U.S. for training.⁸³

After returning to the U.S., Baker served as a self-styled wandering tactical trainer for AVE direct action groups participating in protests against law enforcement throughout the country.⁸⁴ His social media presence detailed several methods for incapacitating police riot teams with homemade weapons.⁸⁵ In the summer of 2020, as protests erupted in several American cities over the killings of unarmed Black people by law enforcement, Baker traveled to Nashville, Tennessee and Seattle,

Washington to participate in demonstrations.⁸⁶ In Seattle, he joined the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest/Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHOP/CHAZ), an effort by local anarchists to seize and occupy several city blocks and prevent the police from entering.⁸⁷ The short existence of the CHOP/CHAZ was marred by violent incidents, including several shootings and a truck-ramming attack.⁸⁸

The protests during the summer of 2020 appeared not to have satisfied Daniel Baker's desire for violent revolution. In an article detailing the downfall of the CHOP/CHAZ movement, Baker is quoted, highlighting the difference between his experiences with the YPG and in the protests and arguing for peaceful civil rights protestors to pursue violence.⁸⁹ "I told them, if they really wanted a revolution, we needed to get AKs and start making bombs," Baker complained, "no one listened to me."⁹⁰

Like the right-wing extremists he opposed, the 2020 presidential election appears to have served as an accelerant for Baker's mobilization to violent action. "God I hope the right tries a coup Nov. 3rd," Baker wrote on Facebook in anticipation of the election, "cuz I'm so fucking down to slay enemies again."⁹¹ In the months that followed, Baker repeatedly exhorted his followers on social media to "gear up" in anticipation for the election fallout, which he believed would be the predicate of a second civil war. "Trump still plans on a violent militant coup," Baker wrote in December of 2020. "If you don't have guns you won't survive 2021."⁹²

In the aftermath of the January 6th siege of the U.S. Capitol, Baker was temporarily banned from Facebook after encouraging his followers to identify and attack individuals who were alleged to have been involved in the siege.⁹³ When he returned from the ban, Baker changed his profile picture several times, using images of him posing with an AK-47 to others in front of YPG and Antifascist Action flags.⁹⁴ He also created an event on Facebook scheduled for January 17, 2021 called "Defend Tallahassee," where he detailed his plans to simultaneously attack right-wing protestors and police at the Florida state Capitol, claiming that the protestors were going to stage "an armed coup [that] can only be stopped by an armed community! If you're afraid to die fighting the enemy, stay in bed and live."⁹⁵ In conjunction with threats of violence against the demonstrators, Baker attempted to purchase a firearm and additionally conducted online searches about law enforcement presence at the state capitol.⁹⁶

Baker was arrested prior to the planned event in January 2021. His case contains evidence that individual AVEs, in response to the current political environment in the U.S., may be increasingly inclined to mirror the behaviors and processes of their counterparts in other domestic violent extremist groups. As federal authorities continue to assess that American extremist groups representing “a range of ideologies” will likely become “galvanized” by contemporary political and social events, it is unlikely that anarchist extremist groups will be immune to these factors.⁹⁷ As Baker’s case demonstrates, their response may include behaviors that, while not historically associated with American AVEs, are part of the “new normal” of operational planning across DVE categories.

Trend 3: Polarization in the United States may escalate lethality and frequency of AVE-related terrorism

In conjunction, the previous trends suggest that violence committed by American anarchist violent extremists is largely event-driven, opportunistic, perpetrated by individuals rather than groups, and focused on specific ideological targets rather than attempting to cause mass human casualties. These traits parallel other groups in the anti-government/anti-authority violent extremism (AGAAVE) category, in which the U.S. Intelligence Community and federal law enforcement situate AVEs.⁹⁸ However, in isolated occasions during the past half-decade, individuals associated with the anarchist movement have deviated from these trends and pursued tactics and methods atypical of AVEs, including mass-casualty attack planning, foreign fighter travel, and using violence as a catalyst for societal collapse. Thus, in comparison to other categories of domestic violent extremists—for whom the planning of mass-casualty violence is both the focal point of group activities as well as the most common outcome of individual-level radicalization—today’s anarchist violent extremists in the U.S. pose a relatively lower risk of conducting large-scale terrorist attacks.

