Assessment

(U//FOUO) Rightwing Extremism: Current Economic and Political Climate Fueling Resurgence in Radicalization and Recruitment

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Office of Intelligence and Analysis
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(U) Prepared by the Extremism and Radicalization Branch, Homeland Environment Threat Analysis Division. Coordinated with the FBI.

(U) Scope

(U//FOUO) This product is one of a series of intelligence assessments published by the Extremism and Radicalization Branch to facilitate a greater understanding of the phenomenon of violent radicalization in the United States. The information is provided to federal, state, local, and tribal counterterrorism and law enforcement officials so they may effectively deter, prevent, preempt, or respond to terrorist attacks against the United States. Federal efforts to influence domestic public opinion must be conducted in an overt and transparent manner, clearly identifying United States Government sponsorship.

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(U) Key Findings

(U//LES) The DHS/Office of Intelligence and Analysis (I&A) has no specific information that domestic rightwing* terrorists are currently planning acts of violence, but rightwing extremists may be gaining new recruits by playing on their fears about several emergent issues. The economic downturn and the election of the first African American president present unique drivers for rightwing radicalization and recruitment.

- ***(U//LES) Threats from white supremacist and violent antigovernment groups during 2009 have been largely rhetorical and have not indicated plans to carry out violent acts. Nevertheless, the consequences of a prolonged economic downturn—including real estate foreclosures, unemployment, and an inability to obtain credit—could create a fertile recruiting environment for rightwing extremists and even result in confrontations between such groups and government authorities similar to those in the past.***

- ***(U//LES) Rightwing extremists have capitalized on the election of the first African American president, and are focusing their efforts to recruit new members, mobilize existing supporters, and broaden their scope and appeal through propaganda, but they have not yet turned to attack planning.***

(U//FOUO) The current economic and political climate has some similarities to the 1990s when rightwing extremism experienced a resurgence fueled largely by an economic recession, criticism about the outsourcing of jobs, and the perceived threat to U.S. power and sovereignty by other foreign powers.

- ***(U//FOUO) During the 1990s, these issues contributed to the growth in the number of domestic rightwing terrorist and extremist groups and an increase in violent acts targeting government facilities, law enforcement officers, banks, and infrastructure sectors.***

- ***(U//FOUO) Growth of these groups subsided in reaction to increased government scrutiny as a result of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing and disrupted plots, improvements in the economy, and the continued U.S. standing as the preeminent world power.***

(U//FOUO) The possible passage of new restrictions on firearms and the return of military veterans facing significant challenges reintegrating into their communities could lead to the potential emergence of terrorist groups or lone wolf extremists capable of carrying out violent attacks.

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* (U) Rightwing extremism in the United States can be broadly divided into those groups, movements, and adherents that are primarily hate-oriented (based on hatred of particular religious, racial or ethnic groups), and those that are mainly antigovernment, rejecting federal authority in favor of state or local authority, or rejecting government authority entirely. It may include groups and individuals that are dedicated to a single issue, such as opposition to abortion or immigration.

— ***(U//FOUO) Proposed imposition of firearms restrictions and weapons bans likely would attract new members into the ranks of rightwing extremist groups, as well as potentially spur some of them to begin planning and training for violence against the government. The high volume of purchases and stockpiling of weapons and ammunition by rightwing extremists in anticipation of restrictions and bans in some parts of the country continue to be a primary concern to law enforcement.***

— ***(U//FOUO) Returning veterans possess combat skills and experience that are attractive to rightwing extremists. DHS/I&A is concerned that rightwing extremists will attempt to recruit and radicalize returning veterans in order to boost their violent capabilities.***

(U) Current Economic and Political Climate

(U//FOUO) DHS/I&A assesses that a number of economic and political factors are driving a resurgence in rightwing extremist recruitment and radicalization activity. Despite similarities to the climate of the 1990s, the threat posed by lone wolves and small terrorist cells is more pronounced than in past years. In addition, the historical election of an African American president and the prospect of policy changes are proving to be a driving force for rightwing extremist recruitment and radicalization.

