

Ch. 25

Threat Assessment: the TRAP-18 and Application to a Lone-Actor Terrorism Incident

In: Lone-Actor Terrorism: An Integrated Framework

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## Abstract

The authors present the theoretical model and empirical measurement of the Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol (TRAP-18), a structured professional judgment instrument for those engaged in risk assessment of persons of concern for acts of terrorist violence. The instrument demonstrates both interrater reliability and content, criterion, discriminant, and postdictive validity in a number of studies to date. The TRAP-18 is then used to analyze the case of Timothy McVeigh, a white ethnic nationalist who carried out an act of domestic terrorism in Oklahoma City in 1995, claiming the lives of 168 men, women, and children.

Key words: Lone actor terrorism, threat assessment, violence risk assessment, counterterrorism, protocol

## Introduction

Terrorists do not snap. The notion that terrorist violence is an impulsive and irrational act—at least in the mind of the terrorist—is a misguided belief. In the larger context of violence risk assessment in general, it is partially a conceptual failure to distinguish between two modes of violence, affective and predatory, which has dogged the violence risk literature for at least four decades. Affective violence is emotional, impulsive, a reaction to an imminent perceived threat, and is a common mode of violence we see in our species—its evolutionary genesis was to defend against a sudden threat to survival. Predatory violence is emotionless, planned, purposeful, and without a discernable and imminent threat—its evolutionary genesis was to hunt for food. These modes of violence have been studied for the past eighty years (Meloy, 2006; McEllistrem, 2004; Siegel & Victoroff, 2009), are biologically distinctive in mammals (Siever, 2008), yet have generally failed to be integrated into existing instruments for assessing the risk of violence (see, for example, Douglas, Hart, Webster & Belfrage, 2013). Synonyms in the research for affective violence include reactive, emotional, impulsive, defensive, and hot-blooded or heat of passion violence; synonyms for predatory violence include

targeted, instrumental, premeditated, and cold-blooded violence. The legal corollaries are manslaughter and murder, respectively.

Acts of terrorism are ideologically-motivated incidents of predatory violence which rarely occur, whether perpetrated by a terrorist organization or a lone-actor (Meloy et al., 2019). This fact has posed a number of problems for those who have attempted to forecast violence in terrorists in the same manner as violence risk assessment has been traditionally practiced: terrorist acts cannot be accurately predicted because of their very low base rates in any population of concern (Gill, 2015); traditional variables associated with general violence risk—e.g., drug use, history of violence—are usually absent among lone actor terrorists (Monahan, 2012, 2016); violence risk assessment is often a static enterprise that results in a one-time opinion of general risk and largely focuses on characteristics of the individual being assessed in a contained setting (hospital, jail or prison); and violence risk assessment usually does not account for the variability of the situational/environmental context nor the target that is being contemplated by the terrorist.

The scientific and operational discipline of *threat assessment and management* (TAM) has attempted to rectify this problem in the larger context of risk assessment by focusing upon behaviors of concern which precede acts of targeted, or predatory violence (Fein & Vossekuil, 1999; Calhoun & Weston, 2003, 2016). Originating toward the end of the twentieth century, the TAM model is now utilized in colleges, universities, corporations,

other private, and governmental entities in North America, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East where threats of targeted violence are most apparent. The research on TAM is now substantial, and has focused upon behaviors of concern which have preceded acts of targeted violence by public figure attackers, stalkers, adolescent and adult mass murderers, targeted attackers in public venues, domestic violence perpetrators, and lone actor terrorists (Meloy & Hoffmann, 2014, 2020). The point of these efforts, however, is not to predict but to prevent. The paradox of such work is that one can never know—with the exception of a last-minute tactical intervention by law enforcement—whether the efforts of threat assessment and management, if *not* done, would have resulted in an act of targeted violence. The good news is that prevention does not *require* prediction.

