Center for Strategic and International Studies

Online Event

"Domestic Terrorism and the U.S. Presidential Election"

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FEATURING:
Brian Michael Jenkins,
Senior Advisor to the RAND President, RAND

CSIS EXPERTS:
Seth G. Jones,
Harold Brown Chair; Director, Transnational Threats Project;
Senior Advisor, International Security Program, CSIS

Suzanne Spaulding,
Senior Advisor, Homeland Security, International Security Program, CSIS

Transcript By
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Seth G. Jones: My name is Seth Jones. I am the Harold Brown Chair and the director of the Transnational Threats Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

And I'm joined by several outstanding experts on this subject. We have Brian Michael Jenkins, the senior adviser to the RAND president, and as I'll note shortly has been working on issues related to terrorism and extremism for five decades. So, Brian, kudos to you for sticking with this subject as long as you have. It is more important than it's ever been.

I'm also joined by Suzanne Spaulding, a colleague of mine at CSIS. She's a senior adviser in homeland security in the International Security Program; and also former undersecretary of defense in the Department of Homeland Security, where she led the National Protection and Programs Directorate, which is now called Cybersecurity and Information Security Agency.

We were also supposed to be joined by Cathy Lanier, who is the former D.C. police chief and senior vice president and chief security officer of the National Football League. Unfortunately, if you have not been following the NFL news, they've been dealing with a COVID crisis on one of the NFL teams, so she has had to deal with some ongoing issues. And we are working to reschedule something with her at a future date.

So, the way we're going to do this is we're going to begin with a discussion amongst the panel here, and then we're going to move to a question and answer with all of you. Some of you have already submitted questions. Please go to the homepage at CSIS, the events page for this particular event, and there is a button to press to submit questions. Submit your questions and we'll try and get as many of them as we can. We already have a handful of very good questions.

Our goal today in this political climate is to have a realistic, substantive, unemotional discussion in that sense of the domestic landscape, but to also recognize the resilience of Americans. They've dealt with major issues in the past. And before we start, I wanted to quote U.S. President Abraham Lincoln in his Second Inaugural Address in 1865 as a reminder from that period. He said: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations." Abraham Lincoln, 1865.

So Brian, let me go to you first. You've been working on terrorism since the 1970s. It's a half-century. What are your – what are your current causes for concern regarding the domestic violence, including terrorism, picture today as we move closer to the November elections?

Brian Michael Jenkins: Well, there's no question that the country is in a strange situation right now and that the anxiety felt by the people is both palpable and understandable under the – under the circumstances. The country faces a broad spectrum of potential scenarios ranging from no violence at all connected with the elections all the way, according to some pundits, the possible of – possibility of civil war.

I would say we can probably set aside the two extremes. A completely tranquil election seems unlikely. The country has been experiencing nationwide protests for months now. It is unlikely that all of that will suddenly disappear on November 3, so complete peace is unlikely. I think at the other end of the spectrum, so is civil war.

The more likely scenarios lie between public protests with isolated, spontaneous acts of violence and eventually, not immediately, more organized terrorist campaigns similar to those seen in the 1970s, which followed the very turbulent 1960s. I think the pandemic and the protests have contributed to radicalization and some connectivity, but at least initially political violence is likely to be unorganized, carried out more by lone actors or gangs than things that we can correctly call organizations.

I think it's important to keep in mind that violent extremists represent probably only a tiny fraction of the population, but they command disproportionate attention. Much of the extremist rhetoric online is chest-thumping and fantasy threats. However, as we've seen around the world in places like the Balkans in the 1990s or more recently in the Arab Spring beginning in 2011, things can escalate rapidly.

I know you used the term "terrorism," and I understand it here in the context that we are discussing it, but terrorism in my view is a term best avoided in dealing with these circumstances. People have called for new domestic terrorism statutes. They've called for new designations of terrorist groups. I think those are not needed and could be counterproductive.