— (U) A recent example of the potential violence associated with a rise in rightwing extremism may be found in the shooting deaths of three police officers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on 4 April 2009. The alleged gunman's reaction reportedly was influenced by his racist ideology and belief in antigovernment conspiracy theories related to gun confiscations, citizen detention camps, and a Jewish-controlled "one world government."

(U) Exploiting Economic Downturn

(U//FOUO) Rightwing extremist chatter on the Internet continues to focus on the economy, the perceived loss of U.S. jobs in the manufacturing and construction sectors, and home foreclosures. Anti-Semitic extremists attribute these losses to a deliberate conspiracy conducted by a cabal of Jewish "financial elites." These "accusatory" tactics are employed to draw new recruits into rightwing extremist groups and further radicalize those already subscribing to extremist beliefs. DHS/I&A assesses this trend is likely to accelerate if the economy is perceived to worsen.

(U) Historical Presidential Election

(U//LES) Rightwing extremists are harnessing this historical election as a recruitment tool. Many rightwing extremists are antagonistic toward the new presidential administration and its perceived stance on a range of issues, including immigration and citizenship, the expansion of social programs to minorities, and restrictions on firearms

ownership and use. Rightwing extremists are increasingly galvanized by these concerns and leverage them as drivers for recruitment. From the 2008 election timeframe to the present, rightwing extremists have capitalized on related racial and political prejudices in expanded propaganda campaigns, thereby reaching out to a wider audience of potential sympathizers.

— (U//LES) Most statements by rightwing extremists have been rhetorical, expressing concerns about the election of the first African American president, but stopping short of calls for violent action. In two instances in the run-up to the election, extremists appeared to be in the early planning stages of some threatening activity targeting the Democratic nominee, but law enforcement interceded.

(U) Revisiting the 1990s

(U//FOUO) Paralleling the current national climate, rightwing extremists during the 1990s exploited a variety of social issues and political themes to increase group visibility and recruit new members. Prominent among these themes were the militia movement's opposition to gun control efforts, criticism of free trade agreements (particularly those with Mexico), and highlighting perceived government infringement on civil liberties as well as white supremacists' longstanding exploitation of social issues such as abortion, inter-racial crimes, and same-sex marriage. During the 1990s, these issues contributed to the growth in the number of domestic rightwing terrorist and extremist groups and an increase in violent acts targeting government facilities, law enforcement officers, banks, and infrastructure sectors.

(U) Economic Hardship and Extremism

(U//FOUO) Historically, domestic rightwing extremists have feared, predicted, and anticipated a cataclysmic economic collapse in the United States. Prominent antigovernment conspiracy theorists have incorporated aspects of an impending economic collapse to intensify fear and paranoia among like-minded individuals and to attract recruits during times of economic uncertainty. Conspiracy theories involving declarations of martial law, impending civil strife or racial conflict, suspension of the U.S. Constitution, and the creation of citizen detention camps often incorporate aspects of a failed economy. Antigovernment conspiracy theories and "end times" prophecies could motivate extremist individuals and groups to stockpile food, ammunition, and weapons. These teachings also have been linked with the radicalization of domestic extremist individuals and groups in the past, such as violent Christian Identity organizations and extremist members of the militia movement.

(U//FOUO) Perceptions on Poverty and Radicalization

(U//FOUO) Scholars and experts disagree over poverty's role in motivating violent radicalization or terrorist activity. High unemployment, however, has the potential to lead to alienation, thus increasing an individual's susceptibility to extremist ideas. According to a 2007 study from the German Institute for Economic Research, there appears to be a strong association between a parent's unemployment status and the formation of rightwing extremist beliefs in their children—specifically xenophobia and antidemocratic ideals.

(U) Illegal Immigration

(U//FOUO) Rightwing extremists were concerned during the 1990s with the perception that illegal immigrants were taking away American jobs through their willingness to work at significantly lower wages. They also opposed free trade agreements, arguing that these arrangements resulted in Americans losing jobs to countries such as Mexico.