The application of TAM to lone actor terrorism has resulted in exceptional advances in the understanding of the pathways to violence of such individuals (Gill, 2016; Bouhana et al., 2018). It has also produced a threat assessment method, developed by the first author<sup>1</sup>, which is showing promise as a structured professional judgment instrument to help law enforcement and counterterrorism investigators prioritize cases and actively risk manage the most acute situations. It is called the Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol (Meloy, 2017). There are several other instruments used to assess risk of terrorist violence, including the ERG 22+ (Lloyd & Dean, 2015) and the VERA (Pressman, 2009), which are also structured professional judgment tools: they help investigators identify

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Meloy derives income from the marketing of both the TRAP-18 manual and codesheets, and any training associated with the instrument.

characteristics of a person of concern for carrying out an act of terrorist violence. Other scales and instruments are addressed in a separate chapter in this book. Multi-method approaches are best for the assessment of terrorism risk, and other instruments for general risk of violence, such as the HCR-20 V3 (Douglas et al., 2013), are also very useful as well validated and complementary sources of important data collection. This chapter focuses upon the TRAP-18.

### The TRAP-18

The TRAP-18 is composed of 8 proximal warning behaviors and 10 distal characteristics which were theoretically and rationally derived from the extant research on terrorism (Meloy et al., 2011; Meloy & Yakeley, 2014; Meloy & Gill, 2016; Meloy, 2017). The model assumes that the proximal warning behaviors are more closely related in time to the violent act of the terrorist than the distal characteristics (see figure 1). Monahan and Steadman (1996) proposed a very helpful weather analogy for violence prediction. They opined that, among other things, there is a usefulness to the meteorological terms, Watch and Warn, in both specificity and imminence when thinking about and communicating violence risk (Monahan and Steadman 1996). This analogy is very useful in the juxtaposition of the proximal warning behaviors and the distal characteristics for the TRAP-18. Any presence of a cluster of distal characteristics would suggest a Watch strategy: there are storm clouds forming on the horizon, but one does not know if or when

they will constellate into a fierce weather event. The presence of one proximal warning behavior suggests that the storm is in one's backyard. In other words, monitoring of a potential event—in this case mobilization for terrorist violence—shifts to active management of a more imminent event (see figure 1). There are no empirically derived cutoffs for the TRAP-18 since it is a structured professional judgment instrument and not a psychological test. Nevertheless, the model advances the hypothesis that one proximal warning behavior is necessary for active risk management, and data indicate that all targeted violence subjects to date have exhibited multiple warning behaviors prior to their attacks

Insert Figure 1 here

These 18 indicators are considered *patterns* of risk to correct for the assessor's tendency to focus upon a discrete variable, and to facilitate a more wide-angle view by capitalizing on our natural ability to see patterns and organize stimuli. Pattern analysis has its roots in gestalt psychology (Koffka, 1921; Kohler, 1929; Wertheimer, 1938) and capitalizes on our normal cognitive-perception to organize bits of detail into meaningful patterns.

The focus of these 18 indicators are present behaviors of concern, the core of threat assessment, and not the traditional mental health approach of an initial diagnostic formulation through the development of psychological inferences, often based upon fairly remote historical data (Meloy & Hoffmann, 2014), to determine general violence risk.

Each indicator is coded as present, absent, or insufficient data. The typology consists of the following 8 proximal warning behaviors:

1. *Pathway Warning Behavior* is research, planning, preparation for, or implementation of an attack. This first warning behavior combines the concept of a *pathway* for targeted violence (Fein & Vossekuil, 1999) with the late stage markers formulated by Calhoun & Weston (2016). When there is evidence of these behaviors, it indicates that the person of concern (POC) has moved into operational space and there is intent to be violent. A recent problem in counterterrorism work is the increased brevity of pathway behavior and the weaponizing of common household and family items, such as knives and cars. In some cases, “the pathway has become a runway” (Meloy & Pollard, 2017).