Nevertheless, this assessment is impermanent. As observers have noticed with the rise in attacks committed by other domestic violent extremists over the past two decades, specific climates of social, political, and group-level circumstances can create the conditions for group-level mobilization to violence.⁹⁹ Previously, American anarchist violent extremists have pursued mass-casualty attacks as a theory of change; the centrality of the concepts of propaganda of the deed and direct action within anarchist thought create the preconditions for their implementation.¹⁰⁰

Therefore, it is critical to reflect on whether certain trends exist in today's landscape of violent extremism in the U.S. that could cause group-level radicalization to violence or an increased frequency in AVE-related mass casualty attack plots.

In this regard, three dynamics that exist today have the potential to metastasize, generating a greater push for violence committed on behalf of AVE ideologies and movements. The first is the growing influence of accelerationism in American extremist thought writ large.¹⁰¹ While the term "accelerationism" is for many a moniker that reflects a core goal of many violent extremists, in this context it refers specifically to the idea that the furtherance of violent action is necessary to "exploit contradictions intrinsic to a political system to 'accelerate' its destruction."¹⁰² In recent years, the use of violence as a harbinger for the collapse of American society and the establishment of a new civil order has been a core element of right-wing AGAAVE and RMVE groups, including the aforementioned "boogaloo" movement and so-called "Siegist" neo-Nazi movements like the Atomwaffen Division.¹⁰³

Regardless of the ends for which it is used, accelerationism as a concept is "ideologically agnostic," and much of its underlying philosophies emerged from the works of anarchist ideologues who envisioned violence and disruption as necessary tactics to cause the internal collapse of capitalism and civil society.¹⁰⁴ The experiences of anarchist groups outside the United States that have endorsed or adopted tenets of accelerationist thought also may influence groups within the United States.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, it is not impossible that American AVEs, viewing political engagement and demonstrations as fruitless, could increasingly incorporate accelerationist ideologies into their thinking. It remains to be seen which political trends could promote this shift, but if it were the case, a greater proportion of AVEs could conclude that violent attacks are the only possible method of attaining change. Like Daniel Baker—who exhorted his followers to "gear up" in preparation for what he saw as an impending civil war and societal collapse—other AVE who incorporate elements of accelerationist philosophy into their doctrines could make the movement a much larger threat to perpetrate large-scale violence.¹⁰⁶

Another trend that could encourage further violence by AVEs is reciprocal radicalization. Initially presented as an explanation for concomitant increases in Islamist and right-wing violent extremism, reciprocal radicalization occurs in situations where opposing extremist groups grow increasingly violent against one

another in an attempt to outbid competitors and retaliate against their opponents.¹⁰⁷ Today, in the United States, reciprocal radicalization at the micro-level between left-wing and right-wing extremists is apparent in street violence during protests between right-wing AGAAVE and RMVE groups on one side and AVEs on the other, such as the spontaneous and frequent clashes between antifa activists, Proud Boys, and other right-wing groups in Portland, Oregon.¹⁰⁸ As more right-wing AGAAVE and RMVE groups shift their focus from political engagement and demonstrations to mass violence, it is possible that AVE groups will take the same path.

Finally, due to the historic reactionary nature of anarchist violence in the United States, ongoing developments related to current political and societal events could prompt a greater number of individuals within the anarchist movement to pursue attacks. Historically, drivers of violent campaigns by American anarchists include events related to economic globalization (most notably after the 1999 World Trade Organization conference in Seattle), law enforcement-involved killings, and issues involving the perception of a U.S. “military-industrial complex,” particularly related to U.S. military interventions and arms sales to foreign countries (especially Israel and its allies).¹⁰⁹ Based on historical developments in anarchist violent extremism, a major political or social event that fits into one of these categories in the near future could lead to violent responses from anarchist groups.¹¹⁰

Anarchist and left-wing extremist groups have historically utilized prominent incidents of right-wing extremist violence to mobilize their followers and encourage them to take violent actions in defense. Thus, the recent uptick in violence perpetrated by right wing extremists in the U.S. may suggest that a continuation of violent activity by AVEs should be expected over the coming years. While the recent past in the U.S. may inform us about the contours and parameters of AVE-related violence, anarchist groups in Europe and elsewhere overseas have pursued more extreme methods including letter bombs and shootings.¹¹¹ Whether such tactics will also be pursued by American anarchists in the future remains unclear, and largely depends on how AVE groups respond to ongoing social and political developments. Therefore, while AVEs in the U.S. today pose a comparatively smaller risk of perpetrating mass casualty attacks than other American violent extremists, there is no guarantee that this assessment will apply to future iterations and evolutions of what is arguably one of the primordial American extremist movements.