I think the likelihood and nature of any violence will depend on a number of variables. Who wins the election, in fact, may be less important than by the margin and how soon we know it. I think that we have to think about the possibilities in terms of three separate timeframes. One is Election Day. The second is from Election Day to inauguration, what happens during the counts and the battles that may come into the courts. And then I think a third period beyond inauguration. Each will have its own motives and modes of violence. I think the consequences of the current political turmoil could persist well into the next decade. And finally, predictably, there will be unpredictable events.

Seth G. Jones: Thanks, Brian.

Before we spend a little bit more time digging into several of those aspects, I wanted to turn to Suzanne for a moment to talk specifically in and around Election Day. So how should we prepare for the immediate period around elections, Suzanne, including on Election Day? What types of threats are you concerned about? And how should voters think about this? I mean, I think in one very, very real sense none of this should dissuade people from voting. So how do you think about the threats and the responses around Election Day?

(Pause.)

You're on mute.

Suzanne Spaulding: Hate that.

We have started the election already, of course. We've got people voting all across the country, either in person or submitting their mail-in ballots. So we are – we are in the election. And I – you know, the point that was made that, you know, people should not be dissuaded from exercising their civic responsibility and right to vote is absolutely the right point.

We've seen, you know, just the, you know, minimal indications so far of, you know, supporters showing up around voting places, but we really haven't seen the kind of violence or even efforts – real efforts at intimidation yet that folks have predicted. And there is a very strong legal framework, certainly, that prevents the use of federal forces around polling places and election-related facilities, barring – it's 18 U.S.C. § 592, 593, 594 – barring the deployment of troops or armed men, civilians, to polling places, that prohibit federal employees really from interfering with, that prohibit intimidation of voters. So we have a strong legal framework, and that is backed up by a very strong normative that goes back in our history, ethic around not deploying certainly federal law enforcement and even state and local law enforcement – there are state law all across the country and local restrictions – so as to not intimidate voters from showing up and voting, given our past history.

I do think that we need to be mindful that the prospect of violence – Brian talked about spontaneous eruptions of violence or other inspired acts of violence – around election-related places will, in fact, strain that norm and those legal restrictions. And what – so what federal, state, and local law enforcement need to be doing now – and I believe they are – is that contingency planning for how to deal with any violence between now and Election Day and post-Election Day without – but particularly in the runup to the elections, without appearing in any way to intimidate or interfere with those elections. And listen, this is not the first time we've had concerns about potential violence at election places, and I believe that state and local election officials working with their local law enforcement are capable of developing ways to deal with that.

I do think it's really important – one of the challenges that we have, Seth, with this discussion we're having this afternoon, and that those of us who are trying to plan for every eventuality, one of the challenges we have is not to somehow speak into existence the things that we are trying to protect against, and certainly to – you know, to be sure that nothing that we do to prepare or train for eventualities somehow normalizes them in any way. And so I think that's a – that's an important task, but a real challenge for all of us.

Seth G. Jones: Yeah, I think that's right. And it's also interesting to note that the levels of violence in the United States, including numbers of attacks we've seen, has been relatively low, including fatalities, from far-right/far-left networks, certainly compared to some of the major attacks we've seen, let's say, 7/7 in London or the Madrid attacks. So I think it's also important to put some of this into perspective.

I want to look at, Brian, the domestic landscape, the extremist landscape right now, and how would you characterize it. I mean, one of the things that strikes me in looking at it is the U.S. has certainly dealt with extremist groups since 9/11, some of which are relatively centralized – al-Qaida had a leadership, led

first by Osama bin Laden and then by Ayman al-Zawahiri. The same with the Islamic State, which had a leadership structure under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi before he was killed earlier this – earlier last year. So we've had – we've had some centralized groups. What we see in the domestic landscape is – appears pretty decentralized, where some networks are inspired by the concept of leaderless resistance.

And so if we look at what some might call the far right, we've got White supremacist networks operating, we've got some of the anti-government militias. We have now some pro-government militias, pretty localized in nature; some of the involuntary celibates, the incels.

On the far left, we have some anarchists, some anti-fascists. We have historically in the U.S. dealt with environmental liberation and Animal Liberation Front extremists.

