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Terrorist Targeting in the Age of Coronavirus

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ABSTRACT

As the novel coronavirus has disturbed our way of life, it has also been weaponized in new ways by an established and expanding set of adversaries. Domestic extremists have proved resilient, energized, enterprising, and opportunistic amidst this crisis environment. Capitalizing on conspiracy theories and adapting to public closures, United States-based racially and ethnically motivated extremists and anti-government accelerationists have identified a new range of targets against which to direct their animus and potential violence: Asian Americans, medical facilities, and 5G infrastructure. Protecting these new targets provides an enormous challenge for law enforcement agencies, which, while contending with a reduced and sometimes virtual workforce, must uphold social distancing orders, reaffirm public confidence in government capabilities, and prepare for and protect against non-public health related threats.

Keywords: *Targeting, COVID-19, Conspiracy, Asian, Medical, 5G, Terrorism*

PUSH AND PULL FACTORS: CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND CLOSURES

Far-right and anti-government extremists in the United States have capitalized on fear arising from the COVID-19 pandemic by means of a familiar tool: conspiracy theories.¹ First, there is the widespread belief that this coronavirus outbreak is a hoax, purportedly designed to enable perceived government infringements on civil liberties, including by passing anti-gun measures while the public is distracted by the virus and by deploying mass surveillance tools.² Since April 2020, supporters of such theories have turned out in waves of protests from Michigan to Arizona, demanding that the government ease social distancing guidelines.³ Second, repurposed anti-Semitic theories have linked the pandemic to a Zionist effort at global domination, the latest manifestation of an age-old trope.⁴ Third, extremist actors have focused on the apparent role of 5G cell towers in spreading the virus, notably claiming that radiation from the towers may be causing illness.⁵ Finally, other theorists, debating the origins of the virus, question whether COVID-19 may have been a bioweapon deliberately released by the Chinese government to further its quest for global hegemony.⁶ Disturbingly, such dubious and unfounded claims have gained greater readership and legitimacy due to a newly isolated and In-

¹ Elise Thomas, "As the Coronavirus Spreads, Conspiracy Theories Are Going Viral Too," *Foreign Policy*, April 14, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/14/as-the-coronavirus-spreads-conspiracy-theories-are-going-viral-too/>.

² Shirin Ghaffary, "Facebook Will Start Nudging Users Who Have 'Liked' Coronavirus Hoaxes," *Vox*, April 16, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/4/16/21223972/facebook-coronavirus-hoaxes-warning-misinformation-avaaz>; Isaac Stanley-Becker, "Pro-Gun Activists Using Facebook Groups to Push Anti-Quarantine Protests," *Washington Post*, April 19, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/04/19/pro-gun-activists-using-facebook-groups-push-anti-quarantine-protests/>; Ben Power, "The Coronavirus Is Expanding the Surveillance State. How Will This Play Out?" *Washington Post*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/03/27/coronavirus-is-expanding-surveillance-state-how-will-this-play-out/>.

³ "US Faced with Protests amid Pressure to Reopen," *BBC News*, April 20, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52348288>.

⁴ Walter Russell Mead, "Amid the Pandemic, Anti-Semitism Flares Up," *Wall Street Journal*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/amid-the-pandemic-anti-semitism-flares-up-11586991224>.

⁵ Kim Komando, "The Great 5G Coronavirus Conspiracy," *Fox News*, April 18, 2020, <https://www.foxnews.com/tech/the-great-5g-coronavirus-conspiracy>.

⁶ David Axe, "No, the Coronavirus Is Not a Bioweapon from China," *National Interest*, April 17, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/coronavirus/no-coronavirus-not-bioweapon-china-145112>.

ternet-dependent workforce.⁷ As extremism researcher Annie Kelly noted in the *New York Times*, “As we retreat to online enclaves and obsessively check the news, our vision of reality is bound to become distorted.”⁸ With their simplistic and inculcating “us versus them” narratives, extremist-backed conspiracies are misinforming, radicalizing, and affecting the focus of terrorist attacks.

New patterns of daily life have also contributed to changing terrorist targeting. Simply put, COVID-19 has rendered mass-atrocity attacks against traditional targets futile. Sports games have been suspended, Broadway theaters closed, concerts postponed, and museums, monuments, and other tourist destinations shuttered.⁹ Typically busy streets are deserted, and mass transit is severely limited, problematized by travel restrictions and closed borders (on April 11, TSA saw 96 percent fewer passengers than the same day last year).¹⁰ States and localities have imposed “shelter-in-place” orders and curfews, allowing law enforcement to effectuate these measures. For example, a March 16 New York City Police Department memo authorized officers to charge disobedient individuals with disorderly conduct, or more serious crimes, should they interfere with police.¹¹ Those very recommendations issued to deal with coronavirus (i.e. social distancing) deny terrorists an operating environment

⁷ Annie Kelly, “Who Goes Alt-Right in a Lockdown?” *New York Times*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/opinion/coronavirus-isolation-radicalization.html>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Victor Mather, “Updates on Sports Canceled by Coronavirus,” *New York Times*, March 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/13/sports/sports-canceled-coronavirus.html>; Michael Paulson, “Broadway, Symbol of New York Resilience, Shuts Down Amid Virus Threat,” *New York Times*, March 12, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/12/theater/coronavirus-broadway-shutdown.html>; “Concerts Canceled Due To Coronavirus: Ongoing List,” *Billboard*, May 14, 2020, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/business/touring/9323647/concerts-canceled-coronavirus-list>; Stacey Lastoe, “Attractions Closed and Events Canceled amid Coronavirus Outbreak,” *CNN*, March 14, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/02/news/coronavirus-closures-tourist-attractions-and-events/index.html>.

