LEFT OF BOOM

SPECIAL EDITION

THREAT ASSESSMENT
FOR THE YEAR AHEAD
2023

A note from our team

Welcome to an expanded edition of Left of Boom, Clinical Security Solution's monthly newsletter.

Each month we share our experiences and perspectives to help nuance your understanding of issues surrounding workplace violence prevention and intervention with the goal of helping you make your workplaces safer for all. In this special issue, we'll discuss our assessment of the threat landscape for the year ahead.

I wish to thank my good friend and colleague, James Sporleder from The Regulus Group https://regulusnw.com/ for his collaboration on this effort.

A Quick Note Regarding Scope and Sourcing

Typically, the focus of our newsletter is to provide actionable and digestible information regarding best practices in behavioral threat assessment and management for use by threat assessment teams in the prevention of incidents of workplace violence.

The scope, focus, and depth of this special edition will be much broader. Our goal is to highlight some of the current overarching political, social, economic, and legal factors that could serve as stressors within society and our respective workplaces during the coming year. We focus on these threat issues and areas of vulnerability and concern for organizations even if the highlighted issue (global instability for example) is beyond the scope of a threat management team. Nevertheless, we believe it's important to highlight these issues since they may directly impact the organizations we advise as well as further contribute to the radicalization of individuals contemplating acts of targeted violence.

We've referenced select data points from multiple studies and surveys. (NOTE: If any of you would like more information on any specific point or cited survey, we'll be happy to direct you to the source document.) Since our primary focus is a workplace violence prevention and behavioral threat assessment and management we'll go into much more detail in those areas. For our commentary on geopolitical matters, we'll avoid getting into great detail but will provide a brief overview of major potential threats.

For a deeper dive into these subjects, we recommend assessments published by Ian Bremmer's Eurasia Group https://www.eurasiagroup.net/ and The Soufan Group https://www.soufangroup.com/. Both organizations provide excellent and detailed analysis of geopolitical and international counterterrorism matters that is well beyond the scope of this newsletter and our practice.

A New Year – A New Term

The ushering in of a new year always is an opportunity for reflection on the prior year and brings us several annual rituals. Among the new and eventually unused gym memberships and the momentary abstinence from alcohol, there is the ritual of identifying a word or a term that sums up the prior year. Here are a few selections from leading dictionaries that we feel capture the mood of our assessment.

To begin, the Oxford English Dictionary has selected **Goblin Mode** as their word of the year. Goblin Mode is a slang term that first appeared on Twitter in 2009 but fell into more common use during the COVID-19 lockdowns. The term describes behavior that is "unapologetically self-indulgent, lazy, slovenly, or greedy, typically in a way that rejects social norms or expectations." In their explanation of the term, Oxford English Dictionary opined that it captured the prevailing mood of individuals reacting to their COVID-19 experience by rejecting the idea of returning to "normal life" while rebelling against societal expectations and unattainable/unsustainable lifestyles exhibited on social media. We believe this term describes the mindset behind the steady erosion of societal norms regarding civil behavior.

Our strong "runner-up" for word of the year is Merriam-Webster's perennial favorite, **Gaslighting** (n.): "the act or practice of grossly misleading someone, especially for one's advantage." It should be noted that the term "gaslighting" also figured prominently in several lists of words and terms deemed to have been so overused as to lose any impact at all and should be retired from use. However, I'm going to get a jump on the 2024 list of "overused words to be retired" and stake a very early claim on the word "**weaponized**."

OK, so there is some strong competition out there but… The Winner is… The Collins English Dictionary has selected the term "**Permacrisis**" as the word of 2022. They define Permacrisis as "an extended period of instability and insecurity, (especially) one resulting from a series of catastrophic events." We heartily concur with this choice. Permacrisis is an apt description of our current reality.

Individuals and organizations are experiencing crisis fatigue as the hits keep coming. Crisis fatigue leads to complacency, and organizations must remain vigilant.

The 2023 Threat Landscape – Settling in for the Long Winter – The Year of Permacrisis

2022 was a year of adjustment and realignment. Our society transitioned from the slow-moving car crash that was the COVID-19 pandemic to the resigned understanding that much of our social and political fabric changed forever while continuing to evolve. Public faith and trust in institutions and government are at an all-time low; political instability is becoming a global norm; and the first land war in Europe since 1945, combined with aggressive moves by China and Iran, has radically altered the global security framework.

A dramatic increase in political violence and anti-democracy activity worldwide has impacted some of the world's largest economies and the rise of authoritarian regimes worldwide is cause for increasing concern. Political violence and instability in the United States have been well documented, while authorities in Germany recently disrupted a QAnon-inspired coup attempt by neo-Nazis. Additionally, right-wing extremists in Brazil stormed government offices in the capitol in a massive riot reminiscent of January 6th. What's important to note here is that these are not events happening in undeveloped countries with a history of instability. Brazil and Germany are mature democracies that represent two of the major global economies.
What must be recognized is that we are operating in a new reality, and companies and organizations must acknowledge and adapt to the evolving challenges ahead.

Specifically:

- Organizations have had to adapt to a radically different concept of the workplace as work-from-home and "hybrid staffing" formats have become "business as usual." Efforts to return the workforce to the office have been met with substantial resistance from employees.
- The severe economic fallout from COVID-19 continues to heavily impact society as a whole and businesses and organizations specifically as society careens about what could become a global recession. An early harbinger may be the large-scale layoffs we're witnessing in the tech sector. It's vital to keep in mind that economic stressors are often precursors to acts of workplace violence.
- The protracted war in Ukraine continues to place intense pressure on the European Union and a likely Russian defeat could result in regime change and major instability in Russia and the region.
- Violent Extremism is surging worldwide with the rise of authoritarian regimes as well as a spike in hate crimes and antisemitism.