And then we also have some religious, including some inspired by ideologies like Salafi jihadism that al-Qaida and the Islamic State have been inspired by.

But the landscape, to me, seems very decentralized, and so it's often hard even to talk about groups. Whether you're talking about Antifa or White supremacists, I mean, occasionally we get groups like The Base or Atomwaffen Division, but oftentimes we're talking about individuals and networks. How would you characterize the landscape? And what are the implications of that?

Brian Michael Jenkins: Seth, I would agree with you that the landscape of the domestic terrorist groups is very different from what we have seen in dealing with the jihadist-inspired terrorism of 9/11 and since 9/11. We have really very few entities that could be called organizations. I mean, there are thousands of websites. There are constellations within universes. But really, it is not – it is not well organized. These are not discrete – in every case discrete organizations. And in fact, they represent, really, an assemblage of grievances and causes, as you correctly pointed out. I mean, we're talking about White supremacism. We're talking about anti-Semitic elements. We're talking about anti-federal government elements. We're talking about incel elements. We're talking about simple nativists. We're talking about ultranationalists. It is – it is really a conveyor for a lot of – a lot of grievances. It's a set of attitudes. And that is a real challenge that the authorities are going to be facing in terms of dealing with this.

The fact is that with al-Qaida and later with ISIS, there was – there at least was something that looked like a central command. There were communications. There were exhortations to homegrown terrorists. There was some degree of connectivity, although it became – it has become looser over the years as we've pounded on the centers of these organizations and they were reduced to greater reliance on exhortation.

It makes it very, very difficult when we talk about designating groups. Either we're going to designate mindsets and grievances or we're going to end up designating literally hundreds, if not thousands of separate groups, which may range all the way from something like a small organization all the way to a single individual with a website. And that is a greater challenge.

I also think, by the way, that for the authorities as they move from dealing with jihadist-inspired terrorism – and by the way, I should point out they have been very effective in dealing with this. If we look at the jihadists that have attempted to carry out attacks in this country, carried out attacks, have gone abroad to join jihadist fronts or have attempted to do so, there's some 400 to 500 individuals in total. Not a significant turnout to the exhortations. But 70 percent of them ended up in prison in long – facing long sentences. Those who managed to evade the authorities and make it to an al-Qaida front or an ISIS front in Syria, about half of them we know have been killed. Of these 400-some, there's probably only 40 are still – that theoretically may still be at large. So it's been a path to destruction. The authorities have been effective.

The authorities are good at this. They know how to do this. They will be facing a different environment here, though, in that a lot of the latitude that they had in dealing with jihadists after 9/11 is not going to be there. A lot of the definitions of material support, which was used in dealing with the foreign-inspired terrorism, is not going to be available. It's going to really raise First Amendment rights. What does it mean if you share the attitudes of Antifa? What does it mean if, in fact, you are – you are broadcasting propaganda of the extreme right? It's a completely different set of rules.

And that's why I say in dealing with this new environment we would be well advised to stick with the crime and stay away from the political motives. Murder is murder. Bombing is bombing. Intimidation with weapons and threats is just that. Deal with the crimes. Prosecutors don't have to get into the motives. And I think that will be best, as I say, not to portray every single one of these in a political context.

Seth G. Jones: Thanks, Brian.

We've been spending a lot of time talking about domestic, although we have talked a little bit about the international groups like al-Qaida and ISIS. Suzanne, there is another international component that U.S. intelligence, law enforcement, private sector including Microsoft and others have been identifying as well, and that is the threat coming from other foreign actors, particularly foreign governments. So, many have expressed concern about the activities of Russia, of China. From your perspective, what are they doing? What are their objectives? And how serious of a threat do you assess they pose to the U.S. and more broadly its democratic institutions?

Suzanne Spaulding: Yeah. So I'll start with China. China is engaged in pretty significant influence operations, but they are not specifically really focused in a major way on the election or on our democratic institutions. I think – listen, I expect that kind of activity from China to grow in time. There are all kinds of reasons why it is in their interest, just as it is in Russia's interest, to denigrate our democracy and our democratic institutions as we compete for influence around the world. But so far that has really not been the nature of their activities.

