



Risk Mitigation Consulting Inc.

Intelligence and Analysis Division

WHITE PAPER SERIES

2020 Election Series: January Domestic
Threat Activity Update

January 2021

INTENT

This white paper is designed to provide analysis of relevant, publicly available information on threat and hazard events/trends and their potential impacts to the interests of the United States, both at home and abroad. This product is not intended to be an all-encompassing assessment of the subject.



2020 Election Series: January Domestic Update

Introduction

President-Elect Joe Biden was declared the provisional winner of the 2020 Presidential Election. Many voices among the media, social media, and even elected leadership expected civil unrest after the election. Research suggests that Americans on opposite sides of the ideological spectrums have adopted increasingly hostile attitudes towards one another, with some outright advocating political violence.¹ In the days prior to the election on 03 November 2020, retail stores and other businesses in major urban centers boarded up windows in preparation for violence and looting.² Since the election, a variety of threat activity has occurred, to include civil disturbances and domestic terrorist plots/activities. Additionally, conditions persist which could be conducive to additional election-related threat activity by various groups across the political spectrum.

Post-Election Threat Activity

While election night did not see unrest on the scale some feared, there have been protests and even riots since then. President Donald Trump has continued to support legal challenges to President-Elect Biden's victory in the Electoral College. His supporters and their opponents have marched and clashed in cities nationwide, including Washington, Denver, Portland, Los Angeles, and others.²

At the time of this paper's final writing and editing (the evening of 07 January), details regarding the previous day's "storming" of the U.S. Capitol by a group of President Trump's supporters continue to emerge. While the event is covered in some detail, additional information may come out, and could potentially conflict with details that were known at the time of production.

Left-Wing Actors

Radical anarchists with a number of grievances have driven some of the violence. On 04 November 2020, a march in downtown Portland, Oregon devolved into a riot after protesters shattered the windows of businesses. Oregon Governor Kate Brown activated the National Guard to assist local police and state troopers. Twelve (12) people were arrested, and numerous weapons were seized, including a rifle, a hammer, a knife, and various fireworks.³ Demonstrations and rioting have continued sporadically in Portland since then, notably when a riot was declared on New Year's Eve after protesters smashed windows and threw Molotov cocktails at officers. Portland City Hall, the Portland Police Bureau, the Oregon Historical Society, and the TriMet were all damaged. Some rioters also unsuccessfully attempted to break into the Multnomah County Justice Center.⁴

Left-wing violence has been somewhat mitigated by President-elect Biden's victory. While Black Lives Matter and associated movements have continued protests against racial injustice, many instances of left-wing violence have, as in the past, been driven by radicals seeking anarchism or communism, or who wish to cause violence and destruction for its own sake. Groups such as Antifa



generally have not expressed support for President-Elect Biden, but rather tend to act based upon grievances against the United States itself.⁵ In Portland, Mayor Ted Wheeler has pledged a harsher response to riots after the riot on New Year's Eve. Wheeler garnered national attention last year for his attempts to quell the ongoing disturbances in May through October with, in his words, "good faith efforts at de-escalation" He has asked local, state, and federal law enforcement to convene and respond, while seeking state-level criminal charges for repeat offenders.⁶

Right-Wing Actors

Amid allegations of election impropriety and/or fraud, President Trump's supporters and other right-wing groups, including the Proud Boys, have participated in a series of rallies and protests since Biden was declared the President-Elect on 07 November. Some of these events have led to clashes between supporters of the President and the President-Elect. President Trump and his allies at the state and national levels have supported assertions of fraud and/or impropriety while exploring legal and legislative strategies to secure his victory. On 14 November 2020, the President's supporters and counter protesters clashed at a series of rallies in Washington D.C. The events were dubbed the Million MAGA March, the March for Trump, and Stop the Steal DC. Per NPR, two (2) officers were injured, at least 20 people were arrested, and seven (7) guns were recovered.⁷ On 12 December 2020, at a similar rally, four (4) people were stabbed, 33 were arrested, and nine (9) were transported to hospitals, including two (2) police officers.⁸ The President and his supporters began suggesting that a large rally would take place on 6 January 2021, when Congress counts and certifies the Electoral College's votes.

There were at least four (4) potential rallies planned from the evening of 05 January throughout 06 January against alleged voter fraud and a "rigged election". President Trump had encouraged the events and stated that he would attend. According to the National Park Service, at least three (3) of the protests were awarded permits, allowing a maximum of 15,000 attendees.⁹ On 04 January 2021, the day before the first rally, Proud Boys chairman Enrique Tarrío was arrested for allegedly destroying a Black Lives Matter sign at a historic Black church in Washington, D.C. at the 12 December event. Tarrío was also carrying two (2) illegal high-capacity magazines, for which he faces a separate weapons charge. The church in question sued Tarrío and eight (8) other members of the Proud Boys for "engaging in acts of terror and vandalizing church property in an effort to intimidate the Church and silence its support for racial justice."¹⁰ Tarrío was released by 05 January and ordered by D.C. Superior Court Magistrate Judge Renee Raymond to leave the capital until his next court date.¹¹

By Tuesday, 05 January, supporters of President Trump began to arrive in Washington, D.C. to protest the electoral count. Washington, D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser activated the National Guard in anticipation of civil unrest and asked for calm.¹² Although there was a peaceful rally that featured a number of speakers at Freedom Plaza, law enforcement made six arrests throughout the District, including arrests for weapons charges, assault, and assault on a police officer.¹³