2. *Fixation Warning Behavior* is an increasingly pathological preoccupation with a person or a cause, accompanied by a deterioration in social and/or occupational life. The work on fixation evolved from the Fixated Research Group, funded by the Home Office in London, to investigate threats to the British Royal Family and other political figures. This project spanned five years, and resulted in a number of scientific publications between 2004-2010. All of these papers are available in PDF at [drreidmeloy.com](http://drreidmeloy.com). Fixation is a preoccupation of thought, usually upon a person or a cause. A simple key to the presence of a pathological fixation—beside the deterioration in work and love—is the disjuncture between the social setting in which it is voiced and the fixation itself. In virtual reality, the more intense the fixation, the greater the number of constant social media postings for others to see. For instance, when they accelerate, there is usually



increased perseveration, stridency, negative characterization of those who oppose the cause, or an angry emotional undertone (Meloy et al., 2011). A pathological fixation could be cognitively and affectively driven by a delusion, an obsession, or an “extreme overvalued belief” (Rahman, 2018; Rahman, Meloy & Bauer, 2019).

3. *Identification Warning Behavior* is a psychological desire to be a pseudo-commando (Dietz, 1986) or have a warrior mentality (Hempel, Meloy & Richards, 1999); closely associate with weapons or other military or law enforcement paraphernalia; identify with previous attackers or assassins; or in the case of the individual terrorist, to identify oneself as an agent to advance a particular cause or belief system. We have discussed this warning behavior in detail (Meloy, Mohandie, Hoffmann & Knoll, 2015), including its roots in A. Freud’s *identification with the aggressor* (A. Freud, 1937), and the concept of identity in the history of psychoanalytic thought (Erikson, 1950). Simply put, fixation is what one constantly thinks about; identification is what one becomes. In the context of terrorism, the key is a shift from fixation to identification (Meloy et al., 2019), as the pathological preoccupation metamorphosizes into a self-identity (e.g., a soldier for ISIS).

4. *Novel Aggression Warning Behavior* is an act of violence that appears unrelated to the intended act of concern and is committed for the first time; it is typically done to test the subject’s ability to carry out his or her act of violence. This warning behavior is difficult to discern and easy to miss. However, the testing of one’s ability to be violent may be critical to the subject moving into operational space. MacCulloch, Snowden, Wood & Mills (1983) referred to this as a *behavioral tryout* in the context of the sexually sadistic

offender, and Hull (1952) would likely define the term as a measure of motivation to act on the environment (MacCulloch et al 1983, Hull 1952).

5. *Energy Burst Warning Behavior* is an increase in the frequency or variety of any noted activities related to the target, even if the activities themselves appear relatively innocuous, usually in the weeks, days, or hours before the attack. Social media activity will usually decrease during this period of time. This warning behavior cannot be assessed unless a baseline of general activity for the person of concern has been established by the threat assessor. Energy burst is a notable increase from baseline, and is likely due to the POC running out of time to complete all necessary tasks before implementing his attack—rather than a psychiatric disturbance such as manic acceleration. Virtual reality presence (social media) during this brief period before an attack will likely decrease due to encryption to enhance secrecy (two of the currently most common applications are Telegram and WhatsApp) or an actual time limitation due to final preparations in terrestrial reality.

6. *Leakage Warning Behavior* is communication to a third party of an intent to do harm to a target through an attack (Meloy and O’Toole, 2011); the third party may be an Internet audience and/or any social media audience. In the context of psychotherapy, this could prompt a legal obligation on the part of the mental health professional to warn the third party and/or law enforcement.

This warning behavior is the Achilles’ Heel of the lone actor terrorist and others intending to engage in targeted violence. A majority of such individuals will leak their intent to

third parties, lone actor terrorists more frequently than non-ideologically motivated mass murderers (Horgan et al., 2016). Motivations vary greatly, and tend to evolve around vulnerabilities created by a narcissistic sense of impunity or various anxieties. The paradox is that most attackers will leak their intent, while most persons of concern with no intent will also engage in leakage. This is exacerbated by the subsequent reluctance of third parties to report following knowledge of a leak, a likely derivative of the Bystander Effect, a validated phenomenon from social psychology that individuals are less likely to help in an emergency when others are present—or perceived as being so (Darley & Latane, 1968). The threat assessment risk with leakage is that the professional assessor becomes complacent due to the frequency of false positives he or she encounters.