As you can tell from – you know, from reading closely the intelligence community's reports, and certainly from work by civil society think tanks all across the country, the much bigger concern with respect to our elections really is Russia and its information operations. And they take advantage of exactly the

kinds of grievances that you guys have been talking about, right, you know, from the racial injustice grievances through to the incel and the Red Pill. I mean, Russia gets into those areas where there are grievances and amplifies and exploits them.

Their goal, put simply, is to weaken us. It is to weaken our ability to have influence around the world by trying to show our democracy that it is as weak and chaotic and corrupt as Russia's. China has a model they believe they can hold up as an example, as an alternative. As a – around the world, Putin knows he has no shining example in Russia to show. And so his objective is to pull us down to his level and to convince his own population that they should not long for Western-style democracy – that's the most important, I believe, of his audiences – to convince those around the world where we compete for influence, and to convince Americans that our democracy is not all it's cracked up to be, and that in fact it is irrevocably broken.

The goal, I believe, is to cause Americans to disengage, to cause us to lose the informed and engaged citizenry upon which our democracy depends. And there's a very pernicious strain there that is, indeed, designed to pour gasoline on the – on the strains of division that already – fires of division that already engulf our online discourse particularly, but all of our discourse across this country all too often.

And you see it in Russia's strategic documents. Again, in Gerasimov's, you know, military doctrine, for example, it talks about tapping into the protest potential of the population. So trying to turn people out into the streets not in the kind of peaceful protests that we've seen all across this country around racial injustice where individuals believe that by their presence on the street they can bring about change; what Putin wants to convince us of is that change is not possible, and to provoke instead the kind of violence that comes from that kind of despair.

So I think this is a ready-made situation that Russia will definitely not be able to resist the temptation to amplify, to exploit, and to make worse. And I think it's really important that the social media platforms double down on their efforts to very quickly identify Russian infrastructure that is coordinated inauthentic activity out there even if it's promoting domestic voices, to identify that infrastructure that was created by Russia, affinity groups and networks, and bring that to light; that the intelligence community continue to inform the public as fully as it can about the narratives that Russia is pushing, that these intelligence reports are not stifled but make it out and inform state and local officials and wherever possible the public, because we have learned that that is a way of inoculating and building resilience within this – within the public against these kinds of pernicious messaging.

And then, ultimately, over the long term we need to build that public resilience in a number of ways, including by reinvigorating civics education so that we can be reminded about what our shared values are, that democracy is worth fighting for, that it must be fought for because it is under attack, that it is up to each and every one of us to defend it. And that means not just understanding the value of democracy, but also the ways in which we must hold our institutions accountable for their shortcomings, and empower individuals to be effective agents of change so that they don't despair at the prospect for change. The

strength of democracy, in contrast to authoritarian regimes, is our capacity for change.

Seth G. Jones: We'll get back a little bit later to the issue of resiliency and what gives both of you hope as we move deeper into the fall and then into the post-election period. But let me turn to Brian and I on the post-election scenarios, in the days, weeks, and even months after the November elections. Brian, what's your sense about possible scenarios that we need to be prepared for? I think we've got to be mindful of what Suzanne mentioned earlier, that we don't want to assume that any of this will happen, but I think any good law enforcement government agency has to prepare for a variety of outcomes. I mean, as I see what happens in November with a Biden win, particularly outright, I think that the incendiary remarks we've heard from some White supremacists, some in the Boogaloo movement, some of the militias, there are accusations that are, obviously, completely erroneous about the U.S. becoming a Marxist or a communist state. There have been conspiracy theories from networks like QAnon. Most of the violence, according to our dataset, that has occurred from these kinds of organizations generally are firearms-related attacks, although we have seen in the summer an uptick in vehicle attacks from these groups driving into demonstrations. I think if Trump wins, on the other hand, the election, we're probably more likely to see larger crowds and potentially individuals involved in urban civil unrest and potentially violence, not always necessarily terrorism by any means. I worry if the process is drawn out that we need to think about the protection and security of our judges, our law enforcement officials, our politicians, especially if a resolution doesn't quickly happen.