Operational Imperatives for 2023 | Executive Summary

We've reviewed multiple sources and dissected assessments from government agencies and key industry leaders in security, international affairs, law, information security, politics, and human resources as a foundational basis for our assessment. We've additionally identified the critical operational imperatives that organizations should consider when developing a preventative security posture for this year.

Here's our list for 2023.

MISINFORMATION AND TOXIC RHETORIC

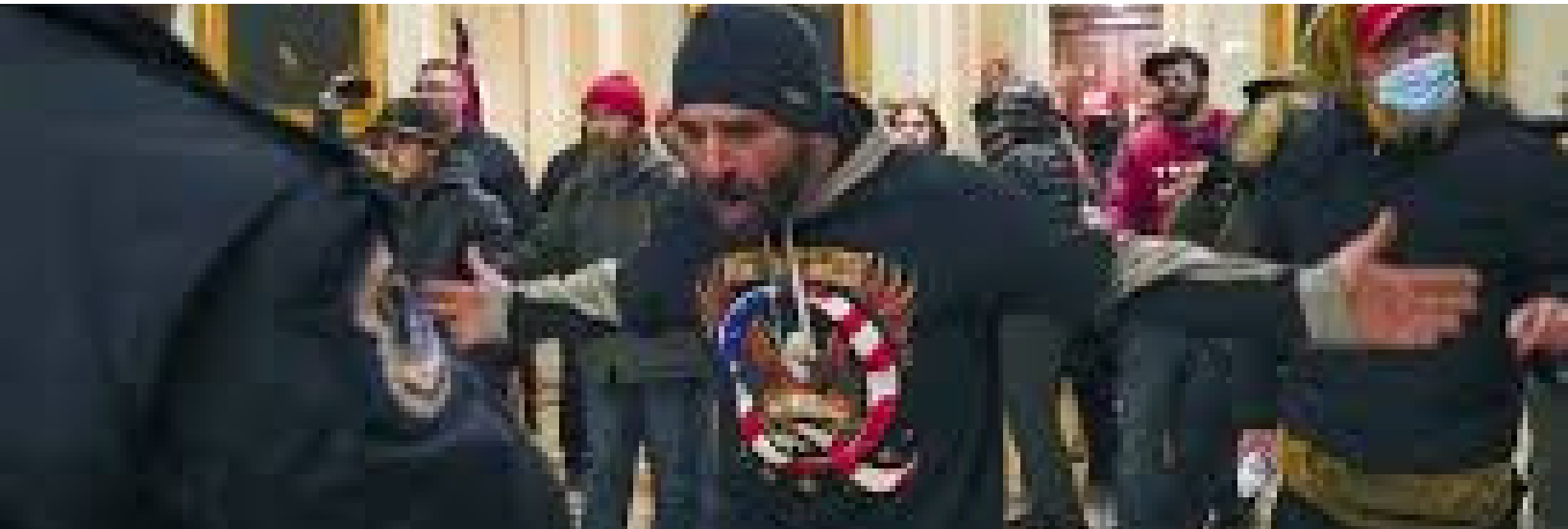
- Leading off our list for last year was "Weaponized Misinformation." We continue to assess that Misinformation and Disinformation (political, medical, etc.) disseminated through multiple sources will be a primary driver of stressors related to workplace violence, political discord, and civil unrest. New technologies such as AI and Deepfakes have only added another complexity to this problem. **Social media and widely dispersed alternative news sources can serve as incubators and accelerators for the spread of misleading and even malicious misinformation**.

INCIVILITY AS A PRECURSOR TO VIOLENCE

- We've also carried this aspect over from our 2022 assessment. The continued normalization of incivility, violent rhetoric, and simply rude behavior will lead to an increase in violent incidents.

THE RISE OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

- Following the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol, the threat from Domestic Violence Extremists remains acute. Prosecutions of key figures involved in this attack notwithstanding, the threat continues to evolve and adapt. And yet this is not just a domestic problem. **Violent extremism is on the rise worldwide**, with Europe experiencing a significant increase in criminal extremist activity.



GLOBAL POLITICAL INSTABILITY

- Simply put, political instability is bad for democracy and bad for business. The Russian invasion of Ukraine shattered the European peace in existence since 1945 and caused significant disruption to the regional energy market. State-sponsored economic warfare by China, coupled with their broader territorial ambitions, have caused new levels of tension in the South China Sea. In contrast, Iran's nuclear ambitions continue to remain a major threat.

SPECTER OF A GLOBAL RECESSION

- The sustained economic fallout from COVID-19, inflation, large-scale layoffs in the tech sector, and economic fallout from the war in Ukraine has stressed the global economy to near breaking point. Economic stressors can often be precursors to acts of workplace violence as individuals face potential lay-off and/or feel desperate over dwindling financial resources to provide for family and loved ones. **Organizations will also likely see increased pressure on operating budgets, which can often impact available funds for proactive and prevention-centric health, welfare, and security measures.**

PERSISTENT AND EVOLVING CYBER THREATS

- Leading cyber security experts are nearly united in their assessment that organizations will face a growing and persistent threat from a myriad of cyber threats in 2023, specifically ransomware. Critical infrastructure facilities face a particularly acute risk.

Organizations should consider these potential threats when evaluating current crisis management, threat management, and business continuity plans.

Operational Imperatives for 2023
Detailed Report & Analysis

Let's take some time to discuss the operational issues detailed above in some depth.

MISINFORMATION AND TOXIC RHETORIC

We've all heard and probably used the old cliché "perception is reality." I understand the sentiment behind the statement, but I've always been troubled by it as well. It seems to be a surrender to bad facts and serves to empower the spread of misinformation by giving it a sense of legitimacy. I recently attended a Threat Assessment conference and was struck by this quote:

"Perception is not reality,
Reality is reality,
But we must address the perception to get to a place of shared reality."