On the morning of 06 January, the day began with additional speeches including one by President Trump, repeating claims of election fraud and other grievances. A mob soon formed, which descended on the Capitol Building following President Trump's speech. The mob began clashing with police officers, ultimately entering the Capitol. Members of the mob broke windows, stole items, and entered offices of members of Congress and even the Senate chamber. The breach of the building halted the counting of electoral votes, which was underway by a joint session of Congress, forcing an evacuation of Senators, Representatives, and their staff. Reports of suspicious packages also contributed to the chaos. Various observers called the participants rioters, insurrectionists, or even domestic terrorists. Ultimately, the electoral vote counting resumed that evening, although the event resulted in 4 deaths (1 woman shot by Capitol Police and 3 deaths caused by medical emergencies), the injury of over 50 police officers (one of whom died on 07 January after being hit in the head with a fire extinguisher the day prior) and dozens of arrests. At the time of writing, additional details regarding the incident continue to be revealed in open source media reporting and official government statements, and some of these numbers and facts are subject to change.^{14,15,16,17.}

The storming of the Capitol also coincided with the discovery of a pipe bomb at the offices of the Republican National Committee in Washington, D.C., which was destroyed by a bomb squad. Additionally, a "suspicious package" was reported at the Democratic National Committee nearby, although further details regarding that incident are not available at the time of writing.¹⁸ Additionally, a number of pro-Trump groups apparently inspired by the events in D.C. gathered at state and local government buildings in states to include Kansas, Arizona, Texas, Oregon, California, and Colorado. In some of these cases, the groups were armed and openly carrying weapons. Some buildings were evacuated, while others were declared an unlawful assembly and dispersed. In at least one case (Kansas), the demonstrators gained access to their target building and temporarily "occupied" a portion of it.¹⁹

Unknown/Unaffiliated Actors

There were also two known instances of arson relating to ballot boxes in the lead-up to the 2020 presidential election. On 18 October 2020, an unknown arsonist set fire to a ballot box in Los Angeles, California, damaging more than 200 ballots. However, local authorities stated that the incident "[had] has all the signs of an attempt to disenfranchise voters and call into question the security of our elections."²⁰ One week later, on 25 October, a fire was reported at a ballot box in Boston, Massachusetts, with the fire (and firefighting efforts) damaging dozens of ballots.²¹ The perpetrator in the Boston incident was apprehended, and was described by the local district attorney as "emotionally disturbed," and is not believed to have sought to "disrupt the election process or undermine confidence in mail-in voting."²²

Potential Threat Activity

The potential for threat activity related to or triggered by the 2020 presidential election diminishes as we progress from the election process to the upcoming inauguration and start of the Biden administration. However, there is still the possibility for events to occur from a variety of groups.



The Trump administration and President Trump himself can still cause a surge in sentiment for or against policies, legal decisions, public statements, or administrative moves during the remainder of his time in office.

Left-Wing Actors

Following the Democratic sweep of the House, Senate, and Presidency, there is a much smaller likelihood that threat activity will come from left-wing actors in response to the presidential election. However, the Trump administration still has the ability to carry out actions that could spur backlash from left-wing actors in the coming weeks, and President Trump himself may seek to continue some political activities after leaving office (which could drive protest activity). As noted, recent politically motivated left-wing threat activity has generally developed from large, peaceful protest activity. Any scheduled protest from left-wing or right-wing groups has the potential to become a source of threat activity.

Additionally, radical left-wing groups such as Antifa, (whose members typically hold anarchist/socialist/communist views significantly to the left of the incoming Biden administration) may continue protest/civil disturbance activity in opposition to the United States' political system, along with various social and economic issues.

Right-Wing Actors

The potential for threat activity from right-wing actors in response to the presidential election will likely extend for larger time frame than the potential threat from left-wing actors. Inauguration day, 20 January, is a potential flashpoint for threat activity. Unusually, an Inauguration Day event with only about 1,000 people in attendance is being set up due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Normally, around 200,000 tickets would be distributed.²³ The smaller number of ticketed attendees will correspond with a smaller than usual number of public attendees, though that cannot be accurately projected. Supporters may clash with or be targeted by right-wing protesters at this event. Following the inauguration, protest activity related to the results of the presidential election is likely to diminish. Right-wing actors may attempt threat activity prior to and following the inauguration. As noted, past attempts related to the election have primarily, though not exclusively, targeted political figures and legislative buildings.

The 06 January “storming” of the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. may also inspire future, similar “occupations” of government buildings (or similar demonstrations outside of such buildings) in response to real or perceived issues, to include issues amplified by conspiracy theories. Though Washington, D.C. has strict firearms laws, other locations may be more permissive, allowing more attendees to be armed.

Conclusion

Domestic threat activity related to the 2020 presidential election persists and has been perpetrated by left- and right-wing actors alike. This includes activities to include civil disturbance and domestic terrorist activities. The upcoming presidential inauguration remains a potential flashpoint



for future threat activity, as President Trump's supporters continue to express anger regarding alleged voter fraud (highlighted by the storming of the U.S. Capitol on 06 January). Left-wing counter protesters may attend activities organized by right-wing groups (and vice versa), which could lead to clashes. Moreover, some left-wing groups, such as Antifa, may not be satisfied with the prospects of a Biden administration, and may continue activities in pursuit of a more radical agenda. The current domestic threat picture remains highly complex and fluid, but politically-motivated threat activity (to include civil disturbance and domestic terrorist activity) is almost certain to continue in the coming weeks months as the presidential transition process is completed.

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