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THE CURRENT: What does the plot against Gov. Whitmer tell us about right-wing domestic terrorism?

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(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

On Thursday, 13 men were arrested in Michigan as part of a plot to overthrow the state government and kidnap Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, in particular. With us to discuss what's happened in Michigan, and particularly the threat of right-wing domestic terrorist groups is Vanda Felbab-Brown, a senior fellow in the security and strategy project here at Brookings. Vanda, thanks for talking to us today.

FELBAB-BROWN: My pleasure.

PITA: What do we know so far about this plot and the men involved?

FELBAB-BROWN: Well, the plot that was unveiled yesterday, following the arrests the night before, is extraordinary. At the core it involves the plan to kidnap Governor Gretchen Whitmer and subject her to a trial by a set of men who belong to two militia groups, one of which calls itself the Wolverine Watchmen. But this group in particular is part of a much larger movement of right-wing extremist militia groups that have been particularly active since COVID started, including in Michigan, and have very much had Governor Whitmer in their eyesight.

Already in May, there was another foiled attack on her life with a man also belonging to these extremist movements seeking to kill her at the time. Moreover, the plan was not just to kidnap the governor, but also the men involved were gathering information about the home addresses of police officers in Michigan, of whom they were planning to target. Again, something very consistent with these type of groups across the United States. There have been similar plots and similar attempts in places such as Texas, for example, and in other parts of the country.

At the same time, and distressingly, some of these groups – most notoriously The Oath Keepers – have been very active in proselytizing members of law enforcement forces, as well as active military and veterans, and recruiting them in their ranks. So there's a complex relationship with law enforcement.

As part of this plot against the governor, the elements also included, for example, placing bombs under a bridge close to her home so that police officers would be distracted with an explosion going over the side while they attempted the kidnapping. So they were planning this for months on and it's really very, very positive and I want us to be very thankful and also a lot of kudos goes to the FBI and law enforcement officials in the state, of staying on top of the kidnapping, possibly murder attempt, and the larger plot. That many officers being involved in this, undercover agents and informants for months that this was being hatched.

PITA: Absolutely. Vanda, you do a lot of research on militia and paramilitary groups all over the world. So, I'm wondering if you can help us out with a bit of a definitional question. A lot of folks are asking why, especially now, and specifically that this group, members have been charged with acts of

terrorism, why not call them a terrorist group? Why do we use the term militia or paramilitary? Is "militia" a specific term?

FELBAB-BROWN: So the groups themselves tend to call themselves militias, and they do it on purpose because they obviously want to refer to the American Revolution and the war of independence, although what the groups at the time, the militia groups that fought against the British as part of the independence process, looked like is very different than what these groups look like. The term militia is also often used to denote an entity that fights against other militant groups on behalf of the state. That is of course quite paradoxical because at the core of many of these right-wing militia groups in the United States is a fundamental rejection of the federal state, particularly federal government authorities.

There are many strands of the extremist right-wing militia groups in the United States, some of which have their roots in neo-Nazi and white supremacy elements, Ku Klux Klan. Others which reject that root history, or even affiliation, in practice, often even the groups that reject this kind of associations, very thickly interact with the white neo-Nazi, white supremacy groups that go back to the 60s and 50s.

But a second strand of these groups goes back to the 60s in a different way, and really, to the Kennedy administration setting off the process of natural resource conservation and land conservation in the west of the United States. What emerged in the 70s and 80s were entities and concepts or ideologies that organized various conservative groups around something called the Sagebrush Rebellion or county supremacy, both of which rejected that the federal government has authority over public lands. A lot of it has to do with conflict between rangers, companies or entities who want to exploit oil or otherwise access natural resources, in opposition to federal regulation of such effort and federal conservation projects. So the Sagebrush Rebellion and the county supremacy of that 70s era also directly feed into what we are seeing today.

And the final element I want to highlight here is, of course, that this is taking place in the context of those very lengthy wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, deployments of U.S. military to other places such as Somalia and other places of Africa, Niger, where many of the militia men who are members of the militias are veterans who have not been able to adjust to civilian life, who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder or otherwise were affected by the wars. That is also consistent with what happened after Vietnam, where that same big set of, stream of veterans, a sub-segment of veterans, was a feeder to groups like right-wing, white supremacy groups that emerged out of it. Now, not all members of the militia groups are veterans or current or former police officers, those who did not serve abroad, but nonetheless, like the imagery, that display of power.

Now coming, then, to your question: paramilitary, militia or terrorist group? So, the term paramilitary and militia is quite frequently used interchangeably, and all in the United States or places like Switzerland, which does not have a military, which has militia, it comes with a benevolent connotation. In many parts of the world, militias are as brutal as the militants whom they fight on behalf of the state. Many are engaged in all kinds of severe human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings and very often in criminality. So even though those militias purport to fight on behalf of the state, they often engage in acts of terrorism, brutality, target civilian populations as well as become heavily involved in criminality. The big difference, sometimes, can be that they develop very thick relations with political authorities and often became, in fact, the private army of politicians.