¹⁰ Jennifer Calfas and Talal Ansari, “States Restrict Travelers from Coronavirus ‘Hot Zones,’” *Wall Street Journal*, March 29, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/states-restrict-travelers-from-coronavirus-hot-zones-11585518299>; U.S. Department of State, “Global Level 4 Health Advisory – Do Not Travel,” Accessed May 15, 2020, <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/ea/travel-advisory-alert-global-level-4-health-advisory-issue.html>; Ben Schott, “The Astonishing Drop in Air Travel, Visualized,” *Bloomberg*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-04-15/coronavirus-tsa-data-reveal-the-pandemic-effect-on-air-travel>.

¹¹ Rocco Parascandola and John Annese, “NYPD Memo: Cops Can Make Arrests If Entertainment Ban, Restaurant Rules Ignored,” *New York Daily News*, March 16, 2020, <https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/nyc-crime/ny-cops-can-arrest-to-enforce-restaurant-order-20200317-f7dku7sgyrbzgj3nydbnvm274-story.html>.

for preoperational surveillance and traditional targeting. Additionally, with flights cancelled and arrivals subject to close screening, it is dubious that global transportation infrastructure and systems will serve as a target of or vehicle for terrorism. Indeed, when elevating far-right terrorism to a “national security priority” before the House Judiciary Committee in February, FBI Director Christopher Wray noted that the greatest threat posed by lone actors is their targeting of “everyday people living their everyday lives [...] so that is a restaurant, a mall, a school, a nightclub.”¹² Without “everyday people living their everyday lives,” the specific threat of terrorists striking heavily populated locales is greatly diminished.

Struggling to find targets with large numbers of co-located people, extremists will instead likely target minority communities and newly symbolic locations. In March, John Demers, U.S. assistant attorney general for national security, asked rhetorically: “Obviously a lot of public places are less crowded, but others, like hospitals, are more crowded. Are they going to see these windows of opportunity to take advantage of?”¹³ As a series of thwarted plots have since shown, the answer is a resounding yes. As early as February, the Department of Homeland Security’s Federal Protective Service (FPS) warned of white supremacist attacks against law enforcement officers and minority communities. According to an intelligence brief from the week of February 17, white supremacists on the messaging app Telegram discussed weaponizing coronavirus and spending time in “non-white neighborhoods” with “enemies.”¹⁴ On April 1, the National Counterterrorism Center similarly warned that “public safety personnel, hospitals and establishments, such as supermarkets and pharmacies, serve the largest number of co-located individuals, making them potentially attractive targets.”¹⁵ More recently, on April 23, a Department of Homeland Security (DHS) bulletin memo suggested, “As the COVID-19 threat expands throughout the United States, the violent ex-

¹² Christopher Wray, Testimony to the United States House of Representatives Committee on the Judiciary, February 5, 2020, <https://judiciary.house.gov/calendar/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=2780>.

¹³ Betsy Woodruff Swan, “How the Coronavirus Is Reshaping Terrorists’ Attack Plans,” *POLITICO*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/27/coronavirus-terrorism-justice-department-150870>.

¹⁴ “Federal Protective Service Intelligence Brief, 17 - 21 Feb 2020,” U.S. Department of Homeland Security, March 21, 2020, <https://news.yahoo.com/federal-law-enforcement-document-reveals-white-supremacists-discussed-using-coronavirus-as-a-bioweapon-212031308.html>.

¹⁵ Mercedes Stephenson and Stewart Bell, “Violent Extremists May Exploit Coronavirus Pandemic, Target Hospitals, Threat Report Warns,” *Global News*, April 8, 2020, <https://globalnews.ca/news/6795248/extremists-may-exploit-coronavirus-pandemic-threat-report/>.

tremist threat will also continue to evolve, potentially increasing in frequency and severity.”¹⁶

THE PANDEMIC AND ITS IMPACT ON TERRORIST TARGETING

Taken together, conspiracy theories and closures of highly-trafficked and pedestrianized locales portend a pivot to three new classes of target: Asian Americans, medical facilities, and 5G infrastructure. Following COVID-19’s initial emergence in China, racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists (REMVE) have turned their focus towards a new ethnic enemy: Asian Americans. While Jews, Muslims, Latinos, and African Americans usually bear the brunt of race-based hate crimes in the United States (attacks which have by no means diminished), the Chinese origin of the virus has precipitated increased attacks on Asian Americans, which at one point soared to 100 incidents per day.¹⁷ For example, on April 12, the white supremacist group Patriot Front posted propaganda around Seattle’s International District targeting Asian American and Pacific Islander businesses.¹⁸ On April 4, a group of youths in New Jersey berated an Asian woman with racial slurs before punching her in the head, and on April 3, a Chinese restaurant owner received death threats from two phone numbers.¹⁹ The targeting of Asian Americans has not been helped by the current U.S. administration’s early insistence on calling the ill-

¹⁶ Natasha Bertrand, “DHS Warns of Increase in Violent Extremism amid Coronavirus Lockdowns,” *POLITICO*, April 23, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/23/dhs-increase-in-coronavirus-inspired-violence-205221>.