So my view is, in part, the way that we need to prepare for the possibility of violence depends in part on what happens in the days and weeks after the election. But I'd be very interested in how you see, you know, mid to late November, December, January, and even as we get early into 2021.

Brian Michael Jenkins: Well, no, I think those are apt comments, Seth. And if we look at the period, say, between November 3rd and inauguration, and assume for a moment that we have a contested election, or at least some portions of it are contested – a lot of it will be obvious, but it may come down to a handful of states, where there are protracted litigation about the outcome. In those circumstances, I would agree with you that I think that protests – there will be street protests. I think the protests will attract counter demonstrations.

What we have seen in the protests thus far – you mentioned the car ramming attacks – these car ramming attacks are interesting. For the most part, they are not the replicas of the earlier terrorist car-ramming attacks, where an individual gets into a truck and tries to drive at high speed into a crowd, killing as many as possible. In fact, fortunately, only a few people have been killed as a result of these. These are rather confrontations and might even be described as premeditated belligerence. That is, displays of defiance. You know, I'll put decals and flags all over my pickup truck and I'll show these people that they dare not stand in my way. That certainly is one dimension of violence we could see.

I would also agree that as we get into decisions being made by judges and by political leadership, that the danger to them increases. Again, we've already seen

this in the COVID-19 virus cases, where judges have been threatened – their lives have been threatened based upon decisions. Or in the other protests going on, where threats are made against individuals. Most of these are – will remain the realm of threats. But it's entirely possible that holding public office may become a more dangerous profession as we go through this period.

I think beyond the inauguration, depending on what happens, we do have the possibility that some of the passion that's generated during this interim period will inspire handfuls of individuals out on the extremist fringes to carry on campaigns that may look very much like those in the 1970s. Again, if we go back in time, we saw a very turbulent 1960s, a lot of mass protest, mass confrontations. But it spawned off on its extremist fringe groups like the Weather Underground, the New World Liberation Front, and so on. And people don't recall that in the 1970s we were dealing with 50-60 terrorist bombings a year in this country. And we survived dealing with that. The authorities dealt with it. So there may be a long tail to this, which will go beyond inauguration day. But that will be a challenge for the authorities.

So three periods: Election Day, intimidation disruptions, the interim period until inauguration, things aimed at intimidation, confrontations at protests, and potentially trying to upset the counts and the recounts, and then after inauguration perhaps the emergence down the line of some tiny, but more organized, groups.

Seth G. Jones: Thanks, Brian. I want to get to everybody's questions now. So, Suzanne, I'm going to turn to you with one of the first questions that we have. And let me just read it. How can there be measures to reduce the misuse of police and the military to handle peaceful protesters? So I think that gets into the issue of different types of agencies, federal and law enforcement, and then different types of issues, including protests.

Suzanne Spaulding: Yeah. Yeah. It's a great question, and obviously a very timely question, an important one. Again, there are – you know, it starts with a couple of basic premises that everybody needs to understand. The first and most fundamental is that ours is a government of enumerated powers. In some countries the government can do anything that isn't prohibited or restricted. In our country, that is the right of individual citizens. We can – we can do anything that isn't restricted or prohibited. But the government can only do the things that it has been specifically authorized by the Constitution or by the law to do.

And so you look at the authorizing language for, for example, these federal forces. And as the undersecretary at the Department of Homeland Security, I led the organization that at that time included the Federal Protective Service, for example. FPS has a very clear mission of protecting federal buildings, federal property, and the people who work and visit them every day. And that's the scope of its authority. And the secretary does have the authority to detail other law enforcement forces within the department to FPS. But then they are operating under FPS' authorities. They can leave the federal property to investigate crimes related to that federal property protection mission, but they are not a national police force.