(U//FOUO) Over the past five years, various rightwing extremists, including militias and white supremacists, have adopted the immigration issue as a call to action, rallying point, and recruiting tool. Debates over appropriate immigration levels and enforcement policy generally fall within the realm of protected political speech under the First Amendment, but in some cases, anti-immigration or strident pro-enforcement fervor has been directed against specific groups and has the potential to turn violent.

(U//FOUO) DHS/I&A assesses that rightwing extremist groups' frustration over a perceived lack of government action on illegal immigration has the potential to incite individuals or small groups toward violence. If such violence were to occur, it likely would be isolated, small-scale, and directed at specific immigration-related targets.

— (U//FOUO) DHS/I&A notes that prominent civil rights organizations have observed an increase in anti-Hispanic crimes over the past five years.

— (U) In April 2007, six militia members were arrested for various weapons and explosives violations. Open source reporting alleged that those arrested had discussed and conducted surveillance for a machinegun attack on Hispanics.

— (U) A militia member in Wyoming was arrested in February 2007 after communicating his plans to travel to the Mexican border to kill immigrants crossing into the United States.

(U) Legislative and Judicial Drivers

(U//FOUO) Many rightwing extremist groups perceive recent gun control legislation as a threat to their right to bear arms and in response have increased weapons and ammunition stockpiling, as well as renewed participation in paramilitary training exercises. Such activity, combined with a heightened level of extremist paranoia, has the potential to facilitate criminal activity and violence.

— (U//FOUO) During the 1990s, rightwing extremist hostility toward government was fueled by the implementation of restrictive gun laws—such as the Brady Law that established a 5-day waiting period prior to purchasing a handgun and the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act that limited the sale of various types of assault rifles—and federal law enforcement's handling of the confrontations at Waco, Texas and Ruby Ridge, Idaho.

— (U//FOUO) On the current front, legislation has been proposed this year requiring mandatory registration of all firearms in the United States. Similar legislation was introduced in 2008 in several states proposing mandatory tagging and registration of ammunition. It is unclear if either bill will be passed into law; nonetheless, a correlation may exist between the potential passage of gun control legislation and increased hoarding of ammunition, weapons stockpiling, and paramilitary training activities among rightwing extremists.

(U//FOUO) Open source reporting of wartime ammunition shortages has likely spurred rightwing extremists—as well as law-abiding Americans—to make bulk purchases of ammunition. These shortages have increased the cost of ammunition, further exacerbating rightwing extremist paranoia and leading to further stockpiling activity. Both rightwing extremists and law-abiding citizens share a belief that rising crime rates attributed to a slumping economy make the purchase of legitimate firearms a wise move at this time.

(U//FOUO) Weapons rights and gun-control legislation are likely to be hotly contested subjects of political debate in light of the 2008 Supreme Court's decision in *District of Columbia v. Heller* in which the Court reaffirmed an individual's right to keep and bear arms under the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, but left open to debate the precise contours of that right. Because debates over constitutional rights are intense, and parties on all sides have deeply held, sincere, but vastly divergent beliefs, violent extremists may attempt to co-opt the debate and use the controversy as a radicalization tool.

(U) Perceived Threat from Rise of Other Countries

(U//FOUO) Rightwing extremist paranoia of foreign regimes could escalate or be magnified in the event of an economic crisis or military confrontation, harkening back to the "New World Order" conspiracy theories of the 1990s. The dissolution of Communist countries in Eastern Europe and the end of the Soviet Union in the 1990s led some rightwing extremists to believe that a "New World Order" would bring about a world government that would usurp the sovereignty of the United States and its Constitution, thus infringing upon their liberty. The dynamics in 2009 are somewhat similar, as other countries, including China, India, and Russia, as well as some smaller, oil-producing states, are experiencing a rise in economic power and influence.

— (U//FOUO) Fear of Communist regimes and related conspiracy theories characterizing the U.S. Government's role as either complicit in a foreign invasion or acquiescing as part of a "One World Government" plan inspired extremist members of the militia movement to target government and military facilities in past years.

— (U//FOUO) Law enforcement in 1996 arrested three rightwing militia members in Battle Creek, Michigan with pipe bombs, automatic weapons, and military

ordnance that they planned to use in attacks on nearby military and federal facilities and infrastructure targets.