¹⁷ Sabrina Tavernise and Richard A. Opiel, “Spit On, Yelled At, Attacked: Chinese-Americans Fear for Their Safety,” *New York Times*, March 23, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/us/chinese-coronavirus-racist-attacks.html>; Alexandra Kelley, “Attacks on Asian Americans Skyrocket to 100 per Day during Coronavirus Pandemic,” *Hill*, March 31, 2020, <https://thehill.com/changing-america/respect/equality/490373-attacks-on-asian-americans-at-about-100-per-day-due-to>.

¹⁸ “Reports of Anti-Asian Assaults, Harassment and Hate Crimes Rise as Coronavirus Spreads,” *Anti-Defamation League*, May 4, 2020, <https://www.adl.org/blog/reports-of-anti-asian-assaults-harassment-and-hate-crimes-rise-as-coronavirus-spreads>;

¹⁹ Chris Sheldon, “Girl Charged with Racially Assaulting Asian Woman over Coronavirus,” *NJ.com*, April 16, 2020, https://www.nj.com/coronavirus/2020/04/girl-charged-with-racially-assaulting-asian-woman-over-coronavirus.html?utm_content=nj_twitter_njdotcom&utm_source=twitter&utm_campaign=njdotcom_sf&utm_medium=social; Eugene Driscoll, “Update: Racist Death Threats Lodged Against Seymour Restaurant,” *Valley Independent Sentinel*, April 5, 2020, https://valley.newhavenindependent.org/archives/entry/update_racist_death_threats_lodged_against_seymour_restaurant/.

ness the “Chinese virus,” despite desperate calls from experts that such framing would lead to growing xenophobia and violence.²⁰

Since the declaration of a national emergency, there have also been four known attempted attacks by individuals espousing far-right ideologies against medical facilities or care homes countrywide. On March 25, 36-year-old Timothy Wilson was shot by law enforcement after attempting to detonate a vehicle-borne improvised explosive at a medical facility in Kansas.²¹ Wilson, the subject of a months-long investigation by law enforcement, was motivated by religious, racial, and anti-government beliefs, the FBI said in a statement.²² According to an online investigation by hate and extremism researcher Nick Martin, Wilson’s Telegram profile, under the pseudonym “Werwolve 84,” included references to the National Socialist Movement (NSM), Vorherrschaft Division, and Pacific Northwest group, The Order (all three organizations call for violence against black people, the LGBTQ+ community, Jews, and other minority groups).²³ In addition to participation in the online extremist milieu, Wilson was a sworn-in member of NSM.²⁴

Wilson’s decision to target the hospital most clearly demonstrates the operational shift invoked by an already radicalized individual as a result of conspiracies and current closures. The FBI concluded that “Wilson may have also believed the additional stress on society posed by the COVID-19 pandemic provided unique opportunities to exploit.”²⁵ Although he had contemplated tar-

²⁰ Katie Rogers, Lara Jakes, and Ana Swanson, “Trump Defends Using ‘Chinese Virus’ Label, Ignoring Growing Criticism,” *New York Times*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/18/us/politics/china-virus.html>; Morgan Gstalter, “WHO Official Warns against Calling It ‘Chinese Virus,’ Says ‘There Is No Blame in This,’” *Hill*, March 19, 2020, <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/488479-who-official-warns-against-calling-it-chinese-virus-says-there-is-no-blame-in-this>. It is also worth noting that the Chinese diaspora has been targeted elsewhere, for example in Indonesia: Ulta Levenia and Alban Sciascia, “How COVID-19 Is Reshaping Terror Threats in Indonesia,” *Diplomat*, May 4, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/how-covid-19-is-reshaping-terror-threats-in-indonesia/>.

²¹ Mike Levine, “FBI Learned of Coronavirus-Inspired Bomb Plotter through Radicalized US Army Soldier,” *ABC News*, March 26, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/fbi-learned-coronavirus-inspired-bomb-plotter-radicalized-us/story?id=69818116>.

²² “FBI: Bomb Suspect Dead after Warrant Served near Kansas City,” *Associated Press*, March 25, 2020, <https://apnews.com/dbbba5249f07093dbab7a14a2d141630>.

²³ Nick R. Martin, “Heartland Terror,” *Informant*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.informant.news/p/heartland-terror>.

²⁴ “White Supremacists Respond to Coronavirus With Violent Plots and Online Hate,” *Anti-Defamation League*, March 26, 2020, <https://lasvegas.adl.org/white-supremacists-respond-to-coronavirus-with-violent-plots-and-online-hate/>.