Notes

¹ “Strategic Intelligence Assessment and Data on Domestic Terrorism.” 2021. Federal Bureau of Investigation, May 2021. <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/fbi-dhs-domestic-terrorism-strategic-report.pdf/view>

² “Domestic Violent Extremism Poses Heightened Threat in 2021.” 2021. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI). <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/UnclassSummaryofDVEAssessment-17MAR21.pdf>.

³ 18 U.S. Code 2231 (5) defines “domestic terrorism” as “activities that involve acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any State; appear to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping; and occur primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States.” *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Sanborn, Jill. 2021. “Violent Extremism and Domestic Terrorism in America: The Role and Response of the Department of Justice.” Statement Before the House Appropriations Committee, Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies Federal Bureau of Investigation. April 29, 2021. <https://www.fbi.gov/news/testimony/violent-extremism-and-domestic-terrorism-in-america-the-role-and-response-of-the-department-of-justice>; Hoffman, Bruce, and Jacob Ware. 2020. “The Terrorist Threat from the Fractured Far Right.” Lawfare. November 1, 2020. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/terrorist-threat-fractured-far-right>; Hughes, Seamus, and Devorah Margolin. 2019. “The Fractured Terrorism Threat to America.” Lawfare. November 10, 2019. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/fractured-terrorism-threat-america>.

⁶ ODNI, “Domestic Violent Extremism Poses Heightened Threat in 2021.”

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⁹ Rapoport, David. 2019. “The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism.” In *Transnational Terrorism*, by Steven M. Chermak and Joshua Freilich. London, UK: Routledge.

¹⁰ Jones, “Anarchist Terrorism in the United States.”

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Harris, John W. 1987. “Domestic Terrorism in the 1980’s.” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* 56 (10): 5–13.

¹⁴ “Anarchist Extremism.” 2010. FBI. 2010. https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2010/november/anarchist_111610/anarchist_111610.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Bjelopera, Jerome. 2017. “Domestic Terrorism: An Overview.” Congressional Research Service. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/R44921.pdf>.

¹⁸ It should be noted that despite many popular sources using the terms interchangeably, this paper distinguishes between the subject of this report, anarchist violent extremists (AVEs), and antifascists (also known as “antifa”). According to the Congressional Research Service, “antifa” refers to individuals who “view themselves as part of a protest tradition that arcs back to opposition groups in Nazi Germany and fascist Italy prior to World War II,” but notes that “the U.S. antifa movement appears to be decentralized, consisting of independent, radical, like-minded groups and individuals...its tenets can echo the principles of anarchism, socialism, and communism. Members do not necessarily adhere to just the tenets of these philosophies, however.” Because there are members of antifa who are 1) not anarchists and/or 2) do not believe in the utilization of violence to achieve the goals of the movement, “anarchist violent extremist” is not synonymous with “antifa.” For more on this distinction, please see Sacco, Lisa. 2020. “Are Antifa Members Domestic Terrorists? Background on Antifa and Federal Classification of Their Actions.” Congressional Research Service, June 9, 2020. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/IF10839.pdf>

¹⁹ Smith, Allan. 2020. “Trump Says He Will Designate Antifa a Terrorist Organization as GOP Points Fingers at Extremists.” NBC News. May 31, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/trump-says-he-will-designate-antifa-terrorist-organization-gop-points-n1220321>; “Department Of Justice Identifies New York City, Portland And Seattle As Jurisdictions Permitting Violence And Destruction Of Property.” 2020. Department of Justice Press Release. September 21, 2020. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/department-justice-identifies-new-york-city-portland-and-seattle-jurisdictions-permitting>.