Social media serves as both an incubator and an accelerator for misinformation. Social media's artificial intelligence algorithms directly spread information, both true and false, quickly and beyond the ability of these platforms to monitor and regulate. False information has also been found to spread dramatically faster than factual information. One study of the Twitter platform found that false news stories were 70% more likely to be retweeted than true ones, and true stories took approximately six times as long to reach 1,500 people as false stories. This is not a new problem; technology has only accelerated the process. Consider this quote from 1919 attributed to Mark Twain – "A Lie Can Travel Halfway Around the World While the Truth Is Putting On Its Shoes." Misinformation on vital issues continues to fuel dissent and discord in our society. Even efforts to counter this problem have been defeated by misinformation. An attempt by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to establish a Disinformation Advisory Board was scuttled by partisan opposition, based, in part, on false information from documented foreign misinformation campaigns.

Additionally, healthcare organizations in Boston were targeted by protests and bomb threats after false and misleading information was posted online reporting that the hospitals were conducting gender reassignment surgery on minors.

This was not true and despite specific counter-messaging, these false statements persisted online, resulting in multiple bomb threats and protests that caused significant disruption to hospital operations.

The debate on the role and responsibilities of Big Tech regarding content standards rages. Elon Musk purchased Twitter in large part to fulfill his wish to establish a climate of "Free Speech Absolutism" by removing most content restrictions. He is already facing major regulatory headwinds from the European Union while controversial and divisive content, once removed, is now flowing back into the platform.

There are now cases on the current U.S. Supreme Court docket addressing such issues. **These cases could result in landmark rulings regarding content restrictions and related liability for platforms hosting questionable content.** Individual states such as Texas and Florida are also considering legislation and regulation to curb perceived censorship by online platforms. Any such efforts to impose standards on the industry are likely to meet legal challenges and may end up before the Supreme Court.

The rhetoric in our society continues to accelerate and intensify; what was once outrageous and scandalous has become normalized and routine. Politicians from both major parties habitually use inflammatory language to describe their opponents. It's now common political currency to refer to an opponent as a "Nazi," "Fascist," "Pedophile," or "Groomer." As we discuss later in this assessment, this erosion of civil mores and normalization of incivility contributes to this escalating and overheated communication environment.

WHAT THAT MEANS TO THREAT ASSESSMENT:

When assessing a potential threat, a threat assessor must account for and consider the potential impact of misinformation on the individual in question. The goal of a threat assessment is not to challenge a firmly held belief; even one rooted in misinformation. A threat assessor must understand the underlying thought process behind an ideologically motivated threat while keeping in mind that understanding does not equal agreement. Understanding a troubled employee who's holding on to a highly overvalued belief that's driving negative behavior will help us craft and implement interventions to mitigate this risk.

INCIVILITY AS A PRECURSOR TO VIOLENCE

As the narrative surrounding workplace violence continues to evolve, we're also starting to see an emergence of research that's capturing the toxic impact of what's often described as "uncivil behavior in the workplace."

Workplace Incivility is defined as **"low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to damage the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect. Uncivil behaviors are characteristically rude and discourteous, displaying a lack of regard for others."**

The fact is, the nexus between workplace violence and workplace incivility cannot be ignored, and we've only recently begun to measure its impact. Christine Porath states in her book Mastering Civility that **"research also shows that working in a group where incivility is present affects people's mental health, even after accounting for general stress and the incivility an individual personally experienced."**

Workplace incivility is a corrosive form of interpersonal communication that also has a powerful emotional contagion effect. And people tend to bring the toxic effects of workplace incivility home with them, negatively impacting their family members as well.

A survey conducted by the Anxiety and Depression Association of America reported that stress and anxiety have several direct impacts on job performance (such as overall performance and quality of work), with the second highest cause of work-related stress being "interpersonal relationships (53%)." And the measurable cost is substantial. In a nationwide poll of 800 managers and employees across 17 industries, Christine Porath and her colleague Christine Pearson learned that "among workers who have been on the receiving end of incivility,"

- **48% intentionally decreased their work effort,**
- **47% intentionally decreased their time spent at work,**
- **38% intentionally decreased the quality of their work,**
- **80% lost work time worrying about the incident,**
- **63% lost work time avoiding the offender,**
- **66% said their performance declined,**
- **78% said their commitment to the organization declined,**
- **12% said they had left their job because of the uncivil treatment, and**
- **25% admitted to taking their frustration out on customers.**

Pearson, C. M., Andersson, L. M., & Porath, C. L. (2005). Workplace incivility. In S. Fox & P. E. Spector (Eds.), Counterproductive work behavior: Investigations of actors and targets (pp. 177–200). American Psychological Association. https://doi.org/10.1037/10893-008

WHAT THAT MEANS TO THREAT ASSESSMENT:
Workplace incivilities, such as verbal abuse and bullying, should consistently be viewed as early pre-incident indicators for potential violence. While many of these behaviors can and should be addressed by first-line supervisors, ***it's never too early to consult with an internal threat management team for input and to simply "get the issue on the radar" in the event additional support and intervention are needed.*** *The primary goal of any threat assessment/management program should be to mitigate the risk of workplace violence by identifying patterns of troubling behavior before a violent event.*

THE RISE OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM
For the past several years, U.S. Law Enforcement agencies (FBI, DHS, USSS) have warned of the rising threat from Domestic Violent Extremists (DVEs). These agencies report that the most significant terrorist threat to the United States today comes from the violent far-right, broadly defined here to include both white supremacist and white nationalist networks, as well as anti-government extremists. Data compiled by the Anti-Defamation League indicates that "right-wing extremists" were responsible for almost 90% of extremist killings in 2021. **This trend has been consistent over the past decade, with 75% of the almost 450 extremist-related murders in the United States since 2012 having been perpetrated by the far-right**.