*7. Last Resort Warning Behavior* is evidence of a “violent action and/or time imperative” (Mohandie & Duffy, 1999). It may be a signal of desperation or distress. Often it is the result of an unexpected triggering event, or one which is anticipated, which involves a loss in love or work. The subject believes he has no other choice and must act now. Sometimes there is no external triggering event, yet the subject imposes upon himself the necessity of action through various psychological defense maneuvers, often narcissistically colored, such as characterizing himself as the last man standing, or the only one with the courage to act. This is a pattern of behavior which may contain within it “final acts” (Calhoun & Weston, 2003, 2016): The subject will complete tasks which suggest he believes his life is about to end, such as giving away possessions, settling debts, or closing bank accounts. It has also been referred to as “end of tether” behavior (James et al., 2014).

8. *Directly Communicated Threat Warning Behavior* is the communication of a direct threat through any means to the target or law enforcement beforehand.

Although directly communicated threats are quite infrequent among those who engage in targeted violence of any kind, including terrorism (Meloy & Hoffmann, 2014), they always warrant active investigation because they may turn out to be true positives: in a few cases they are actually signaling an intent to act. We found this to be the case in one out of five lone actor terrorists (Meloy & Gill, 2016). The paradox is that research among approachers and attackers of public figures, for example, indicates that a directly communicated threat may actually *reduce* the likelihood of an attack when analyzed as group data (Meloy & Hoffmann, 2014). The operational issue, however, is that one cannot afford to be wrong when conducting a threat assessment, and therefore the default position should always be that all direct threats are taken seriously.

The 10 distal characteristics are as follows:

1. *Personal grievance and moral outrage* is the joining of both personal life experience and particular historical, religious, or political events. Personal grievance is often defined by a major loss in love or work, feelings of anger and humiliation, and the blaming of others. Moral outrage is typically a vicarious identification with a group which has suffered, even though the lone actor terrorist usually has not experienced the same suffering.

2. *Framed by an ideology* is the presence of beliefs that justify the subject's intent to act.

It can be a religious belief system, a political philosophy, a secular commitment, a one-

issue conflict, or an idiosyncratic justification. Beliefs are usually superficial and selected to justify violence.

3. *Failure to affiliate with an extremist or other group* is the experience of rejecting or being rejected by a radical, extremist, or other group with which the subject initially wanted to affiliate.

4. *Dependence on the virtual community* is the use of the Internet through social media, chat rooms, emails, listservs, texting, tweeting, posting, searches, etc., for virtual interaction (for example, reinforcement of beliefs) or virtual learning (for example, planning and preparation).

5. *Thwarting of occupational goals* is a major setback or failure in a planned academic and/or occupational life course.

6. *Changes in thinking and emotion* is a pattern over time wherein thoughts and their expression become more strident, simplistic, and absolute. Argument ceases and preaching begins. Persuasion yields to imposition of one's beliefs on others. There is no critical analysis of theory or opinion, and the mantra, "don't think, just believe," is adopted. Emotions typically move from anger and argument to contempt and disdain for others' beliefs, to disgust for the outgroup and a willingness to homicidally aggress against them (Matsumoto et al., 2015). Violence is cloaked in self-righteousness and the pretense of superior belief. Humor is lost. Engagement with others in virtual and/or terrestrial reality may greatly diminish or cease once the subject has moved into operational space.

7. *Failure of sexually intimate pair bonding* is the historic failure to form lasting sexually

intimate relationships. The sexualization of violence is a secondary component. It refers to the finding of a sexual attitude or behavior in the subject which appears to substitute for the absence of a sexual pair bond, such as the sexualization of weapons, the anticipation of unlimited sexual gratification in the afterlife, the exclusive use of prostitutes and other unbonded sources of sexual gratification, or compulsive use of pornography: all of these behaviors may be rationalized by the ideology (Meloy, 2018).