²⁵ Levine, “FBI Learned of Coronavirus-Inspired Bomb Plotter.”

getting a school with a large population of black students, a synagogue, a nuclear plant, Walmart, and a mosque months beforehand, Wilson deviated from these plans, selecting a hospital treating virus victims in “an attempt to cause severe harm and mass casualties.”²⁶ While coronavirus conditions infected his logic vis-à-vis the target, conspiracy theories lit the final fuse, moving up his attack date from April or May to March.²⁷ Echoing many of the Internet’s anti-Semitic tropes, Wilson suggested on Telegram that the virus was engineered by Jews as a “power grab,” contending that “Jews have been playing the long game we are the only ones standing in their way.”²⁸ Although Wilson’s planned attack was the earliest known terrorist plot directed at a medical installation in the United States since the outbreak of COVID-19, Wilson was not alone in his targeting calculus.

On April 1, Eduardo Moreno, a train engineer at the Port of Los Angeles, was arrested for trying to crash a train into the USNS *Mercy*, an oil tanker repurposed into a 1,000 bed hospital ship, which was sent to alleviate the burden placed on overwhelmed hospitals.²⁹ Moreno ran the train off the end of tracks and crashed through a series of barriers before coming to rest more than 250 yards from the naval ship. Upon his arrest, Moreno told officers he was suspicious of the *Mercy* and believed it had an alternate purpose related to COVID-19 or a government takeover.

Two weeks later, on April 15, a protest—which was organized by two right-wing groups in response to Michigan’s closure and may have blocked access to Sparrow Hospital—attracted a group of Proud Boys, an extreme, right-wing

²⁶ Michael Kosnar and Phil Helsel, “FBI Says Man Killed in Missouri Wanted to Bomb Hospital,” *NBC News*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/fbi-says-man-killed-missouri-wanted-bomb-hospital-amid-coronavirus-n1169166>.

²⁷ “FBI: Raymore Man Targeted Belton Hospital in March Because of Government’s Response to Coronavirus,” *KMBC News*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.kmbc.com/article/fbi-raymore-missouri-man-targeted-belton-regional-medical-center-because-of-governments-response-to-coronavirus-coronavirus-timothy-wilson/32160366>.

²⁸ Martin, “Heartland Terror.”

²⁹ U.S. Department of Justice, “Train Operator at Port of Los Angeles Charged with Derailing Locomotive Near U.S. Navy’s Hospital Ship *Mercy*,” April 1, 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-cdca/pr/train-operator-port-los-angeles-charged-derailing-locomotive-near-us-navy-s-hospital>; Terri Moon Cronk, “USNS *Mercy*, USNS *Comfort* Receiving Patients in LA, New York City,” U.S. Department of Defense, Accessed May 15, 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2134688/usns-mercy-usns-comfort-receiving-patients-in-la-new-york-city/>.

gang.³⁰ Local radio reporting on the protest also interviewed a man who identified himself as “Phil Odinson,” whose true identity, according to news reporting, is Phil Robinson, a “prime mover in a group called the Michigan Liberty Militia, whose Facebook page features pictures of firearms, warnings of civil war, celebrations of Norse paganism, and memes ultimately sourced from white nationalist groups like Patriot Front.”³¹ The group allegedly blocked the entrance to the local hospital, though it remains unclear whether the denial of access was pre-planned or an unintended consequence of the city-wide gridlock.³² Meanwhile, that same day, Massachusetts police arrested resident John Michael Rathbun for attempting to blow up a Jewish assisted living residence with a five gallon homemade incendiary device on April 2. Similar Jewish palliative care and memory support residences exist nationwide and are all soft targets.³³ According to a Department of Justice press release, Rathbun’s target, Ruth’s House, is within one square mile of several other Jewish facilities, including three Jewish temples, a Jewish private school, and a Jewish Community Center.³⁴ Recent reporting also suggests hospitals may be under increased risk of cyber attacks, although the existence of political motives undergirding such attacks remains unclear.³⁵

Finally, while some extremists have blamed ethnic groups for spreading the virus, others focus on the apparent role of emerging technology infrastructure, with advocates claiming the specific 5G frequency spectrum facilitates transmission of the virus. False narratives about the relationship between COVID-19 and the rollout of new 5G communication networks are mushroom-

³⁰ “Chad Loder on Twitter: ‘The Michigan Proud Boys,’” Twitter, April 15, 2020, <https://twitter.com/chadloder/status/1250530116544815104>; “Proud Boys,” *Anti-Defamation League*, Accessed May 15, 2020, <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/proud-boys-0>.

³¹ Jason Wilson, “The Rightwing Groups behind Wave of Protests against Covid-19 Restrictions,” *Guardian*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/17/far-right-coronavirus-protests-restrictions>.

³² Beth LeBlanc, “Police, Health Officials Rebut Whitmer’s Claims about Ambulance Protest Problems,” *Detroit News*, April 21, 2020, <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/michigan/2020/04/21/police-rebut-whitmer-claims-ambulances-blocked-protest-traffic/5169518002/>.