Broadly speaking, DVEs are identified and segregated by political ideology (right-wing, left-wing). While extremism is present along the entire political spectrum, historically, this threat has been cyclical. In the 1960s and 1970s, left-wing extremism was dominant, with groups such as The Weathermen and the Symbionese Liberation Army conducting widely publicized acts of terrorism.

Beginning in the 1980s and 1990s and continuing to this day, right-wing extremism has become dominant. Neo-Nazi groups such as The Aryan Nation, The Order, and The National Socialist Movement emerged. Militia movements formed in the 1990s and served as the foundation for "Patriot" and other anti-government groups such as the Oath Keepers, Three Percenters, Proud Boys, Patriot Front, 1St

Amendment Praetorians and the accelerationist Boogaloo Bois. Attacks motivated by racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and white supremacy have increased dramatically, with the Global Terrorism Index reporting a 320% surge in far-right terrorist attacks between 2013 and 2018, primarily concentrated in North America, Western Europe, and Australia/New Zealand.

Patriot Front is a white nationalist and neo-fascist hate group that is relatively new on the scene and traces roots to the neo-Nazi organization Vanguard America. According to the Anti-Defamation League, **the group has between 200-300 members nationwide and was responsible for 82% of all reported incidents in 2021 involving the distribution of racist, antisemitic, and other hateful propaganda in the United States for a total of 3,992 incidents.**

Another emerging organization of concern is the People's Network. Formed and led by anti-government activist Ammon Bundy, this group now has a presence in more than 40 states and claims to be able to mobilize large groups of protesters on short notice. This group was responsible for organizing several large spontaneous protests in the Pacific Northwest in support of anti-vaccine activists. Bundy is a failed fringe gubernatorial candidate and was the leader of two high-profile standoffs with federal authorities over land use disputes. His current focus appears to be related to healthcare.

The violent far-right poses a dual threat of lone actor violence and organized attacks by groups. **The movement embraces the concept of "leaderless resistance."** This strategy, which encourages small-cell and lone-actor violence, has allowed many of the movement's most violent actors to evade early detection by law enforcement. Other factions of the movement continue to organize openly, often in paramilitary structures (e.g. Oath Keepers, Three Percenters, Proud Boys, Patriot Front, etc.).

The current ascendancy of right-wing extremism should not cause us to ignore the persistent yet mostly dormant threat from the violent far-left. In June 2022, a lone actor with links to far-left causes traveled cross country in an attempt to assassinate conservative Supreme Court, Justice Brett Kavanaugh. Upon arriving armed at Justice's residence, the would-be attacker aborted the attempt when he observed the presence of security officers. In 2017, a left-wing extremist attacked a Republican team practice for the annual Congressional Baseball Game, shooting and seriously wounding House majority whip Steve Scalise before being fatally shot by police.

In addressing left-wing extremism, conservative media and politicians have repeatedly pointed to Antifa, an amorphous anarchist network that predominantly engages in criminal vandalism and rioting. Unlike many right-wing groups, Antifa is more of an ideology than an organization.

Simply put, by definition, anarchists do not form organizations, whereas many right-wing groups tend to adopt a formal, hierarchical paramilitary structure. While Antifa is the focus of media and political attention, it is not the only left-wing threat. Analysis of prior attacks indicates the most dangerous violent left-wing extremists are frequently inspired by single-issue causes, from abortion rights to climate change, to police killings.

It is the assessment of law enforcement sources that future left-wing attacks will primarily be conducted by individually radicalized lone actors in response to high-profile events related to these single-issue causes.

To further understand the nature of the DVE threat and the potential impact on the workplace and organizations we'll spend a little time discussing some of the issues driving the movement at this time.

The Impact of January 6th

In my experience as a domestic terrorism investigator, the right-wing extremist community has often been a victim of its paranoia. Intense attention from law enforcement has, at times, crippled some of these groups as they turn on each other in cannibalistic searches for suspected informers. Personality conflicts among leaders and disputes regarding ideological purity and direction have also led to self-destructive internal conflict, which has limited the ability of these groups to mount significant and sustained operations. This changed, however, with the 2020 election. **Uniting behind claims of election fraud, groups that may never have worked together now had a common grievance. This new unity was on full display on January 6th.**

The arrests and subsequent prosecutions of January 6th offenders has somewhat disrupted the right wing for the moment. The first group of leaders have now been convicted on Seditious Conspiracy charges and are awaiting sentencing, with a second group starting trial in the near term.

Academics who study extremism and law enforcement alike issued dire warnings regarding potential violence and disruption of the 2022 midterm elections based on continued far right-wing rhetoric regarding claims of election fraud. Our own Left of Boom analysis expressed concern that right-wing extremists would regroup and disrupt the midterms. These groups were largely on the sidelines of the 2022 midterm elections and election fraud claims were minimal. Midterm election candidates at all levels who espoused 2020 Election fraud conspiracies were primarily defeated at the polls. Some analysts believe that the pending January 6th prosecutions had a chilling effect on right-wing activity during the midterms.

It remains to be seen if these groups will become more active for the 2024 general election.

Political Violence – A Persistent Threat

While the 2022 midterm elections were relatively peaceful, the risk for political violence remains substantial. In a recent interview, Senator Susan Collins (R-Maine), who has received death threats and had a window smashed at her home, said violent threats appear to be crossing over into actual violence. **"I wouldn't be surprised if a Senator or House member were killed," Collins told The New York Times.** "What started with abusive phone calls is now translating into active threats of violence and real violence." U.S Representative Pramila Jayapal (D-Washington) was recently threatened in her home by an armed individual who camped out in front of her residence while screaming death threats.

In July 2022, while campaigning for Governor of New York, Republican Congressman Lee Zeldin was accosted on stage by a man armed with a large knife.

