Domestic violent extremism is an ongoing national security concern that undermines trust in government institutions and divides our society, our organizations, and even our families.

In collaboration with DoD’s Counter-Insider Threat Program and the National Insider Threat Task Force, The Threat Lab created this graphic novel to raise awareness of the harm that domestic violent extremism may cause and offer strategies to interrupt pathways to violent behavior.

Credits

PROJECT DIRECTOR
Stephanie L. Jaros

STORY
David Prina

CREATIVE DESIGN
Mario Ruiz
Mike DuBerry

ART
David Hahn

SPONSORS
Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security (OUSD[I&S])

National Insider Threat Task Force (NITTF)

Acknowledgements

Thank you to those who reviewed early drafts of this graphic novel and shared their time and expertise with us. We appreciate their help in making this a poignant and powerful story!
DEBRIEF SECTION

GRIEVANCES PLAY A BIG ROLE IN THE SPREAD OF EXTREMISM. THERE ARE MANY SOURCES OF GRIEVANCES, INCLUDING A JOB LOSS, A MISSED PROMOTION, RELATIONSHIP OR FAMILY PROBLEMS, UGLY POLITICAL DISCOURSE, AND PERCEIVED UNFAIRNESS. A PERSON WITH GRIEVANCES MAY FEEL STRONGLY THAT THEY HAVE BEEN BETRAYED OR HAVE BEEN DENIED WHAT THEY DESERVE.
BEST WE CAN OFFER IS 2 WEEKS’ PAY AGAIN, I’M REALLY SORRY IT WASN’T MY DECISION.

WHY IS THIS HAPPENING? I THOUGHT THIS COMPANY SUPPORTED VETERANS!

OVERSEAS COMPETITION IS TOUGH FOR ALL OF US.

YOU SAID ’US’ BUT MORE LIKE TOUGH LUCK FOR JUST ME, HUH? SO MUCH FOR BEING PART OF A TEAM.

THAT’S NOT WHAT I MEANT...

I HEARD YOU LOUD AND CLEAR, CHIEF FOREIGNERS ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN VETERANS.

DEBRIEF SECTION

OUR SOCIETY—GOVERNMENT, BUSINESSES, FAMILY, FRIENDS—MAKES A LOT OF PROMISES BUT DOESN’T ALWAYS DELIVER:

WORK HARD AND YOU WILL SUCCEED.

GET AN EDUCATION AND YOU CAN FIND A JOB.

GO ABOVE AND BEYOND AND YOUR HARD WORK WILL BE RECOGNIZED.

WHEN PEOPLE DO ALL THE RIGHT THINGS BUT STILL FALL SHORT, THEY MAY LOSE FAITH. WHEN THEY SEE OTHER PEOPLE GETTING AHEAD OR SUCCEEDING WHILE THEY STRUGGLE, THEY MAY THINK IT’S UNFAIR—THAT THE WORLD IS STACKED AGAINST THEM. BROKEN PROMISES, REAL OR PERCEIVED, CAN LEAVE PEOPLE RECEPTIVE TO EXTREMIST IDEOLOGIES.
LATER THAT NIGHT

I CAN'T BELIEVE THAT SOME FIRED ME. CAN YOU BELIEVE IT? THREE YEARS—DOWN THE DRAIN. I STILL HAVEN'T TOLD MY FAMILY.

NAH, MAN. THAT'S MESSED UP. I BET YOUR SUPERVISOR KEPT HER JOB BECAUSE SHE AND HER BOSS ARE ON GOOD TERMS, IF YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN. YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE SHOWN HER WHO'S BOSS.

YEAH, I SHOULD HAVE. WHO FIRES A VETERAN?

SOMEONE WHO HATES AMERICA, THAT'S WHO.

GONE, EVEN AFTER SERVING MY COUNTRY. I DID MY PART, MAN, AND LOOK WHAT IT GOT ME—2 WEEKS' PAY.

YEAH, GOOD OLD DAYS ARE GONE. A MAN CAN'T PROVIDE FOR HIS FAMILY ANYMORE.

I BET YOU NEVER HAD TO DEAL WITH THIS IN THE MILITARY.

NOT—HEY! YOU STOLE MY KILL.

TOO SLOW, BRO.

WHATEVER. THE MILITARY CARED, BUT MAN WE COULDN'T SAY ANYTHING TO THOSE SNOWFLAKES. THE PC POLICE WERE EVERYWHERE. ALL THAT DIVERSITY STUFF MEANT WE KEPT GETTING WY UNDERQUALIFIED PEOPLE. YOU COULDN'T SAY ANYTHING WITHOUT GETTING CALLED A RACIST OR A SEXIST OR A WHATEVER.

