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OFFICE OF HOMELAND SECURITY AND PREPAREDNESS

Intelligence. Unclassified. Podcast Episode 21: Round Two with J.M. Berger

Rosemary Martorana, Director of Intelligence, New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness: Hello. I am Rosemary Martorana, Director of Intelligence here at the New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness (NJOHSP) and you are listening to *Intelligence. Unclassified.* This podcast is exactly what the title states: unclassified information about current trends in homeland security for the state of New Jersey, as well as educational information and resources for your awareness. Although it is produced every month, we aim to stay on top of current events and will often offer additional content. If this is your first time listening, then thanks for coming! Please feel free to add this podcast to your RSS feed or iTunes. You can also follow NJOHSP on Twitter @NJOHSP and Facebook. All links can be found in the show notes and on our website www.njohsp.gov.

Rosemary Martorana, Director of Intelligence, New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness: On Friday, May 6, partners from across the mid-Atlantic region gathered together for the inaugural Regional Domestic Terrorism Conference in New Brunswick, New Jersey, to discuss how law enforcement and homeland security professionals may counter the current threat of domestic terrorism. This event hosted by our office, the New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness, in coordination with the New Jersey Regional Intelligence Academy, provided a forum for various organizations from various states to report on the terrorist threat that exists in the United States and in their jurisdictions. Over the next few weeks, you will hear from experts in the field, to include Clint Watts, a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, J.M. Berger, a senior fellow from George Washington University's Center Cyber and Homeland Security, as well as J.J. MacNab, also a fellow from George Washington University's Center for Cyber and Homeland Security. You will also hear from some of our regional partners, like Liberty Day from the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, more commonly known as START, from the University of Maryland. And finally, Thomas Brozowski, counsel for domestic terrorism matters from the US Department of Justice.

Angie Gad, Intelligence Analyst, New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness: Hi, I am Angie Gad and I am an Intelligence Analyst with the New Jersey Office of Homeland Security. Today, I am with J.M. Berger, who is a fellow with George Washington University's Program on Extremism. He is a researcher, analyst, and consultant, with a special focus on extremist activities in the US and use of social media. Mr. Berger is the co-author of *ISIS: The State of Terror* and author of *Jihad Joe: Americans Who Go to War in the Name of Islam*. Mr. Berger publishes the website Intelwire.com and has written for *Politico*, *The Atlantic*, and *Foreign Policy*, among others. To start off Mr. Berger, could you briefly describe your assessment of the domestic terrorism threat today?

J.M. Berger: I think that the domestic extremist scene is really increasingly diverse. We are seeing a lot more activity in a lot of different directions. The anti-government movement has had a real surge in activity over the last couple of years. As we discussed today at the conference, we have seen a huge increase in interest in white nationalism, especially online. There is really very organized activism going on now, pushing that viewpoint out. Certainly since the 1990s, I think we are seeing activity at a level that we have not seen since then.

Gad: Which domestic terrorism group do you perceive to pose the biggest threat to the United States?

Berger: It depends on how you are going to define your threat. The anti-government movement that seized the wildlife refuge in Malheur, Oregon, is obviously very active. They are more organized than most, but still not really that organized. They might be able to cause trouble in a limited space, in a limited period of time that would be a big problem. What is more difficult to quantify is how particularly the increase in white nationalism has been playing out. What we see is that there are certainly a lot of hate crimes, increases in rallies and protest actions, which are becoming more heated and violent as people are becoming more polarized. It is harder to quantify that, but it is probably a bigger movement than the anti-government group. From the perspective of police, sovereign citizens and related movements are the most direct threat to police trying to do their jobs. It is a very diverse threat. It is hard to say any one is more than the other.

Gad: Just last month, was the 21st anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing. Looking back, I wanted to know what your view is on what the most important lessons learned from that event.

Berger: I think there were many lessons of what did not work from that incident. Certainly it woke people up to the concept of domestic extremism in a way that they had not appreciated for a while, since the wave of domestic terrorism in the 1970s died down. People tend to forget. There is about a twenty year cycle of forgetting. The Oklahoma City bombing reminded them. At the same time, I think the investigation of the Oklahoma City bombing failed to really probe into networks. Someone yesterday asked me, "What would be the difference if the Oklahoma City bombing happened today, as opposed to the 1990s?" We are much more conscience of the networks and of the fact that it is extraordinarily rare for someone to really be lone wolf terrorist. I think everyone was very happy to write McVeigh off as a lone wolf, but he came out of both a social context and probably a material support context that helped him carry out that bombing.

Gad: After 9/11, we saw the intelligence community was restructured and there is more focus on international terrorism. Was there the same after the Oklahoma City bombing?

Berger: It was the reverse actually. There was a huge focus on these guys up until about 1992-1993, at which point, because the FBI had actually overreached so much in investigating them that they got knocked back and ordered to stand down. The FBI essentially had a massive infiltration into domestic right-wing groups. I mean massive, with informants and undercover operations. And they escalated to the level that some people near the top of the agency and some judges looked at this and said, "You are not investigating a crime. This is domestic intelligence gathering of the type that is not constitutional." And then obviously attitudes towards jihadists

was so different, too. They knew that these guys were coming back and forth from Afghanistan, they just did not count them. Nobody has a reasonable count.