In October 2022, a QAnon-inspired individual broke into the San Francisco home of then-Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. Speaker Pelosi was not home at the time, but the subject attacked and critically injured her husband. The attacker told arresting officers he planned to take Speaker Pelosi hostage and interrogate her.
Authorities in Albuquerque, New Mexico, are currently investigating a series of drive-by shootings targeting the residences of local Democratic politicians.

In recent Congressional testimony, the Chief of the U.S. Capitol Police reported that Members of Congress received more than 9,000 threats in 2022, up from a total of 1,000 threats in 2017. The Capitol Police, responsible for the security of members of Congress, recently opened two field offices, one in California and another in Florida, to investigate and respond to these escalated threats.

A Resurgent QAnon – Has the Virus Mutated?

QAnon is a decentralized, far-right conspiracy theory and political movement rooted in a nonsensical theory that former President Donald Trump is waging a secret war against a cabal of Satan-worshiping pedophiles who control the world and run a global child sex trafficking ring, and who murder children in ritual Satanic sacrifices in order to harvest a supposedly life-extending chemical from their blood known as “adrenochrome.”

The QAnon movement held that Donald Trump was destined to defeat the cabal by assuming power and conducting mass roundups of this global satanic, pedophile cult. In its purest and most outrageous iteration, the QAnon theory held that Hillary Clinton, Oprah Winfrey, Bill Gates, and other liberal elites would be arrested, imprisoned and executed. In the QAnon lexicon this was known as “The Storm.”

Much like other doomsday cults in our history, none of these dire predictions came true. When a prediction failed to materialize, ardent believers searched for meaning, blamed misinterpretation, and awaited a new date for the end of the world. This delusional thinking sustained the movement through the 2020 election. “The Storm” was coming.

January 6th was the turning point. **Many QAnon adherents knew that the time had finally arrived and there would be “The Storm” that would finally take down the Deep State.** Joe Biden’s Inauguration would be prevented, and Trump would remain in power aided by JFK, Jr., long thought to be dead but now emerged from hiding to serve as Trump’s Vice President. January 6th appeared to be the moment “The Storm” had finally arrived.

When President Biden was successfully inaugurated, the QAnon world was again stunned and it looked like QAnon would follow the path of other apocalyptic doomsday cults and fade away. Disillusioned acolytes openly questioned if it was all a waste of time and a scam. Online activity and discussion began dissecting what went wrong as disillusionment and bitterness hung in the air. Had it all been for naught? What was the plan now? The movement appeared to have died and the conspiratorial fever had broken. **Posts from the apocryphal Q stopped as QAnon content was removed from most internet and social media sites for violations of content standards. The movement appeared to be dying out from lack of exposure and widespread disillusionment among followers.**

Beginning in December 2022, former President Trump began actively posting QAnon-related material on his social media site Truth Social. Following Elon Musk’s purchase of Twitter, in line with his stated goals of removing restrictions on content, QAnon material quickly returned to Twitter.

QAnon has always been a passive movement. Followers have been waiting for a sign or an action from “Q”, or another savior-like figure to put the plan in motion. When this did not happen, the discussion shifted and some supporters began to post messages saying that QAnon supporters must take a more active role in bringing about the destruction of the cabal. This is the direction, tone, and tenor of the conversation now.

QAnon rhetoric, once limited to the fringe, has now seeped into mainstream political dialog. The movement appears to be reinvigorated as mainstream political figures incorporate more QAnon rhetoric into their political dialog. In 2022, the Texas GOP adopted as their official slogan, "We are The Storm," while denying any association with QAnon.

A resurgent QAnon movement, supported by rhetoric from mainstream political figures, will likely bring about an increased risk of potential attacks motivated by this theory. Historically, QAnon has inspired lethal attacks by lone actors. In 2019, Cesar Sayoc mailed a series of pipe bombs to critics of President Trump. In 2021, Matthew Colman abducted his two young children taking them to Mexico, where he murdered them both with a spearfishing gun. Coleman, an ardent QAnon follower, believed that his children were "infected with serpent DNA" (another eccentric and bizarre QAnon belief) and needed to be killed to protect the human race.

The Rise of Violent Right-Wing Extremism – A movement in search of a grievance?
Lacking the unifying grievance of election fraud, right-wing extremists are increasingly adopting multiple causes, motives, and grievances. **In recent congressional testimony, FBI Director Christopher Wray offered an assessment that many extremists seem to hold a "weird hodgepodge blend of ideologies."** He noted this presents challenges for investigators "trying to unpack what is often sort of incoherent belief systems, combined with a kind of personal grievance." The FBI has used the phrase "salad bar extremism" to describe this trend.

This is an important point to consider when conducting a threat assessment. In my experience, investigators, academics, and researchers tend to categorize and organize. We give labels to things to help us understand and to have a common vocabulary as we describe and evaluate things. We must resist the temptation to assume that, if an individual has links to a movement or ideology, then all aspects of that belief system will apply to that individual. Take QAnon for example; **the core belief of this conspiracy theory is that a cabal of Satan-worshiping pedophiles control the world and run a global child sex trafficking ring, murdering children in ritual Satanic sacrifices to harvest a supposedly life-extending chemical from their blood known as adrenochrome**. Sounds outlandish, right?

And yet, some diehard adherents do hold this belief to be true. Now consider your average online conspiracy theory enthusiast who may repost or like certain QAnon-related content. If you asked them the question "Do you believe that Hillary Clinton drinks the blood of murdered children?" Many of them would say that is a ridiculous question. If the question were reframed and made more ambiguous and posed as "Do you believe there are powerful people in the world who are responsible for the organized abduction and trafficking of children?"

You might get a different response.