DEBRIEF SECTION

MANY PEOPLE WORK THROUGH GRIEVANCES AND DON'T LET THEM DOMINATE THEIR LIVES. OTHERS NURSE THEIR GRIEVANCES AND COLLECT NEW ONES WITHOUT RESOLVING THE OLD ONES. THESE UNRESOLVED GRIEVANCES CAN MAKE A PERSON MORE RECEPTIVE TO EXTREMIST CONTENT. BY OFFERING SIMPLE EXPLANATIONS FOR A PERSON'S SUFFERING, MANY CONSPIRACY THEORIES BECOME POWERFUL LURES.
DEBRIEF SECTION

Today, there are many ways to share grievances. Social media, gaming platforms, messaging apps, and imageboards are some of the most common ways to share information. These platforms allow unprecedented access to people and to information, most of it harmless.

Some content, however, is concerning, and the mix of grievances and the ease of sharing may provide an on-ramp to some extremist ideologies.
"How is a man supposed to provide for his family in this country? I swear, the government is keeping us down. They keep pushing this globalist agenda, keeping the honest working man down. They police what we say and think but turn their back on us when we lose our jobs..."

"Illegal aliens taking our jobs. Violent crime. Runaway corporate lobbyists with politicians wrapped around their fingers. Military leaders who only care about fighting useless wars. We’re not fighting terrorism, we’re making it. It’s like a game. The more people we hurt, the more people try to hurt us back, so we can call them terrorists. And it just keeps going on and on and on. Like a machine!"

"Who benefits from war and terrorism? The big corporations, the military leadership, and the politicians. They keep us scared and they want us scared so we’ll keep electing politicians who spend money on the military who gives it to corporations. But here’s the good news: we don’t have to be scared! We have the power to take back our country! We have to act now!"

---

**Debrief Section**

Increasingly, what we see online is dictated by what keeps our attention and keeps us clicking rather than what we searched for in the first place. Social media platforms use algorithms to prioritize content. This is intentional. Platforms calculate what keeps our attention, and then flood our feeds with more of the same to encourage user engagement on their apps.

"THE REPUBLIC HAS BEEN STOLEN FROM THE PEOPLE. OUR DEMOCRACY IS DEAD AND HAS BEEN FOR A WHILE. BUT NO ONE SEEMS TO REALIZE IT YET. LIFE IS NOT AT ALL WHAT IT ONCE WAS. IN FACT, IT IS GOING TO HELL FOR REAL AMERICANS.”

"AND THE MILITARY? THAT’S WHO IS PROPPING IT ALL UP WITHOUT THEM..."

"THEY NEED TO BE SCARED OF US. IF WE UNITE, WE CAN TAKE BACK OUR COUNTRY. SAY NO TO THIS TYRANNY! LIKE AND SHARE THIS VIDEO IF YOU ARE A TRUE PATRIOT. SPREAD THE WORD!"

DEBRIEF SECTION

OFTEN, WE CHOOSE TO CONSUME CONTENT THAT WE AGREE WITH, AND WHAT OFTEN KEEPS OUR ATTENTION IS CONTENT THAT SPARKS A STRONG EMOTIONAL REACTION LIKE OUTRAGE AND ANGER. FLOODING OUR FEED WITH MORE AND MORE OF THE SAME CONTENT—OFTEN ONE-SIDED CONTENT—CAN CREATE A PERSONALIZED REALITY THAT MAY ULTIMATELY MAKE EXTREMIST IDEOLOGY SEEM ACCEPTABLE. WE CAN SO DOWN A RABBIT HOLE OF EXTREMIST CONTENT WITHOUT EVER ACTIVELY CHOOSING TO VIEW IT OR KNOWING HOW WE GOT THERE.
DEBRIEF SECTION

Events in the news often have complex explanations that can take time to understand. Conspiracy theories and extremist rhetoric take advantage of this by offering a simple explanation for complex events.

Extremist rhetoric also plays off strongly held beliefs—killing is bad, crime is bad, bullies are bad. When these bad things happen, extremists blame someone for causing them. In reality, these events usually have their roots in a wide range of complex issues. Bad things may happen for a variety of explainable but difficult to understand reasons that are not immediately obvious. Often, honest explanations may require acknowledging inconvenient facts that can make us feel uncomfortable.
DEBRIEF SECTION

Extremism singles out one or more groups as the cause for all of society’s problems. This blame can disrupt bonds of trust between different groups within society that were built over years of effort. It can also quickly fray bonds among communities, friends, and family.