²⁰ Ries, Lora, and Cully Stimson. 2020. “Designating Antifa as a Domestic Terror Organization Is a Step in the Right Direction to Restoring Law and Order.” The Heritage Foundation. June 2, 2020. <https://www.heritage.org/crime-and-justice/commentary/designating-antifa-domestic-terror-organization-step-the-right>; “Designating Antifa as Domestic Terrorist Organization Is Dangerous, Threatens Civil Liberties.” 2020. Southern Poverty Law Center. June 2, 2020. <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2020/06/02/designating-antifa-domestic-terrorist-organization-dangerous-threatens-civil-liberties>.

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²³ Schuurman, Bart. 2019. “Topics in Terrorism Research: Reviewing Trends and Gaps, 2007-2016.” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 12 (3): 463–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2019.1579777>.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

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³⁰ *Ibid.* all.

³¹ *Ibid.* all.

³² Authors' interviews with experts on violent extremism, July 2021; Authors' interviews with American and European law enforcement officials, September 2021.

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³⁴ "EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report." 2021. Europol. Accessed October 20, 2021. <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/eu-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report>

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³⁷ *Ibid.*

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⁴³ ODNI, "Domestic Violent Extremism Poses Heightened Threat in 2021."

⁴⁴ Wood, Graeme. 2020. "The Pinnacle of Looting Apologia." *The Atlantic*. September 2, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/09/there-no-defense-looting/615925/>.

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⁴⁶ Bey, Hakim. 1985. , *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*

⁴⁷ Copsy and Merrill, "Understanding 21st-Century Militant Anti-Fascism."

⁴⁸ FBI, "Strategic Intelligence Assessment and Data on Domestic Terrorism."

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ The FBI's list of significant AVE-related domestic terrorism incidents does not treat all attacks perpetrated by left-wing violent extremists as AVE-related. Most prominently, on June 14, 2017, James Hodgkinson opened fire on a group of Republican Members of Congress and staff who were gathering to practice for the Congressional Baseball Game for Charity. Then-U.S. House Majority Whip Steve Scalise and four others were wounded; Hodgkinson, a left-wing political activist, was shot and killed by police during the attack. The FBI report claims Hodgkinson was a "domestic violent extremist" with a "personalized violent ideology." FBI, "Strategic Intelligence Assessment and Data on Domestic Terrorism."

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Clifford, "RMVE Attack Planning and United States Federal Response."

⁵⁴ Data in figure derived from FBI, "Strategic Intelligence Assessment and Data on Domestic Terrorism." Due to discrepancies in the definitions and metrics used by the FBI and civil society organizations, non-government indices of domestic terrorism incidents, such as datasets maintained by the Anti-Defamation League, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and the New America Foundation, often report differing figures of total domestic terrorism incidents. See Jones et al., "The War Comes Home,"; "Murder and Extremism in the United States in 2020." 2021. Anti-Defamation League. <https://www.adl.org/murder-and-extremism-2020>.; "What is the Threat to the United States Today." 2021. New America Foundation. <https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/terrorism-in-america/what-threat-united-states-today/>

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⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

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⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

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⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

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⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

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⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

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⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

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⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, Silva, Daniella, and Matteo Moschella. 2020. “Seattle Protesters Set Up ‘Autonomous Zone’ After Police Evacuate Precinct.” NBC News. June 11, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/seattle-protesters-set-autonomous-zone-after-police-evacuate-precinct-n1230151>.

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⁹⁷ ODNI, “Domestic Violent Extremism Poses Heightened Threat in 2021.”

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¹⁰⁸ BBC News. 2019. “Portland Rally: Far-Right and Antifa Groups Face Off,” August 18, 2019, sec. US & Canada. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-49382386>; Shepard, Katie. 2020. “Portland Police Allow Proud Boys and Antifascists to Spar with Guns in the Crowd.” *Washington Post*, August 22, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/08/22/portland-police-far-right-protest/>; “Riot Declared during Fight between Proud Boys, Antifa in Oregon City, Police Say.” 2021. KGW. June 8, 2021. <https://www.kgw.com/article/news/local/riot-declared-during-fight-between-proud-boys-antifa-in-oregon-city/283-d042e7c8-845c-49ef-9578-68ddea040d8>.

¹⁰⁹ Bjelopera, “Domestic Terrorism: An Overview”

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

111

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