We must remember that a threat assessment focuses on behaviors, not ideology. Membership in a militia or anti-government group, or a connection to an alternative ideology, is significant and should be a factor in our assessments. Still, we must focus on behaviors and direct ideological statements rather than make assumptions based solely on association alone.

In place of election denial, some attackers have returned to more traditional and foundational grievances within the far right-wing macrocosm. Several recent attacks, including the Buffalo, New York grocery store shooting, as well as other attacks in Pittsburgh, El Paso, and overseas, were inspired by the so-called "great replacement" theory, which holds that a deliberate replacement of the white population in Western states is underway, funded and organized by Jews and other elites. Adherents of this theory portray themselves as defenders of the white race and protectors of a white homeland.

Analysts have also noted an increase in activity among right-wing groups subscribing to the theory of Accelerationism. This theory holds that society as we know it is doomed to collapse and fail. **Accelerationists seek to hasten this change by conducting disruptive acts of terrorism.** They believe that following a total societal collapse, they will be able to rebuild the society they want; typically, this is a white ethnostate.

If we do enter a global recession, accelerationists will likely take this as an additional sign of impending societal collapse and could initiate attacks in furtherance of this goal.

Accelerationists have also discussed attacks on infrastructure targets as means to bring about societal collapse. **In early 2022, the Department of Homeland Security issued an intelligence bulletin noting the desire of right-wing groups to attack the energy infrastructure**. In late 2022, such attacks did occur, targeting electrical distribution substations in North Carolina and knocking out power to thousands. A similar attack in Tacoma, Washington, was initially thought to be a possible right-wing attack but was later determined to be an ill-conceived diversion for a planned business burglary. Both of these attacks highlighted the fragility and vulnerability of infrastructure targets.

Other groups have targeted healthcare organizations, not only for COVID-19-related issues but for other "health freedom" causes. Prominent culture war issues, such as transgender medical care and abortion, will also draw the attention of single-issue advocacy groups and extremists on both ends of the political spectrum.

Analysts have also monitored chatter among right-wing groups seeking to target Big Tech over censorship issues. **Right-wing extremists have also discussed targeting large corporations over Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) investment goals claiming this practice to be a prime example of "woke" corporate socialism.** ESG investing efforts have also drawn scrutiny from left-wing extremists dismissing such efforts as blatant "greenwashing," meaning insincere and cynical efforts by an organization to appeal to climate-sensitive consumers.

WHAT THAT MEANS TO THREAT ASSESSMENT:

As outlandish and eccentric as the QAnon cult sounds, we dismiss them as simple crackpots at our own peril. While many who are involved in the QAnon movement may be passive "keyboard commandos," indulging only in online rants, their rhetoric and dialog has directly impacted and radicalized lone actors who have gone on to commit horrific acts of violence. Threat assessors should familiarize themselves with the vernacular of QAnon and be alert to such references in threatening communications and online activity of subjects. Similarly, threat assessors/managers must be aware of and familiar with those extremist groups active within their areas of organizational operations.

QAnon Terminology:

- "Trust the Plan"
- "The Storm"
- "Where We Go One, We go All" or "WWG1WGA"
- "Save the Children"
- "Follow the White Rabbit"

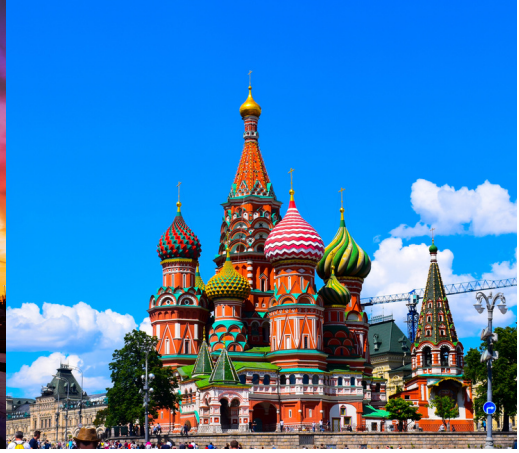
Threat assessors/managers must remember that the threat assessment process focuses on observable behaviors rather than belief systems. In this era of identity politics, a direct challenge to a closely held belief could be interpreted as a threat or a challenge, which would negate any positive de-escalation efforts and/or threat management interventions.

It appears that political violence will be with us for some time. **Many in our society today consider their political beliefs to be a major component of their core identity.** Political ideology can easily serve as a foundational grievance for an act of targeted violence. The assault on, or assassination of, a political figure will likely further inflame the political dialog and could result in additional violent acts or protests.

GLOBAL POLITICAL INSTABILITY

For nearly two decades, the defeat of global Islamic terrorism was America's foremost defense and national security priority. That changed with the release of the 2018 National Defense Strategy. When introducing the change, Secretary of Defense James Mattis explained, **"We are facing increased global disorder, characterized by decline in the long-standing rules-based international order—creating a security environment more complex and volatile than any we have experienced in recent memory. Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security."**





RUSSIA: Leading Russia experts have uniformly offered grim assessments of the current situation. Russia's disastrous invasion of Ukraine has turned it from a major force on the global stage into perhaps the world's second most dangerous rogue state, with the crown still going to North Korea. Rampant rumors about the physical and mental health of Vladimir Putin have only added layers of uncertainty to any analysis of Russian intentions. **Facing a potentially catastrophic and humiliating military defeat, with little to lose from further international isolation, sanctions, and other forms of Western retaliation, Russia faces intense domestic pressure to show strength.** Experts believe that Russia will intensify asymmetric warfare against the West to inflict damage obliquely rather than by overt aggression requiring the military, diplomatic, and economic power that Russia simply no longer has.