So we start with understanding that there are certain authorities, and those define the limits of what our federal forces can do. There's a – even in those contexts, there is a very strong precedent, ethic, and in some places statutory reinforcement that we defer, first and foremost, to state and local law enforcement. And again, this is a very longstanding policy based on some real commonsense understandings that our state and local law enforcement folks are in the best position to deal with these kinds of – you know, whether it's civil unrest of peaceful protest. And part of that is because instinctively, traditionally, and generally – and there are exceptions, of course – but that state and law enforcement, they're members of the community and their goal is the safety and security of that community.

So that goes to another important norm, ethic, and culture that needs to be really reinforced with any federal deployment. And that is that the mission of any such deployment is to deescalate, is to deter violence, not to dominate, right? And so – but if we have exhausted those civilian resources, the next level up is the deployment of the National Guard. They can be deployed under the governor, or they could be federalized. If they're federalized, they cannot engage in law enforcement activities. That's a violation of what we call the Posse Comitatus Act. There is an exception for that if there's an insurrection. But that is rarely invoked, and usually to protect Constitutional rights like freedom of assembly or the right to vote.

So those – you know, those are some of the fundamental principles. And then last and very rarely invoked is the deployment of other armed military – active-duty military. And I think you can see, even in the statements, late as they may have been, from Secretary of Defense Esper and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the strong norm there against the use of military forces, certainly for any political purposes. And so again, I think there's a legal framework in place here, there are normative frameworks in place.

But I think some of the key things we need to focus on: always emphasizing the mission is to deescalate, that the state and local folks are the supported command, if you will. That they are the ones that really have the lead in these sorts of things. Make sure that any federal forces that are deployed are clearly identified. That's, you know, really important for accountability and transparency. And I think, you know, particularly if we're worried about a pretextual deployment, any deployment that's based on, you know, we're getting intelligence about, Congress and local authorities ought to be – ought to insist on being briefed on the intelligence that supports them. So those are a few of the things that I think, you know, folks are thinking about in terms of ways to mitigate the potential for an escalation rather than a de-escalation.

Seth G. Jones: Thanks, Suzanne. I think that's a really important point. This is not about crushing dissent. This is about deescalating a situation and preventing it from escalating into further violence, either more serious uses of violence or the spreading of violence to other areas.

Brian, I want to turn to you for another question. And this was an issue that did come up at the debate last night – the presidential debate last night. And the question is, in last night's debate we heard the president tell the group Proud Boys to "stand back and stand by," followed by the insinuation that someone

needed to respond to antifa and far-left movements. In what ways can we expect these words to impact this coming election? And on the other hand, this individual asks, the vice president denounced White supremacy but stated that he is not in favor of defunding police, which is a demand, the questioner says, of Black Lives Matter advocates. Can we expect to see more protests in response to this statement? What is your sense of both of those questions?

Brian Michael Jenkins: Well, with regard to the president's statement about Proud Boys, I'm not – I'm not going to try to fathom what exactly the president was thinking about. I'm not nationally recognized in the field of remote psychoanalysis. So I'm going to leave that part. What is obvious, however, is that there are those who are in this entity, the Proud Boys. Those who may subscribe to similar beliefs, that will take – that will interpret that statement as an endorsement of their positions. And, indeed, will interpret that as instructions to, in a sense, be ready for action if called upon. So whatever was the intention of the statement, we know how it is – it has been interpreted, is being interpreted by the individuals themselves. And, you know, how then they will respond to what triggers, again, that we don't know. But they regard themselves as a force. They now regard themselves as having an official endorsement. And they will define – they will define a role for themselves.

With regard to the issue of defunding police, again, this is – this is a term that is somewhat vague and means a lot of things. I mean, for some, I suppose, in the extreme it means we're going to abolish police departments. That's absurd. I don't think anyone is – can seriously be thinking about that. Are there some areas – are there some areas where we rely on police to do things which is not part of their primary mission and for which they don't have particular training? I mean, as a concrete example, certainly one of the most dangerous call outs for police are dealing with people who are suffering psychotic episodes or who are obviously mentally disturbed individuals. They are unpredictable. Because our society has decided to put more resources in law enforcement and not put so many resources into dealing with mental health in our society – which is a major – which is a major issue – we rely on police forces to be the frontline of our mental health system.