³³ U.S. Department of Justice, “East Longmeadow Man Charged with Attempted Arson at Longmeadow Assisted Living Residential Facility,” April 15, 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-ma/pr/east-longmeadow-man-charged-attempted-arson-longmeadow-assisted-living-residential>.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ See, for example: Priyanka Dayal McCluskey, “As cyber attacks grow, doctors and hospitals struggle to update security measures,” *Boston Globe*, April 19, 2020, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/04/19/business/cyber-attacks-grow-doctors-hospitals-struggle-update-security-measures/>.

ming on social media, with many alleging that the electromagnetic frequencies generated by 5G towers are sucking oxygen from the air and living organisms; the respiratory distress COVID-19 patients incur is believed to be the result of 5G radiation beams intentionally fired at segments of the population.³⁶ Social media companies were slow to respond to such allegations, with Facebook acknowledging as late as April that it was “starting to remove false claims which link COVID-19 to 5G technology and could lead to physical harm.”³⁷

Conspiracy theories linking 5G to health risks are not new; websites such as InfoWars and Russian state broadcaster RT have circulated such content since 2016.³⁸ However, under the coronavirus conditions, these 5G conspiracies, peddled by QAnon and other extremists, have inspired a worrying number of attacks in the United States and Europe.³⁹ Attacks have increased concurrent with the spread of the virus.⁴⁰ A DHS intelligence report from May stated that “since December 2019, unidentified actors conducted at least five arson incidents targeting cell towers in Memphis, Tenn., that resulted in more than \$100,000 in damages.”⁴¹ Separate DHS field reporting indicates that “14 cell towers in western Tennessee, between February and April, were purposely turned off by way of disabling their electrical breakers.”⁴² Furthermore, ac-

³⁶ Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens and Blyth Crawford, “5G and the Far Right: How Extremists Capitalise on Coronavirus Conspiracies,” *GNET*, April 21, 2020, <https://gnet-research.org/2020/04/21/5g-and-the-far-right-how-extremists-capitalise-on-coronavirus-conspiracies/>.

³⁷ Josh Peter, “Cellphone Towers Attacked as Conspiracy Theory Connecting 5G and Coronavirus Gains Steam,” *USA Today*, April 6, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2020/04/06/coronavirus-5-g-conspiracy-theory-cellular-towers/2955557001/>.

³⁸ See, for example, “VIDEO: Watch Researcher Predict Virus/5G Crisis In 2018,” *InfoWars*, April 11, 2020, <https://www.infowars.com/dr-group-alex-jones-predicted-everything-happening-now-back-in-2018/>; “‘A Global Catastrophe’: Radiation Activist Warns That 5G Networks Are ‘Massive Health Experiment,’” *RT International*, February 6, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/news/450775-massive-health-experiment-5g-cancer/>.

³⁹ Ryan Broderick, “A Conspiracy Theory That 5G Is Causing The Coronavirus Is Spreading Alongside The Pandemic,” *BuzzFeed*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ryanhatesthis/conspiracy-theory-5g-coronavirus-qanon>.

⁴⁰ Kevin Chan, Beatrice Dupuy, and Arijeta Lajka, “Conspiracy Theorists Burn 5G Towers Claiming Link to Virus,” *Associated Press*, April 21, 2020, <https://apnews.com/4ac3679b6f39e8bd2561c1c8eeafd855>.

⁴¹ Josh Margolin, “Feds Warn of Attacks Related to Bogus COVID-19 Conspiracy Theory,” *ABC News*, May 16, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/feds-warn-attacks-related-bogus-covid-19-conspiracy/story?id=70721145>.

⁴² *Ibid.*

According to DHS, in April 2020, arsonists set fire to a major cell tower in Portland, Oregon.⁴³

Though there are currently fewer reported attacks on 5G infrastructure in the United States than in Europe, this trend may change.⁴⁴ The shift to more remote work and the value of 5G technology to the broader economy further incentivizes the U.S. to accelerate the deployment of 5G technologies.⁴⁵ Extremists may view continued social distancing measures, combined with the rollout of 5G cell towers, as an opportunity to rally sympathizers and conduct attacks.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The recent targeting of Asian Americans, hospitals, and 5G infrastructure has three main implications for the law enforcement and policy communities. First, law enforcement must harden vulnerable targets and prepare for the possibility that perpetrators may mask themselves (literally and figuratively) to gain entry into medical facilities. Security-minded professionals must balance the necessity of the sick to be immediately admitted with threats presented by “Trojan horse” attackers who don medical garb or police uniforms. This

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Widespread attacks on 5G cell towers in Europe have also occurred. In April 2020, about 50 arson attacks targeting 5G cell towers were reported in the U.K. alone, and telecom engineers working at those sites reported incidents of abuse 80 times. Other attacks were reported in the Netherlands, Ireland, Cyprus, and Belgium. Companies in Europe have gone so far as delaying their 5G rollout to allay community fears surrounding the new technology. See, for example: Jon Fingas, “Anti-5G Cell Tower Attacks Spread to the Netherlands,” *Engadget*, April 11, 2020, <https://www.engadget.com/anti-5g-attacks-in-netherlands-220248588.html>; Nic Fildes, Mark Di Stefano, and Hannah Murphy, “Masts under Attack as 5G Conspiracy Theory Spreads across Europe,” *Irish Times*, April 16, 2020, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/masts-under-attack-as-5g-conspiracy-theory-spreads-across-europe-1.4230435>; “Cyprus Slams ‘Fake News’ over Corona-5G Attack,” *France 24*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200415-cyprus-slams-fake-news-over-corona-5g-attack>; Harry Baldock, “Proximus Pauses 5G Deployment in Belgian City to Allay Residents Health Concerns,” *Total Telecom*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.totaltele.com/505567/Proximus-pauses-5G-deployment-in-Belgian-city-to-allay-residents-health-concerns>; Katie Collins, “Europe’s 5G Difference: Unlimited Data without a Big Surcharge,” *CNET*, July 10, 2019, <https://www.cnet.com/news/5g-in-europe-after-the-big-switch-on-its-game-on-for-the-networks/>.