Gad: Looking at Ruby Ridge and Waco, Texas, the standoffs there, what lessons do you think we have learned from law enforcement's encounter with those two standoffs? And, did you see those being applied in the Oregon standoff this year?

Berger: I think we definitely saw the lessons of Waco and Ruby Ridge being applied to a fault at the Malheur standoff. In the case of Ruby Ridge, there were clear problems in how the FBI handled that situation. In the case of Waco, there was a huge loss of life, although arguably less culpability for the FBI in that encounter. But in both cases, they really inflamed domestic extremist movements. One thing we know about how domestic extremist movements differ from international movements is that domestic actors usually need a specific grievance. They need to feel like they did not fire the first shot. An event like Ruby Ridge or Waco gives them that cause. What we saw in Malheur was that this standoffishness was almost at comical levels, because these guys were out there for weeks before the FBI even had a visible presence. I think a lot of people were justifiably unhappy about that. In the end, when they finally did wrap it up, they ended up shooting one of these guys anyway and kind of creating the potential for that caussi belli that can provoke a swell in violence. I think the lesson learned from Malheur is that we maybe overlearned the lessons from Ruby Ridge and Waco.

Gad: On that note, since Waco the federal government seemed to take a more patient approach when it comes to standoff situations with anti-government extremists. Do you see any risks in continuing that same approach?

Berger: Yes. I think that there is wisdom in holding off. And part of the wisdom in holding off in a situation like this is based on your expectation of the group. The problem is that it does start to create a double standard, which then fuels other grievances and other kinds of social unrest and extremist unrest. One of the most common things you saw in the description of this was what if these guys had all been black? Would the FBI and state authorities have held off as long as they did? And the answer is probably not. You need to be sensitive to that double standard. But at the same time, if you can deescalate the situation, any time you can deescalate the situation so that nobody gets hurt, that is a good thing.

Gad: What do you think is the state of the anti-government movement in the wake of the Oregon standoff? Is it more or less unified? You spoke about how they killed Robert LaVoy Finnicum and how that can fuel more things in the future.

Berger: I think that it is more fractured right now, in the wake of these events, because there was a really big division in anti-government circles around the decision to take control of the refuge. When it went badly, I think there was a lot of backbiting, second-guessing, and backseat driving. Everybody is kind of mad at everybody else. The people who are doing the criticizing are the people who did not show up. And the people who showed up are mad at the people staying at home and criticizing. There is a core group of people who are probably the bigger violence risk who are really incensed by what happened. Some of those may be pulling together into smaller

groups. In terms of the effect on the wider movement, I think this was very demoralizing for them.

Gad: Shifting topics a little to ISIS and white supremacist groups, when we look at both of those groups, to me they appear to be a little more cult-oriented. What I mean by that is the two groups tend to isolate themselves and are very exclusive. They hold a very bipolar view of the world, an us-versus-them mentality. In terms of new recruits, they become isolated from external social connections and new relationships are forged within these movements. That being said, what other similarities can you identify between ISIS and white supremacists?

Berger: Well, they are both identity politics, really. It is ultimately about your identity group and being superior and dominant over all other identity groups. Fundamentally, a lot of people, when they talk about ISIS, they want to talk about is ISIS Islamic, is this a problem with Muslims that is causing the rise of a group like this? For me, when I look at ISIS, I see a group that is more similar to other extremist groups, no matter what the stripe, whether it is white nationalists or Christian religious cult or a Mormon cult. To me, ISIS is a very characteristic extremist group and not a very characteristic Muslim group. It is the same thing with white nationalism. When you look at a group like the Copter, or the National Socialist Movement, or Hammerskins operates, they operate on that tight organizational basis. It is not really like the average white person.

Gad: Lastly, just to wrap up, what books are you currently reading that you could recommend to our listeners?

Berger: Well, one that I read recently was LaVoy Finnicum's book, *Only by Blood and Suffering*, which is a dystopian novel of grazing rights gone bad, basically. I think that it is kind of interesting because with his death, the book is selling remarkably well. Now, the question is whether it has content that is something to be concerned about when you compare it to a book like *The Turner Diaries*. *The Turner Diaries*, I think, is a much more incitement to violence than this book. This book is kind of quirky and characteristic of this anti-Bureau of Land Management movement. A lot of it is about land management, but it also features an EMP going off, and a lot of different survivalist how-to tips. When I read the book, and when I came away from it, I was not sure exactly what the message it was trying to convey was. It did not have a clear call to action. But it is certainly putting a lot of eyes on the content that is written from this domestic extremist perspective. I think that is something to keep in mind. It is about an EMP goes off in the United States and then a family has to come together on a ranch and fight off petty Bureau of Land Management barbarians, and others trying to oppress them, as society breaks down. It is kind of unintentionally funny if you are not in the movement because there are scenes like stops at a state park to camp, and then there is fascist camp ranger who does not necessarily line up with your experience with the park system.

Gad: Well, Mr. Berger thank you so much for speaking with us today.

Berger: Thank you.

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