I’m tired of being told I need to apologize for who I am. I didn’t grow up rich. I don’t have anything handed to me. I’m not “privileged.” I earned everything I’ve got!

Just promise me you won’t watch any more of this stuff, okay? or at least take a break every once in a while.

Sure, whatever. But if you keep watching, you’ll understand.

And please call mom and dad. They haven’t heard from you in months. They’re worried about you.

Debrief Section

Extremist rhetoric is dangerous because it manipulates emotions, offers simple but deceptive explanations, and offers a simple solution unconnected to the real causes of an issue. It’s easy to understand why social media algorithms recommend this content. It tells a highly-charged, emotionally compelling story that captures our attention.
...THE MILITARY IS A TOOL OF CORRUPT POLITICIANS, THE GLOBAL ELIORS OF ZION, AND BANDITS. IT NEEDS TO BE CLEANSED...

"...OTHERWISE IT WILL BE USED TO BRING ABOUT THE END OF AMERICA AS WE KNOW IT, THEY'LL TAKE AWAY THE GUNS, AND THEN THEY'LL START THEIR POPULATION CONTROL AGENDA. IT'LL START WITH AN EXCUSE—SOTIONS OR UNREST—THEN THEY'LL DEPLOY THE NATIONAL GUARD..."

Humblepatriot1352: hey, i saw you on the "Why Die for a Lie?" video. is this the right place to join the movement?
1488fan: if you clicked the link, then yes dumbbag
RAHOWA_BOA: no feds allowed, lol
Truth_hurts_14: nice name for a fed
Mid_April_dream4201889: lay off
Mid_April_dream4201889: humble, tell us why you're here

2:30AM

Humblepatriot1352: i'm tired of all the bull**** that people seem to believe. i served in the military and can't believe how awful things are and how powerless i feel about it. i want to find people who feel the way i do. i want something real to fight for.
RAHOWA_BOA: another angry vet — you're in the right place
Humblepatriot1352: i hope so. i'm looking to make a difference. i took one useless oath and i don't want to take another unless it actually matters.
Mid_April_dream4201889: whoa calm down
Mid_April_dream4201889: anyone can type tough
Mid_April_dream4201889: send proof

DEBRIEF SECTION

EXTREMIST GROUPS ACTIVELY RECRUIT VETERANS TO FURTHER THEIR AGENDAS. VETERANS ARE A TARGET FOR SEVERAL REASONS:

VETERANS BRING SPECIFIC SKILL SETS AND EXPERIENCES THAT CAN HELP ADVANCE THE EXTREMIST AGENDA—LEADERSHIP, ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS, AND WEAPONS TRAINING.

THE U.S. MILITARY IS STILL ONE OF THE MOST TRUSTED INSTITUTIONS IN THE NATION. HAVING MEMBERS OF THAT TRUSTED INSTITUTION IN THEIR RANKS BLENDS LEGITIMACY TO THE GROUP AND HELPS WITH FURTHER RECRUITMENT.
SEVERAL WEEKS LATER.

Home

== SECURE CHAT ==

1486am: Oh HELL, this IS IT the FEDS are TAKING OVER. First they send in the Nat Guard, then the drones to watch US/CHE and then OUR GUNS. Then it'll be too late. We need to stop them now.

Truth_hurts_14: we can't sit back and let them take control. We have to do something.

== SECURE CHAT ==

Mid_April_dream42013800: we need something now - gotta hit them first before they lock down the Internet, the radio and TV

Humblepatriot1352: I got an idea - when I was in the service, every year the Guard would host a recruiting event. It was during the Fall festival. Lots of military folks would attend. It's nearly in Washington Park, should be a few hundred there at once. Festival is in 3 days.

Mid_April_dream42013800: you're a lifesaver humble, send us the coordinates and I'll pass the word along - 2 days from now. Don't tell anyone you're coming, and bring the heat.

Humblepatriot1352: hey yeah, I've been collecting guns just for this moment - and don't worry, I'll keep quiet - no one will know I'm gone.

DEBRIEF SECTION

EXTREMISM OFTEN FUELS AND REINFORCES ITSELF, ESPECIALLY ONLINE, WITH ALGORITHMS PUSHING THE SAME CONTENT AND GROUPS PROMOTING ONLY INTRA-GROUP COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT, MANY PEOPLE WHO FALL VICTIM TO EXTREMISM END UP SOCIALLY ISOLATED.