⁴⁵ Todd Wasserman, “Why the Coronavirus Pandemic May Fast-Forward 5G Adoption in the US,” *CNBC*, March 20, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/20/why-the-coronavirus-pandemic-may-fast-forward-5g-adoption-in-the-us.html>; Bob Davis and Drew FitzGerald, “U.S. Pushing Effort to Develop 5G Alternative to Huawei,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 4, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-pushing-effort-to-develop-5g-alternative-to-huawei-11580831592>.

seemingly far-fetched charade is not without precedent. In 2011, white supremacist Anders Breivik, who killed 77 people in twin attacks in Norway, wore a police uniform (black trousers and a pocketed vest with the word “politi” on the right breast) to deceive his victims and first responders.⁴⁶ In 2017, ISIL militants dressed in white doctor’s coats entered the Sardar Daud Khan military hospital in Kabul, Afghanistan, slaughtering more than 30 people and injuring an additional 50.⁴⁷ More recently, on May 12, 2020, three gunmen disguised as police burst into the maternity ward of another Kabul hospital, killing 24 people, including babies and new mothers, in a methodical shooting spree.⁴⁸ Terrorists can also capitalize on mask regulations to hide their identities.⁴⁹ In fact, officials said that one of Europe’s most wanted terrorists, Abdel Majed Abdel Bary, and two of his associates, evaded detection before their April 21 arrest by wearing surgical masks.⁵⁰

Relatedly, law enforcement must recognize the heightened value that far-right, anti-government, and accelerationist terrorists might place on dual military-medical installations. These include military hospitals and clinics, which an April inspector general report elucidated can be “vulnerable to incidents of violence, sabotage or terrorism.”⁵¹ Auditors concluded that eight Defense Health Agency facilities had poor security enabling unauthorized personnel to use lost or stolen badges to enter the premises.⁵² Fences guarding generators

⁴⁶ Jacob Aasland Ravndal, “A Pre-Trial Profile of Anders Behring Breivik,” *CTC Sentinel* 5, no. 3 (March 2012), <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/a-pre-trial-profile-of-anders-behring-breivik/>; Sean Flynn, “Anders Breivik: The Full Story of Norway’s Utøya Massacre,” *GQ*, July 30, 2012, <https://www.gq.com/story/anders-behring-breivik-norway-massacre-story>.

⁴⁷ Robbie Gramer, “ISIS Fighters Disguised As Doctors Attack Kabul Hospital, Kill Dozens,” *Foreign Policy*, March 8, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/08/islamic-state-isis-afghanistan-kabul-hospital-attack-terrorism/>.

⁴⁸ Kathy Gannon and Tameem Akhgar, “US Blames Deadly Afghan Maternity Hospital Attack on ISIS-K,” *Military Times*, May 15, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/2020/05/15/us-blames-deadly-afghan-maternity-hospital-attack-on-isis-k/>.

⁴⁹ Scottie Andrew and James Froi, “States That Require Face Masks in Public,” *CNN*, April 20, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/20/us/states-that-require-masks-trnd/index.html>.

⁵⁰ “Policía Nacional on Twitter: ‘Así Detuvimos En #Almería a Uno de Los Foreign Terrorist Fighters de DAESH,’” Twitter, April 21, 2020, <https://twitter.com/policia/status/1252556938996408320>.

⁵¹ “Audit of Physical Security Controls at Department of Defense Medical Treatment Facilities,” Project No. D2019-D000AW-0136.000, U.S. Department of Defense Inspector General, April 6, 2020.

⁵² Kyle Rempfer, “Some DoD Medical Facilities Found Vulnerable to ‘Violence, Sabotage or Terrorism,’” *Military Times*, April 8, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-army/2020/04/08/some-dod-medical-facilities-found-vulnerable-to-violence-sabotage-or-terrorism/>.

and fuel storage tanks at some of the facilities were also found to be subpar. Additionally, field hospitals and other medical facilities are now partially manned by a military that has increasingly assumed humanitarian roles.⁵³ Effective protection and preparedness in the face of this new threat landscape is thus key. Although the May 2018 *DHS Soft Target and Crowded Places Security Plan Overview* can be a guideline for the public and private sectors, soft targets must be expanded beyond “sports venues, shopping venues, schools, and transportation systems” to include smaller and less conspicuous spots.⁵⁴