It's not a job that the police necessarily want. It's not something they're particularly trained for. And indeed, some of the protocols that come with taking people into custody, even if it is for self – even if it is to protect themselves, exacerbates situations. For example, you know, a requirement to put people into constraints. Well, if you're dealing with certain kinds of mental illness or mental episodes, that is only going to exacerbate the situation.

If the police bring them into psych wards and hospitals, the hospitals cannot retain them beyond a certain point. Give them some medications and in a few days they're back on the streets until they are picked up the next time. That's simply not probably, in terms of society, the most effective way of dealing with this problem. And it's one that we probably can figure out, gee, do we – do we want to approach this in different ways? I don't think that means defund. I mean, it rather is looking at a different problem in a different way.

Now, look, in the United States there are – I don't know the exact figure – but there are about 17-18,000 different police jurisdictions in this country. There

are about 800,000, approximately, sworn police officers. Those police, with that many, are going to reflect all – are going to reflect the society. They're going to biases. They're going to have prejudices. Some of them are going to be more effective, some less effective. That comes with simply being this large of a country. They operate in an extremely difficult environment.

I know when we – when we are critical of police drawing their guns, this is a heavily armed society. And they do face danger. This is not – I'm not protecting misconduct by police here, but they have a rough task. It is incumbent upon those departments – incumbent upon the leadership of those departments to institute codes of conduct, appropriate training, accountability that will deal with this. You deal with this in the military. You deal with it in the police department. You deal with it in any large organization.

And so – and when we talk about some of these – last night people were getting – people were obliged – well, they didn't always abide by it – but two-minute answers. There are complex problems that don't lend themselves to two-minute answers, let alone to bumper sticker slogans. And as we think about this, I mean, we really have to be serious and think about exactly what we're – what we're doing here. So when say defund the police, what the hell does that mean? And what makes sense? And what is absolute nonsense?

Seth G. Jones: Thanks, Brian. I'm going to – I'm going to ask one last question – I'll take this one – and then I'm going to ask each of you a final question, which is: What gives you hope as we move into the final stages of the election and the post-election period?

The question is – comes from one of you – that I believe it falls within the purview of the FBI to establish a unit to balance the equities between national security and Constitutional protections and establishing rules of engagement to penetrate and preempt acts of violence attendant to the 2020 election that goes beyond simply making prosecutable cases. Is the FBI trained and willing to do so? I mean, there are a lot of questions embedded in there. I just wanted to hit a couple of issues that I takeaway, particularly regarding the FBI, which would be the lead for several issues that have been raised tonight, including counterterrorism, as well as counterintelligence. Some of the issues that Suzanne mentioned would be under the jurisdiction of the FBI, as well as the Department of Homeland Security, and others.

Let me just say this, having spent some time working at Hoover for the FBI, is I think when we look at the FBI's trajectory in the United States, they have a track record of penetrating, taking down a range of domestic extremist groups in the United States. They range from groups like The Order and Order II to The Covenant, the Sword, and the Arm of the Lord. This is not the first time we've had a range of individuals and networks on the domestic side that have plotted, planned, and then even executed attacks in this country, from within America's soil. But I would say there are a few things worth noting along those lines.

One is, when we actually look at attacks, what we don't see right now is part of what we saw after 9/11, which is an organization that plots and plans attacks the way Bin Laden did 9/11 or the way we saw the Paris attacks in 2015 in November, partially plotted, planned, and executed by an external operations

cell of an organization. Violence is very individualized, so that even within extremist networks what we've seen in our data over the past couple of years is individuals choose on an individual basis to conduct attacks. That does make it notably more difficult to preempt, because what it does is it – you can't just penetrate an organization or a network when it's an individual who is perpetrating an attack. So I think it does – it does – it does create significant difficulties for organizations like the FBI and the Joint Terrorism Taskforces that are involved in these investigations.