8. *Mental Disorder* is evidence of a major mental disorder by history or in the present. The ideology may help to reduce anxiety surrounding the mental disorder or utilize the symptoms to advance the attack (for examples, suicidal thoughts and depression become motivations for martyrdom; delusions of grandeur solidify commitment).

9. *Creativity and innovation* is evidence of tactical thinking “outside the box.” The planned terrorist act is creative (a major aspect has not been done before in contemporary times) and/or innovative (may be imitated by others).

10. *Criminal violence* is evidence of instrumental criminal violence in the subject’s past, demonstrating a capacity and a willingness to engage in predation for a variety of reasons, such as a history of armed robberies or planned assaults on others for material gain.

The proximal warning behaviors were assumed to be both sensitive and specific to lone actor terrorist acts, while the distal characteristics were assumed to be sensitive to acts of terrorism, and not necessarily specific, such as criminal violence. However, these assumptions needed to be empirically tested.

## Empirical Validation of the TRAP-18

The first published study of the TRAP-18 coded a sample of 22 individuals who carried out acts of terrorism in Europe between 1980-2015 (Meloy, Roshdi, Glaz-Ocik & Hoffmann, 2015). Fifteen subjects acted alone, and 7 formed autonomous cells of two or more individuals whose actions were not commanded nor controlled by a terrorist organization, which included the Charlie Hebdo attackers in Paris in January, 2015. The mean interrater reliability (Cohen's Kappa) was 0.895 and ranged from 0.69 to 1.0 for the warning behaviors and 0.75 to 1.0 for the distal characteristics. The terrorists who acted alone and the autonomous cell members showed no significantly different frequencies across the eight warning behaviors, with a majority positive for 72% of the indicators. There were more differences when comparing the distal characteristics between the lone actors and the cell members, but both groups showed a frequency >70% on personal grievance and moral outrage, framed by an ideology, thwarting of occupational goals, and changes in thinking and emotion. The only significant difference ( $p=.0048$ ,  $\phi=0.70$ ) was a much greater frequency of criminal violence (100%) by history among the autonomous cell members than the lone actors.

There are some important take-aways from this study. Gill, Horgan, Corner and Silver (2016) noted the risk of a "time cohort effect" when a sample covered a lengthy time period, but in our study 64% of the cases occurred during the past decade, lowering the

likelihood of such an effect. This study also provided some basic evidence of criterion validity for the TRAP-18 when applied to these small samples, and also the generalizability (the real world fit) of the instrument when applied to both lone actor and autonomous cell subjects. There was not, however, a comparison group of those of concern but without intent, as we had in a previous school shooting study (Meloy et al., 2014b) with just the warning behaviors; therefore, evidence for the TRAP-18's discriminant validity was not demonstrated.

The second study (Meloy & Gill, 2016) used an open source sample of 111 lone-actor terrorists from the U.S. and Europe as criteria to further validate the TRAP-18.

Terrorism was defined as, “the use or threat of action where the use or threat is designed to influence the government or to intimidate the public or a section of the public, and/or the use or threat is made for the purpose of advancing a political, religious, or ideological cause” (Gill et al., 2013). The sample, however, was composed of only those who planned and carried out an attack (in some cases thwarted) between 1990-2014. 70% of the terrorists were positive for at least half or more of the indicators. 77% or more evidenced four proximal warning behaviors: pathway, fixation, identification, and leakage. When the sample was divided into Islamic terrorists ( $n=38$ ), extreme right wing terrorists ( $n=43$ ) and single issue terrorists, mostly anti-abortionists ( $n=30$ ), there were no significant differences across the 18 indicators except for four: personal grievance and moral outrage, dependence on the virtual community, thwarting of occupational goals, and fixation. Islamic extremist lone actors were significantly more



likely to display dependence on the virtual community than the single-issue terrorists. Extreme right-wing lone actors were significantly less likely to display personal grievance and moral outrage, thwarting of occupational goals, and fixation warning behaviors than either the Islamic extremists or the single-issue terrorists. Single-issue lone actors were significantly less likely to display dependence on virtual communities than the Islamic extremists.