CHINA: **Xi Jinping now has a chokehold on China's political system to a degree not seen since the reign of Mao**. Xi faces very few limits on his ability to advance his nationalist policy agenda. With no functional opposition to challenge Xi or even temper his views, the West can expect arbitrary decisions and a high degree of policy volatility. Xi's strong nationalist goals, territorial ambitions, and aggressive foreign policy moves will increase tensions with the West and other Asian neighbors.

IRAN: Nationwide anti-government protests continue in Iran while the regime in Tehran dramatically escalates its nuclear program. Iran's provision of weapons to Russia for use in Ukraine is also highly problematic and could lead to additional sanctions and confrontations. **A new far-right government in Israel is already advocating for renewed overt attacks targeting Iranian nuclear efforts and is likely to conduct additional acts of clandestine sabotage targeting this program.** In response, Iran could once again strike Saudi oil facilities or oil tankers in the Gulf of Hormuz, disrupting oil traffic while risking retaliatory attacks. We've seen this movie before. The potential for war or a major disruption of world oil markets would be acute.

EurasiaGroup_TopRisks2023.pdf

WHAT THAT MEANS TO THREAT ASSESSMENT:
Global instability is yet another stressor impacting society. Organizations with operations overseas must have a robust intelligence analysis integrated with its risk management function.

SPECTER OF A GLOBAL RECESSION
The sustained economic fallout from COVID-19 continues to heavily impact society and businesses as the world economy stumbles toward a possible global recession. The war in Ukraine has caused significant disruption to European economies and those of its trading partners.

In October 2022, the International Monetary Fund released its annual global economic outlook projecting weak growth in 2023. The report highlighted high inflation, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the continued effects of COVID, particularly in China, as key factors impacting the overall health of the global economy.

The war in Ukraine remains a key variable for the global economy. The restricted supply of Russian natural gas has created an energy crisis in Europe. A mild European winter has blunted some of the impacts of the reduction in the supply of Russian natural gas, but this may only be a reprieve. Some European economies have already tipped into recession territory, with major implications not only for those economies but also for their trading partners.

In the United States we're beginning to see large scale layoffs in the tech sector. This is typically a highly dynamic but resilient sector of the U.S. economy but layoffs and other major labor events can form the basis for serious individual grievances that if allowed to metastasize, can lead to acts of workplace violence.

WHAT THAT MEANS TO THREAT ASSESSMENT:
Individual economic stressors can be acute catalysts to acts of workplace violence. Organizations contemplating a reduction in force through layoffs should plan extensively for an integrated and measured approach to optimize safe and secure workforce reductions.

Security programs, in particular threat assessment/management programs, can be highly vulnerable to corporate cost-cutting measures. Long-term preventive security programs can be hard to justify during times of austere corporate funding due to the lack of visible and immediate results. It will be imperative for corporate and organizational stakeholders in these programs to be prepared to provide strong value propositions to senior executive leaders who may be facing extraordinary pressure to trim budgets and heal the bottom line.

PERSISTENT AND EVOLVING CYBER THREATS

Ransomware attacks can have a devastating impact on business. The Colonial Pipeline ransomware attack in 2021 temporarily shut down a major fuel supply system in the southeastern U.S. and resulted in a **$4.4 million payday for the hackers.** In their most recent analysis of the ransomware threat, the cyber intelligence firm Cybereason reported the following:

- **73% of respondents said their organization had been the target of at least one ransomware attack over the past 24 months (an increase of 33% percent from the 2021 survey).**
- **Of the 46% of organizations that reported losses from a ransomware attack, 67% said their combined losses reached between $1 million and $10 million (USD).**
- **Of the 28% of respondents who paid the ransom, 80% of those got hit with a second ransomware attack with 68% percent being hit a second time within a month, and for an even higher ransom amount.**

Recent intelligence estimates warn of increased malicious cyber activity related to the war in Ukraine and the associated sanctions imposed on Russia. It is assessed that Russian security services will target countries and organizations supporting Ukraine and those who imposed sanctions against Russia. It is also likely that Russian state-sponsored organized cybercrime groups that specialize in ransomware will support Russian war efforts. U.S. government agencies, defense contractors, and other organizations assisting with Ukraine's defense are at elevated risk of being targeted with retaliatory forms of cyber-attack, disruption, and intrusion.

WHAT THAT MEANS TO THREAT ASSESSMENT:

Successful defense against such cyberattacks must be conducted by highly skilled technical cybersecurity experts. Threat assessment/management teams should work hand-in-hand with cyber security specialists when addressing such threats. There are two schools of thought regarding employees as a component of a cybersecurity program. The first is that employees are viewed as the weakest link in any information security program. Human vulnerability can range from the careless user bypassing security measures by responding to phishing attacks, to intentional and malicious acts perpetrated by an insider. These are valid concerns. Another school of thought, however, holds that properly trained, robustly supported, and engaged employees serve as an organization's first and best line of defense against cyber threats. While cyber security requires a highly technical skill set, the human dynamic should never be ignored. IT Security experts and threat assessment/management teams should work in close coordination.

A Special Note for our Healthcare Clients

Many cyber experts agree that healthcare organizations will remain prime targets for cybercriminals in 2023. As telemedicine and electronic health records become more common, ransomware and deepfake attacks on the healthcare industry can have a devastating impact. As more patients rely on telehealth platforms to connect with their doctors, have prescriptions filled, and access their sensitive healthcare records, this practice presents extensive vulnerabilities for exploitation by cybercriminals.

Additionally, and with direct consideration of what we now term “Clinical Violence,” the healthcare industry has long been aware that violence against healthcare workers has reached epidemic proportions, impacting both patient care and staff retention. Solutions have been harder to come by, but change may be in the wind. **In 2022, The Joint Commission, the largest healthcare accrediting organization, issued sweeping new standards for workplace violence prevention.** Accredited organizations are now required to conduct a comprehensive annual worksite analysis designed to assess the effectiveness of their respective workplace violence prevention, reporting, and training efforts. Organizations must investigate all reported acts of violence and analyze them to identify trends and gaps. Organizations must also then show progress toward addressing these gaps.