Domestic terrorism and domestic violence is also inherently bottom up, as we've already talked about. So I think that sense this cannot just be in terms of preempting or preventing attacks. This cannot just be the FBI. This must be local agencies that are really the eyes and ears of the local communities, which is inherently a bottom-up process. In many ways, it's very different from the international terrorism that we've seen historically. And I think there there's a lot of variation in how well equipped some law enforcement agencies are to identify some of this extremist violence and to take preventive action.

And then the third issue is – and this is a broader subject really not for today – you know, there are some issues related to domestic terrorism statutes and designations that are not in place at this point in part because of the decentralized nature of extremism in the United States. So I do think it makes it – it makes the situation the FBI and other agencies have to deal with different from what we've seen in past eras, and also different, in some ways, from the way they dealt with international terrorism. And again, as I look at domestic extremism in the United States, our law enforcement agencies – including federal ones – have dealt with a lot over the past several decades, not just the period we're in. And we've come out fine in any of those previous eras.

So let me turn first to Brian and then to Suzanne. What makes you hopeful as we move into the election period? I want to make sure we leave with some sense that we're a resilient society, not all is doom and gloom. So, Brian, what gives you some hope?

Brian Michael Jenkins: Well, we are a resilient society, although we happen to be in a strange situation where the future of the country seems to depend more on the good sense of its people than of its political leadership. Look, elections are not about anointing saviors or rooting out antichrists. Regardless of their political differences, I think that most Americans – most Americans – are tired of the political pandemonium. They want to get on with their lives, especially in the shadow of COVID-19 and its devastating economic consequences. I don't think the majority of Americans are seeking a national revolution. And we will not tolerate tyranny. And so I suppose my sense of optimism just comes from the courage, the self-reliance, the resiliency, and the sense of community of the American citizenry.

Seth G. Jones: Thanks, Brian.

Suzanne, you get the last word.

Suzanne Spaulding: Well, Brian is exactly right. At the end of the day what gives me the greatest hope, of course, is that Americans are not easily scared. And they will – they will,

I think, fight to sustain our shared principles and our shared values at the end of the day. But they are sustained in this. And the reason that it's worth fighting for is that our constitutional republic is strong. I do believe in the strength of the – of the system that our framers created, that others have perfected, that is an ongoing struggle toward a more perfect union. I do believe that our courts understand what – that it's never been more important.

At a time of declining trust in institutions across the board, at a time when, as I've documented, Russia, for example, is engaged in information operations to undermine our trust in our courts, to think they're irrevocably broken, that our courts will, by and large, do the right thing, and stand up to protect the rule of law. And I think it's really important, again, that individuals across this country not jump to the conclusion that every court decision with which they disagree is therefore a political decision in which the judge is a political partisan. We've seen that in some places already with regard to election law decisions. And Americans need to be careful about that because our courts have a really important role to play, particularly potentially in the peaceful transition of power.

Congress, I think similarly – as flawed as it is, and as incredibly frustrated as we so often get with them, I think justifiably so – I think when push comes to shove, at the end of the day, that we can count on enough members of Congress to stand up and do the right thing. And I know that a lot of people wouldn't agree with that, but I do believe that's true. And I place a great deal of hope in the men and the women – men and women who serve our country both in civilian roles in government and at every level – state, local, territorial, and tribal, and federal, and in our armed forces and our National Guard.

All of those federal folks take an oath. They take an oath not to the president, but to the Constitution. And I believe they take that oath seriously. And at the end of the day, that we can count on the vast majority of those folks to, again, do the right thing, to act with the right motives. And I take hope from people, Seth, like you and Brian, and your counterparts, again, all across civil society and, again, all across this country, who are thinking so carefully not about what are the risks? This can be a very – could be a very dark time, but a lot of really smart people who are committed to our democracy are giving this a lot of thought and preparation and working hard to make sure that we are able to come through this on the other side. And I have great hope in them.

Seth G. Jones: Well, on that rousing note, and uplifting one, I want to thank you, Suzanne, and I want to thank you, Brian. I want to thank CSIS more broadly for a really interesting, objective, substantive, nonpartisan discussion of domestic violence, including terrorism, and the presidential election. Everyone can also find this video will be posted on the CSIS website. Thank you very much.

(END)