Second, the spate of thwarted attacks suggests that the “fame factor” is as powerful a motive as ideology. Wilson had chosen his target precisely because of “the increased [perceived] impact given the media attention on the health sector” arising from the pandemic.⁵⁵ An FBI bulletin stated that the case illustrated how white supremacists are “seeking to maximize their audience and the dissemination of their message.”⁵⁶ In the same vein, the train engineer, Moreno, told officers that he felt the urgency to carry out an attack because “[t]he whole world is watching.”⁵⁷ Indeed, repeated studies have shown that terrorists crave acknowledgement, credit, and commendation, as illustrated by the frequent practice of publishing detailed manifestos, streaming live feeds, and claiming responsibility on social media or otherwise.⁵⁸ A recent FBI study of lone-offender attackers found that 96 percent of subjects “produced

⁵³ C. Todd Lopez, “Comfort, Javits Center Open Care to COVID-19 Patients,” U.S. Department of Defense, April 7, 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2140535/comfort-javits-center-open-care-to-covid-19-patients/>.

⁵⁴ “Soft Targets and Crowded Places Security Plan Overview,” U.S. Department of Homeland Security, May 2018, https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/DHS-Soft-Target-Crowded-Place-Security-Plan-Overview-052018-508_0.pdf.

⁵⁵ Pete Williams, “Missouri man planned to bomb hospital during pandemic to get attention for white supremacist views,” *NBC News*, March 30, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/missouri-man-planned-bomb-hospital-during-pandemic-get-attention-white-n1172346>.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ U.S. Department of Justice, “Train Operator at Port of Los Angeles.”

⁵⁸ Adam Lankford and Eric Madfis, “Don’t Name Them, Don’t Show Them, But Report Everything Else: A Pragmatic Proposal for Denying Mass Killers the Attention They Seek and Detering Future Offenders,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 2 (February 1, 2018): 260–79; <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764217730854>; Jacob Ware, “Testament to Murder: The Violent Far-Right’s Increasing Use of Terrorist Manifestos,” *ICCT Policy Brief*, March 17, 2020, <https://icct.nl/publication/testament-to-murder-the-violent-far-rights-increasing-use-of-terrorist-manifestos/>; Maura Conway and Joseph Dillon, “Future Trends: Live-Streaming Terrorist Attacks?” *VOX-Pol*, Accessed May 16, 2020, https://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol_publication/Live-streaming_FINAL.pdf; Aaron M. Hoffman, “Voice and Silence: Why Groups Take Credit for Acts of Terror,” *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 5 (2010): 615–26.

writing or video intended to be viewed by others.”⁵⁹ As terrorism expert Louise Richardson wrote in *What Terrorists Want*, “There is no greater affront to terrorists than to be ignored.”⁶⁰

The death toll from any likely terrorist attack will be dwarfed by that from coronavirus, which as of this writing, stands at approximately 103,000 deaths domestically.⁶¹ But the death toll comes with a thin silver-lining. When the physical and psychological effects induced are paltry in comparison to the more pressing public health and economic concerns of the day, terrorism proves futile. Intimidating or coercing a civilian population; influencing the policy of government; or affecting the conduct of a government—the trifecta of terrorist end games (as defined by 18 USC 2331)—will not pay off in the midst of a national emergency. For this calculus to remain true, both the media and elected officials must avoid the sort of hyperbole, fear-mongering, and sensationalized stories over terrorist threats and plots that galvanize would-be attackers.

Third, the government, public, and law enforcement agencies must find ways of better countering and removing online conspiracy theories and misinformation. Theories scapegoating Asian and Jewish Americans endanger segments of the U.S. population, while those professing health implications caused by 5G imperil engineers and key American communications infrastructure. Conspiracies claiming the pandemic to be a hoax, meanwhile, undermine our national response, putting frontline workers, including law enforcement, and health care professionals, as well as elected officials trying to implement beneficial policies, at risk of infection.⁶² The free reign of misinformation on social media platforms has damaged American democracy in the past, and

⁵⁹ “A Study of Lone Offender Terrorism in the United States (1972 - 2015),” FBI Behavioral Threat Assessment Center, November 2019, <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/lone-offender-terrorism-report-111319.pdf/view>.

⁶⁰ Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat* (New York City: Random House, 2007), 198.

⁶¹ Joe Fox, Brittany Renee Mayes, Kevin Schaul, and Leslie Shapiro, “Tracking U.S. Coronavirus Deaths and Reported Cases by State,” *Washington Post*, Accessed June 2, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/national/coronavirus-us-cases-deaths/>.