— (U//FOUO) Rightwing extremist views bemoan the decline of U.S. stature and have recently focused on themes such as the loss of U.S. manufacturing capability to China and India, Russia's control of energy resources and use of these to pressure other countries, and China's investment in U.S. real estate and corporations as a part of subversion strategy.

(U) Disgruntled Military Veterans

(U//FOUO) DHS/I&A assesses that rightwing extremists will attempt to recruit and radicalize returning veterans in order to exploit their skills and knowledge derived from military training and combat. These skills and knowledge have the potential to boost the capabilities of extremists—including lone wolves or small terrorist cells—to carry out violence. The willingness of a small percentage of military personnel to join extremist groups during the 1990s because they were disgruntled, disillusioned, or suffering from the psychological effects of war is being replicated today.

— (U) After Operation Desert Shield/Storm in 1990-1991, some returning military veterans—including Timothy McVeigh—joined or associated with rightwing extremist groups.

— (U) A prominent civil rights organization reported in 2006 that "large numbers of potentially violent neo-Nazis, skinheads, and other white supremacists are now learning the art of warfare in the [U.S.] armed forces."

— (U//LES) The FBI noted in a 2008 report on the white supremacist movement that some returning military veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have joined extremist groups.

(U//FOUO) Lone Wolves and Small Terrorist Cells

(U//FOUO) DHS/I&A assesses that lone wolves and small terrorist cells embracing violent rightwing extremist ideology are the most dangerous domestic terrorism threat in the United States. Information from law enforcement and nongovernmental organizations indicates lone wolves and small terrorist cells have shown intent—and, in some cases, the capability—to commit violent acts.

— (U//LES) DHS/I&A has concluded that white supremacist lone wolves pose the most significant domestic terrorist threat because of their low profile and autonomy—separate from any formalized group—which hampers warning efforts.

— (U//FOUO) Similarly, recent state and municipal law enforcement reporting has warned of the dangers of rightwing extremists embracing the tactics of "leaderless resistance" and of lone wolves carrying out acts of violence.

— (U//FOUO) Arrests in the past several years of radical militia members in Alabama, Arkansas, and Pennsylvania on firearms, explosives, and other related violations indicates the emergence of small, well-armed extremist groups in some rural areas.

(U) Outlook

(U//FOUO) DHS/I&A assesses that the combination of environmental factors that echo the 1990s, including heightened interest in legislation for tighter firearms restrictions and returning military veterans, as well as several new trends, including an uncertain economy and a perceived rising influence of other countries, may be invigorating rightwing extremist activity, specifically the white supremacist and militia movements. To the extent that these factors persist, rightwing extremism is likely to grow in strength.

(U//FOUO) Unlike the earlier period, the advent of the Internet and other information-age technologies since the 1990s has given domestic extremists greater access to information related to bomb-making, weapons training, and tactics, as well as targeting of individuals, organizations, and facilities, potentially making extremist individuals and groups more dangerous and the consequences of their violence more severe. New technologies also permit domestic extremists to send and receive encrypted communications and to network with other extremists throughout the country and abroad, making it much more difficult for law enforcement to deter, prevent, or preempt a violent extremist attack.

(U//FOUO) A number of law enforcement actions and external factors were effective in limiting the militia movement during the 1990s and could be utilized in today's climate.

- (U//FOUO) Following the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City, the militia movement declined in total membership and in the number of organized groups because many members distanced themselves from the movement as a result of the intense scrutiny militias received after the bombing.

- (U//FOUO) Militia membership continued to decline after the turn of the millennium as a result of law enforcement disruptions of multiple terrorist plots linked to violent rightwing extremists, new legislation banning paramilitary training, and militia frustration that the "revolution" never materialized.

- (U//FOUO) Although the U.S. economy experienced a significant recovery and many perceived a concomitant rise in U.S. standing in the world, white supremacist groups continued to experience slight growth.

(U//FOUO) DHS/I&A will be working with its state and local partners over the next several months to ascertain with greater regional specificity the rise in rightwing extremist activity in the United States, with a particular emphasis on the political, economic, and social factors that drive rightwing extremist radicalization.

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