

Stopping Extremists from Becoming Terrorists: A Strategy for the Trump Administration

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The authors of a bipartisan study discuss their recommendations for preventing and countering violent extremism.

On March 31, Rand Beers, Samantha Ravich, and Matthew Levitt addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute to mark the publication of the [bipartisan study group report](#) "Defeating Ideologically Inspired Violent Extremism: A Strategy to Build Strong Communities and Protect the U.S. Homeland." Beers is a visiting professor at Dartmouth College and a former senior advisor to President Obama. Ravich is a senior advisor in the Chertoff Group and former deputy national security advisor to Vice President Dick Cheney. Levitt is the Institute's Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of its Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

RAND BEERS

I first began thinking about the basic concepts behind countering violent extremism (CVE) fifty years ago as a platoon and company commander during the Vietnam War. At the time, we realized that the goal was not just to hold territory, but also to hold the people in support of the American effort. I came away with the notion that indiscriminate violence and coercion focused on an entire class of people, rather than the enemy, only creates or confirms opposition to American aims.

When I returned to government in 2009 at the Department of Homeland Security, I discovered that the previous administration had been thinking about how best to deal with extremism domestically. As the Obama administration began to carry on the Bush administration's efforts, it drew on an FBI study published several years prior that had found patterns of behavior common to perpetrators of terrorist attacks in the United States. These precursors to violence were observable, and the FBI identified four groups most likely to notice such behavioral changes: peers, family members, institutional figures (i.e., teachers or religious leaders), and other community members.

The question then arose: if people are observing this conduct, why aren't they reporting it to authorities? There are three prevailing answers to this question: (1) they do not realize the significance of the behavior, (2) they are in denial as to what it may mean about their loved one, or (3) they are reluctant to report it because the only avenue for doing so is law enforcement.

As the United States seeks answers to homegrown violent extremism, it must consider developing or bolstering non-law enforcement options for potentially problematic individuals. Although law enforcement cannot be excluded from the solution, Americans need a way to bring troubling behavior to the attention of others who may

be able to help first, such as mental health professionals and social workers. Intervention programs should be combined with public outreach to inform people about radicalization patterns and the options available for reporting them. In this whole-of-community approach, disconcerting behavior can be confronted before it progresses into criminality.

The federal government has a role in this approach, as seen in the CVE Grant Program established by Congress last year and the related initiative taken by U.S. Attorneys' offices around the country. Nevertheless, even federally supported CVE efforts must be grounded locally in order to build the necessary trust for good working relationships.

SAMANTHA RAVICH

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the United States was guided by the fundamental belief that it was at war with "a transnational terrorist movement fueled by a radical ideology of hatred, oppression, and murder." This mindset was articulated in the 2006 National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, which notes that the "war on terror" is a different kind of war. It is a battle of arms and a battle of ideas, requiring America to fight its terrorist enemies on the battlefield while also providing alternatives to the oppressive terrorist narrative. The paradigm for combating terrorism includes all aspects of U.S. national power and influence: military, diplomatic, financial, and so forth.

Accordingly, the Bush administration's second term was marked by an interagency push to counter the terrorist threat. These early efforts focused on what the federal government could do for the country, and not enough on what local communities could do to empower themselves. As the [Washington Institute study group report points out](#), what is needed is a preventive CVE concept that leverages not just a whole-of-government approach, but a bottom-up, whole-of-society approach.

In this regard, it would be a mistake to ignore the transnational element of CVE. After 9/11, the United States worked with its foreign partners to counter the growth of terrorism and extremism in their countries. Ironically, however, it was lax in developing such programs at home. Today, there is much Washington can learn from the successful initiatives established by its foreign partners.

Yet the Institute's broad recommendations are intended to augment, not supplant, law enforcement. Community programs can help law enforcement get ahead of the curve on violent extremism, forming a broad base of support for public safety. Public-health models may also be applicable as the government brings these programs to a larger swath of the population.

According to a 2007 Congressional Research Service report, "Increasingly, analysts view terrorism as a process. Once it gains a foothold, it becomes self-perpetuating...Thus a process of terrorism that could potentially have been dislodged at an earlier stage with relative ease often becomes increasingly robust if left unchecked, particularly with respect to indoctrination of the young." Preventing and countering violent extremism is a key part of that early dislodging effort.

MATTHEW LEVITT

As U.S. law enforcement attempts to disrupt extremist threats to the homeland, it faces an overwhelming number of potential terrorism cases, including more than 900 investigations related to the Islamic State alone. Unsurprisingly, then, law enforcement authorities are the leading advocates for establishing programs that move the needle earlier in the radicalization process. America needs more resources that can intervene with at-risk individuals before they cross the Rubicon into criminality.

Community members are best positioned to recognize disconcerting behaviors and refer individuals to professionals capable of intervening. Those professionals in turn have a duty to warn law enforcement if they detect an imminent threat. Indeed, law enforcement is desperate for civil society partners. There have been at least four tragic cases in which the FBI investigated suspicious individuals, found no legal basis to continue, and closed the investigation, only to have the suspects later carry out terrorist attacks: the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, the 2015 shooting in Garland, Texas, the 2016 Orlando nightclub attack, and the bombings in New Jersey and New York that same year. In each case, the bureau's hands were tied -- authorities had no partners to whom they could refer these cases, and the results were disastrous. The government needs to build connective tissue between service-oriented CVE and law enforcement in a way that is not police-driven.

The first level of the whole-of-society model [recommended in the Institute's report](#) involves building resilience over a broad area. The second level focuses on individuals, neighborhoods, schools, and ethnic communities that are at higher risk of radicalization because of their exposure to extremist ideologies, contacts with radical networks, or similar factors. The third level comprises intervention options when radicalization does occur. Preventive CVE efforts should be based on geography rather than predetermined ideologies, since they will differ from one community to the next. These efforts should be applied to the full spectrum of extremist ideologies: far-right, far-left, Islamist, and so forth.

It is also critical to cover the full life cycle from radicalization to rehabilitation and reintegration -- a fact that Washington's European partners are quickly realizing. While the United States does not face quite the same threat as Europe (i.e., thousands of fighters returning from the Syrian battlefield), it does not have the luxury of ignoring the problem. The first American convicted on Islamic State-related charges is set to be released within the next

month, and she will be among hundreds released in the next two to ten years. There are no CVE programs in U.S. prisons, nor any post-release initiatives that focus on CVE issues. Although some deride the "back end" of CVE as soft, such efforts constitute smart policy and fall squarely within the broader effort to safeguard America's national security.

In the study group meetings that produced the Institute's bipartisan report, experts expressed legitimate criticisms of CVE as it stands today. Participants also grappled with the term CVE, an acronym so toxic that it is disregarded in most every local program across the country. The answer to such criticism is not to change terms, but rather to put systems in place that address the legitimate concerns associated with these terms -- while recognizing that for some people, CVE will be untenable no matter its name.

One such concern is the securitization of CVE policy. This is unsurprising given that law enforcement led the push for CVE after the Boston Marathon bombing. While law enforcement cannot be removed from the equation, it should not be the face of local programs, and authorities should adjust their approach accordingly. Local communities, law enforcement, and the federal government must work together to make all Americans safer.

This summary was prepared by Maxine Rich.