Now, coming back to the situation with the militias in the U.S., as I mentioned, a lot of the roots of these groups is in specific rejection of the federal government and federal authority. For example, the county supremacy movement that I mentioned, specifically said the highest authority is an elected sheriff and anything beyond, these groups reject. They reject state government, they reject federal government. Now, it's tricky for them because they have embraced President Donald Trump often as their leader. The one current example, of course, is the Proud Boys, but there are very many groups which fundamentally challenges the notion that they reject federal government. The way they square it and the way they justify it is that Donald Trump is an anti-establishment politician who wants to destroy institutions, weaken them,

make the government very slim, eliminate institutions. They often love the fact that he has been very anti-environmentalist, that he has tried to roll back all kinds of federal public health restrictions or environmental restrictions, so they see him as the president who wants to undo the government and who wants to undo laws and institutions in the United States. And that's why they have been able to embrace him. Of course, then there are also the outright racist, anti-immigration dimensions that also appeal to many of these groups, some of which have their origins as individuals who organized posses to capture undocumented workers along the border with Mexico.

The term then, terrorism, is often applied to mean the conducting of violent acts either against civilians or with the purpose of intimidation of populations and government officials and by that definition of terrorism, clearly, many of these groups qualify. Certainly, the men who were plotting and engaged in the plot against Governor Whitmer did so very specifically with a desire not to just limit their action to capturing and perhaps murdering the governor, but to incite the collapse of state authority, societal meltdown, and that would certainly qualify as terrorism. And they were charged with terrorism. And this narrative of inciting civil war, of causing social mayhem, of bringing down government authority, of destroying institutions is highly prevalent across these groups. It became particularly strong with COVID, with lots of online activism, for example, with the so-called Boogaloo Boys very specifically planning to incite civil war and use COVID restrictions and activity to in opposition to COVID restrictions precisely to get a revolution going.

PITA: So, given that the pandemic is likely going to keep going and the sort of economic dislocation that we're facing is not going to be over anytime soon, what's going to be really important for state or federal authorities to do going forward to continue monitoring and preventing acts like what happened in Michigan?

FELBAB-BROWN: Well, these groups and white supremacy, right-wing terrorism has been the deadliest form of terrorism in the United States in recent years. That is likely to continue. So clearly, they need to be a top priority for law enforcement. That involves many steps to which, including the capacity to infiltrate groups. It's really that element of the ability to infiltrate, to get human intelligence as well as signal intelligence, which was critical for the plot, but it's also been since 9/11 critical to disrupting jihadi terrorism-linked plots in the United States. And the skills and assets and capacities that Federal Bureau of Investigations and others acquired from that focus is now very directly transferable and needs to be transferred to these groups.

But I would say that there are several other larger elements. One is clearly a need to prosecute and act against politicians who would directly try to use those groups. What we see around the world is they live and persist because they get political backing. Now that is enormously difficult in the context of a U.S. president who is not only unwilling to condemn the groups, who in fact directly messages them, such as by saying that people should be watching the elections – threats against the fundamental rights to vote and vote without intimidation – or a president who tells the groups to “stand back and stand by,” perhaps indirect but nonetheless-understood message that he wants the group's backing. So that is frightening and fundamental and really needs to be countered. There can simply be no incitement, tolerance, acceptance, by U.S. politicians of public authority of these groups.

The third element I would highlight is to counter the political capital they are trying to build with not just politicians but also businesses and larger society. And here is where COVID is very dangerous. Not only has it allowed them to recruit actively online, with online membership swelling to numbers not seen in decades of these groups' history, but it also allows them to provide services to populations that are disgruntled with either economic hardships of COVID, particularly the lockdowns. Many of these groups have offered themselves as protectors to businesses who refuse to insist on people wearing masks to come in or to businesses who refuse to comply with lockdowns. And there have in fact, been stand-offs with police in some places, as law enforcement were trying to insist on the lockdown being executed and such groups protecting the businesses that aren't, saying that they will not comply with the lockdown. In other places the groups have also tried to bring in, for example, relief in a post-disaster

situations such as such as floods or fires which is, on the one hand, a humanitarian gesture and something that should be praised, but it becomes very dangerous when the sub-context is to build political capital for their violent acts, social disorder they plan to cause and civil war. So as important as the law enforcement element is, and as crucial as is the public government, political authority rejection of any of these group and real needs to prevent the formation of relationships between politicians and these groups, it's equally important to prevent the formation of bonds between these groups and particular sub-segments of the population because it is the last and the second that will ultimately give them authority and give them the capacity to even overcome law enforcement actions.

My final comment here is, what is really extraordinary is there is a systematic effort to either recruit or intimidate law enforcement officials, to attack law enforcement officials and murder them. This is something, this is a level of impunity and planning that we see with organized crime groups in Mexico, for example, where the hallmark of the violence in Mexico is the utter brazenness and impunity, with police officers being systematically killed and given what's often referred to as the choice of a bullet or a bribe. Where these very same criminal groups -- Mexican cartels such as the Sinaloa cartel or Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación -- behave strikingly different in the United States. They never challenged law enforcement authorities, they never attempt to kill judges or police officers because U.S. law enforcement has authority and has deterrence capacity. So, preserving the deterrence capacity of our law enforcement vis-à-vis these right-wing groups, these right-wing militias, extremist groups, is critically important. And that means that many will need to be rounded up for any kind of violations, they will need to be effectively prosecuted, they will need to be given sentences to preserve that authority.

PITA: All right, Vanda, you've given us a lot to chew over. As a reminder to our listeners, I'll link to more of your writings on these issues in the show notes. Anyone who wants to learn more can come to brookings.edu to find that. Vanda, thanks very much for talking to us today.

FELBAB-BROWN: My pleasure.