OFTEN, EXTREMIST SYMPATHIZERS DEMONSTRATE PROFOUND BEHAVIOR CHANGES IN A SHORT PERIOD OF TIME. THEY LOSE OR LIMIT CONTACT WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY, AS THEY BECOME MORE RADICALIZED, THEY BECOME MORE ISOLATED AND THEREFORE FEWER OFF-RAMP SOLUTIONS FROM EXTREMISM.

EXTREMISM ALSO BLINDS PEOPLE TO ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS. ANGER FEELS GOOD AND RIGHTEOUS ANGER BRINGS A FEELING OF SUPERIORITY. THERE ARE USUALLY MULTIPLE WAYS TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM AT THE ROOT OF A GRIEVANCE. EXTREMISM SELECTIVELY DISMISSES ALL BUT THE MOST RADICAL SOLUTIONS, THUS NARROWING A PERSON'S CHOICES TO ONLY ONE OPTION—VIOLENCE.
What are you doing here?
I brought over dinner.

No, stop! I'm not going anywhere. Why is your gun on the table? What are you packing for?
I'm just cleaning it. I get.

No, you've been dodging calls and ignoring me for a long time. You're watching awful videos and talking like you're some kind of martyr. What's going on with you?

Hey, Blake! Haven't seen you in a while.
I'm... what's all this?
Nothing. Just gonna clean off and get out of here.

Debrief Section

Extremism is complicated. There's no one route or pathway to extremism and violence. What may push one person toward violence may have no effect on another person. The timeframe of radicalization differs as well. Some people are radicalized to violence in a matter of days, while others are fully immersed in extremist rhetoric for years but never harm anyone.
I CAN’T SAY BUT IT’S TO HELP MAKE EVERYTHING BETTER, TO HELP PROTECT YOU AND EVERYONE.

IF IT’S REALLY AS IMPORTANT AS YOU SAY, THEN I’LL UNDERSTAND, YOU CAN TELL ME.

I DON’T KNOW IF I CAN DO WHAT HAS TO BE DONE. I HAVE TO THOUGHT, SOMEONE HAS TO!

JUST PLEASE, TALK WITH ME.

IT’S BOOGALOO TIME.

DEBRIEF SECTION

THOUGHT PRECEDES ACTION. EXTREMIST Rhetoric may feed into action. Extremist rhetoric is sometimes, but not always, an indicator of someone’s willingness to use violence. In fact, someone might not fully understand they are repeating extremist talking points, especially if they are surrounded by extremists—either online or in real life. Extremist rhetoric must be taken seriously because it can have a corrosive effect on organizations and personal relationships.

GRIEVANCES PROVIDE THE OPPORTUNITY FOR PEOPLE TO TURN TO EXTREMISM, AND THE ROAD FROM GRIEVANCE TO EXTREMISM HAS BEEN SUPERCHARGED BY ALGORITHMS AND SOCIAL MEDIA. HERE ARE SOME TIPS TO INOCULATE YOURSELF AND OTHERS AGAINST EXTREMIST RHETORIC:

BE WARY OF “US VERSUS THEM” MESSAGES.

BE WARY OF PEOPLE WHO DEMAND EXTREME MEASURES AND DISMISS MODERATE ONES OUT OF HAND.

BE WARY OF MESSAGES WITH SIMPLE SOLUTIONS TO COMPLEX PROBLEMS.

BREAK OUT OF THE SOP OF THE ALGORITHM, TALK TO OTHERS AND GET MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES!

READ FROM MANY DIFFERENT KINDS OF SOURCES! YOU COULD BE LIVING IN A BUBBLE AND NOT KNOW IT.

THERE IS NO ONE APPROACH TO TACKLING VIOLENT EXTREMISM—but knowing why and how someone may radicalize may help disrupt the pathway to violence.
The Threat Lab: A Brief History

The Defense Personnel and Security Research Center (PERSEREC) founded The Threat Lab in 2018 to realize the DoD Counter-Insider Threat Program Director’s vision to incorporate the social and behavioral sciences into the mission space. Our team is headquartered in Seaside, California, and includes psychologists, sociologists, policy analysts, computer scientists, and other subject matter experts committed to workforce protection.

Our business model is simple: We work with stakeholders to transform operational challenges into actionable research questions. We then design and execute research projects that result in accessible, concise findings and recommendations that we integrate into training and awareness materials for organizations to use as is or to customize for their own purposes.

For more information or to request a briefing, please email us at dodhra.ThreatLab@mail.mil