This has widely been viewed as an excellent first step. Data gleaned from the required annual worksite analysis should help the industry develop meaningful and impactful interventions to reduce acts of violence against our healthcare workers.

Extremist groups and single-issue advocacy groups will continue to target healthcare organizations over culture war issues such as transgender healthcare and abortion. Healthcare organizations should develop anticipatory crisis management plans for protests and other forms of civil unrest. Crisis communication plans should also consider specific counter-messaging for false claims.

A Cautionary Tale of Negligent Threat Assessment

(This segment is an excerpt from a longer legal analysis authored by J. Reid Meloy, PhD. and Molly Ammon, JD, which is available on their website https://www.wtsglobal.com)

A recent case out of California (Bowe Cleveland v. Taft Union High School District (Cal. App. 5th, March 25, 2022), addressed the liability and negligence of a school district regarding their threat assessment of a student that resulted in a school shooting. Specifically, the school district employees involved in the threat assessment were found to be **54% responsible for the $3.8 million in total damages** sustained by the plaintiff. This is very significant—the district, in its failures, was deemed to be more responsible than the shooter.

On appeal, the verdict was upheld and the appellate court affirmed there was no blanket immunity to the district for all the actions of the threat assessment/ management team. The appellate court upheld negligence on the part of the district due to the following omissions by the Threat Assessment Team members:

- Failed to carry out the assessment collectively
- Failed to communicate amongst themselves concerning the identified student of concern
- Failed to include the school resource officer in the threat assessment
- Failed to adequately communicate with the subject student's mother
- Failed to recommend counseling to the mother as an intervention tactic
- Failed to collectively continue to monitor the student and update/reassess the safety plan"

The appellate court further opined, "The multiple failures of District employees to handle information with ordinary care combined (i.e., concurred) to cause the assessment team's failure to adequately address the threat the student posed, resulting in plaintiff's injuries. This is not a case of an unknown assailant where the trier of fact had to guess how the unidentified assailant might have been stopped. Here, the causal chain was identified by the expert witness, who testified that if the threat assessment team had operated within the standard of care, it was more likely than not that the shooting would have been prevented."

MAJOR DEVELOPMENT: This opinion has established as case law, a standard of care for threat assessment in California and is now embedded in California civil law, as Bowe Cleveland v. Taft Union High School District, F079926 (Super. Ct. No. S1500CV279256).

This case, currently limited to the educational sector in California, may very well serve as a legal and operational precedent in other jurisdictions and the impact of this decision may not be limited to educational settings. It is not a reach of the imagination to anticipate that employers in non-educational sectors may also be held to a higher standard of care for workplace violence prevention and associated threat assessment/management.

Threat Mitigation Strategies

HAVE A PROGRAM, LIVE THE PROGRAM
If you do not have a workplace violence prevention and intervention program, it's imperative that you start one now!

Have a policy that's both OSHA compliant and meets the current ANSI National Standard for Workplace Violence Prevention and Intervention and that reflects industry best practices. Organizations like the Association of Threat Assessment Professionals (ATAP), the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), the International Association for Healthcare Security and Safety (IAHSS), and ASIS International all offer a wealth of resources for organizations seeking to start a workplace violence prevention program.

If you already have a program, is it doing what it should be doing?
Is your workplace violence prevention and intervention plan sitting in a three-ring binder on a dusty shelf, or do you review and test your plan regularly? Our firm recently worked with one organization that had a very comprehensive and well-written policy regarding WPV prevention and threat assessment. This policy specified a detailed protocol for a Threat Management Team (TMT) that was in full compliance with the current ANSI National Standard. The problem was that nobody other than the authors of the plan was trained on the details of the plan or even knew of its existence. The policy identified specific individuals within the organization as being members of the TMT. However, when we contacted these individuals, not only were they not aware that the organization had a TMT, but were completely unaware that they were supposed to be members of the team!

This organization had all the elements of a good WPV prevention and intervention program in place, yet failed to execute the plan and failed to train its staff resulting in significant exposure to risk.

COMPREHENSIVE GAP ANALYSIS & POLICY REVIEW

This is the time of year for organizations to conduct a comprehensive review of all crisis and contingency plans with the articulated threats above in mind. Organizations must also remain vigilant and mindful of regional and locally focused protest activity. Establishing or enhancing liaison relationships with local law enforcement is also strongly recommended. Security leaders should not wait until they are on the scene of an actual crisis to exchange business cards with their law enforcement counterparts.

CODE-OF-CONDUCT IMPLEMENTATION

Organizations should consider implementing policies that address civility in the workplace and should also consider developing a code of conduct that articulates acceptable workplace behavior. While remaining mindful and respectful of individual beliefs, organizations can craft a code of conduct that describes acceptable behavior. Many organizations, including most governmental agencies, already have policies that restrict or limit political activity or discussion within the workplace (see the Hatch Act of 1939, applicable to U.S. Federal Government employees). Addressing workplace incivility can be an important way for your organization to push workplace violence prevention measures even further upstream. Your efforts here, integrated with other organizational efforts aimed at developing and nurturing an organizational culture that values personal dignity and respect, not only strengthen your program, but increase the overall safety and security of everyone, and that's a goal worth working toward.

Finally, we can help.

Contact us for a free consultation.
We can help you establish, train, and run your threat management team and even provide you with real-time access to an external threat assessment expert through our Virtual Threat Manager® retainer program. Contact us for a gap analysis and full policy review to help eliminate redundant or conflicting guidance and to bring your policy into full alignment with prevailing best practices and vetted guidelines. We can also develop and deliver live and remote training solutions tailored to the needs of your organization.

Why wait? Let's get started!

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