⁶² Natasha Bertrand, “DHS Warns of Increase in Violent Extremism amid Coronavirus Lockdowns,” *POLITICO*, April 23, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/23/dhs-increase-in-coronavirus-inspired-violence-205221>.

better policies to address the threat are long overdue.⁶³ Crucially, effective strategies for combatting misinformation are both a tool in the fight against terrorism and in great power competition, as reports indicate foreign adversaries are playing an active role in propagating disinformation related to the virus.⁶⁴

MOVING TARGETS: KEEPING FOCUSED ON THE BULLSEYE

Regardless of whether today's terror targets are the targets of the "post-corona tomorrow," the transition period will be fraught with security challenges. If policymakers hope to flatten the curve of domestic terrorism, they must anticipate how and when social distancing measures will be relaxed. Terrorists will no doubt seek to take advantage of the popular longing for in-person entertainment, sports, and celebration by acting out and stoking fear. President Trump has outlined a roadmap for reopening over the next several weeks and months, suggesting that "we are starting the rejuvenation of our economy again."⁶⁵ Already, states across the country have begun re-opening retail stores, theaters, restaurants, gyms, and other non-essential businesses, repopulating the types of locales often favored by domestic terrorists seeking high death tolls.⁶⁶

As more of America re-opens this summer, the rush to resume public life may coincide with emblematic holidays like Independence Day and Labor Day. This simultaneity could prove especially toxic. Anti-government extremists, with momentum and support engendered by coronavirus conspiracy theories, might capitalize on a target-rich environment (with revelers out to celebrate) combined with the symbolism of a patriotic holiday; Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel acted upon this logic when he drove a truck into Nice's Promenade

⁶³ "Report of the Select Committee on Intelligence United States Senate on Russian Active Measures, Campaigns, and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election," 116th Congress, 1st Session, https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume1.pdf.

⁶⁴ Julian E. Barnes, Matthew Rosenberg, and Edward Wong, "As Virus Spreads, China and Russia See Openings for Disinformation," *New York Times*, March 28, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/28/us/politics/china-russia-coronavirus-disinformation.html>.

⁶⁵ Chris Megerian, Noah Bierman, and Eli Stokols, "Governors Will Ease Coronavirus Restrictions under White House Plan," *Los Angeles Times*, April 16, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/projects/california-coronavirus-cases-tracking-outbreak/embed/>.

⁶⁶ Sarah Mervosh, Jasmine C. Lee, Lazaro Gamio, and Nadja Popovich, "See Which States Are Reopening and Which Are Still Shut Down," *New York Times*, May 15, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/states-reopen-map-coronavirus.html>.

des Anglais on Bastille Day, France’s national day, in July 2016.⁶⁷ An attack early in the reopening timeline would no doubt make headlines, amplifying angst and agitation over leaving quarantine and resuming quotidian affairs. This nightmare scenario played out on a small scale in mid-May, when an incel-inspired extremist opened fire at the newly reopened Westgate Entertainment District in Glendale, Arizona, wounding three but killing none. The attacker had targeted couples and hoped to kill 10 victims; fortunately, his gun jammed, and he surrendered to authorities.⁶⁸

In the age of the coronavirus, law enforcement and intelligence agencies will be asked to strike a balance between new and old threats. On the one hand, attacks against hospitals, 5G infrastructure, and Asian Americans—not to mention certain extremists’ plans to exploit the virus in sparking what some call a “boogaloo” civil war against the government and minorities—suggest the new set of targets should be of paramount concern, perhaps beyond the end of the immediate crisis;⁶⁹ on the other, attacks like a recent Ramadan firebombing at a Missouri mosque and continued, virulent anti-Semitism suggest the traditional targets remain in the crosshairs.⁷⁰ Domestic extremists have used the coronavirus to radicalize and redirect their focus; counterterrorism should therefore remain an important concern during and while recovering from the coronavirus crisis.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Jamie Doward, “Far Right Hijack Coronavirus Crisis to Push Agenda and Boost Support,” *Guardian*, April 25, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/25/far-right-hijack-coronavirus-crisis-to-push-agenda-and-boost-support>; William Horobin and Matthew Dalton, “Attacker in Nice Conspired for Months,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 21, 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/french-prosecutor-recommends-charges-against-five-detained-after-attack-in-nice-1469083873>.

⁶⁸ Ray Stern, “The Westgate Shooter Was an Incel Who Wanted Couples to Feel ‘Pain,’” *Phoenix New Times*, May 22, 2020, <https://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/news/arizona-westgate-glendale-shooter-was-an-incele-who-targeted-couples-armando-hernandez-11471873>.

⁶⁹ For more on the “boogaloo” and the origins of the term, see “The Boogaloo: Extremists’ New Slang Term for A Coming Civil War,” *Anti-Defamation League*, November 26, 2019, <https://www.adl.org/blog/the-boogaloo-extremists-new-slang-term-for-a-coming-civil-war>.

⁷⁰ “National Digest: FBI Investigating Blaze at Islamic Center in Missouri,” *Washington Post*, April 25, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/national-digest-fbi-investigating-blaze-at-an-islamic-center-in-missouri/2020/04/25/f1c321f6-869c-11ea-ae26-989cfce1c7c7_story.html; “Coronavirus Crisis Elevates Antisemitic, Racist Tropes,” *Anti-Defamation League*, March 17, 2020, <https://www.adl.org/blog/coronavirus-crisis-elevates-antisemitic-racist-tropes>.

⁷¹ For another perspective on terrorist targeting during the coronavirus, see Jessica Davis, “Terrorism During a Pandemic: Assessing the Threat and Balancing the Hype,” *Just Security*, April 28, 2020, <https://www.justsecurity.org/69895/terrorism-during-a-pandemic-assessing-the-threat-and-balancing-the-hype/>.

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