We then divided the sample according to successful ( $n=67$ ) versus thwarted ( $n=44$ ) attackers. The successful attackers actually carried out their violent act, while a thwarted attack covered plots which were developed by lone actor terrorists that were interrupted, uncovered, or stopped by some form of police, intelligence, or security organization *and* subsequently led to a conviction. Individuals caught up in FBI sting operations or “material support” cases were not included. These are cases in which a person knowingly and intentionally provides training, expert advice, service, or personnel for terrorist endeavors (Doyle, 18 US Code Section 2339A).

The successful attackers were significantly more fixated, creative and innovative, and failed to have a sexually intimate pair bond. They were significantly less likely to have displayed pathway warning behavior to others and be dependent on a virtual community of likeminded true believers. Effect sizes for these comparative differences were small to medium ( $\phi= 0.19-0.32$ ).

These differences make operational sense. Less evidence of pathway behavior would suggest less observation by others, whether through luck or stealth. Fixation, the second warning behavior more frequent among the successful attackers, suggests an intensity of pursuit in a larger stalking context (Meloy & Hoffmann, 2014). A history of failed sexual pair bonding lowers the risk of an intimate becoming familiar with one's activities and disrupting the operation. Creativity and innovation, another distal characteristic more frequent among the successful attackers, helps outwit the counterterrorism investigator; and less dependence on the virtual community means a lessened chance of having one's postings or social media communication picked up by a third party and communicated to authorities.

Meloy and Gill (2016) advanced the construct validation of the TRAP-18, with important within-group comparisons from an ideological and operational perspective. However, a comparison group of subjects of concern but without intent (false positives) was not available, and therefore discriminant validity was not demonstrated.

In a postdictive study of US domestic terrorists (Sovereign Citizens), Challacombe and Lucas (2018) compared 58 individuals, 30 who had committed violent or dangerous actions and 28 who committed nonviolent criminal actions. Interrater reliability was excellent ( $\kappa=.76$ ). All incidents occurred between 2004-2014. Ten TRAP-18 indicators significantly correlated with violence with medium to large effect sizes ( $\phi = 0.33-0.70$ ): the warning behaviors of pathway, identification, leakage, and last resort; and

the distal characteristics of personal grievance and moral outrage, framed by ideology, thwarting of occupational goals, and criminal violence were all more frequent among the violent right wing extremists. Two warning behaviors negatively correlated with violence: novel aggression and energy burst. A binary logistic regression was then performed using the summed TRAP-18 score and correctly explained 44-59% of the variance. The TRAP-18 correctly classified 75.9% of the cases as either violent or nonviolent. Odds ratio was 2.10 ( $p=.000$ ).

Another comparative study of North American terrorist attackers ( $n=33$ ) and persons of national security concern who were successfully risk managed ( $n=23$ ) found significant differences with medium to large effect sizes ( $\phi = .35-.70$ ) across half of the TRAP-18 indicators (Meloy, Goodwill, Meloy, Martinez, Amat & Morgan, 2019). The subjects in this study were an ideological mix of violent jihadists, extreme right-wing nationalists, and single-issue terrorists, usually anti-abortionists. Findings indicated that the proximal warning behaviors which differentiated the attackers from those of concern where there had been successful intervention and risk management, were pathway, identification, energy burst, last resort, and the absence of a directly communicated threat. The distal characteristics which were more frequent in the attackers were ideological framing, changes in thinking and emotion, and creativity and innovation. Mental disorder was significantly less frequent. Odds ratios and 95% confidence intervals were also computed in this study. Goodwill and Meloy (2019), using the same sample, demonstrated through multidimensional scaling that the proximal warning behaviors

clustered together (co-occurrence) among the attackers, and not among the nonattackers; and there was less clustering among the distal characteristics, which were apparent in both groups. What has emerged across all the targeted violence studies to date is the ubiquity of the proximal warning behaviors of pathway, fixation, identification, leakage, energy burst, and last resort; and within the lone actor terrorist domain, the evolution from fixation to identification—what one thinks about all the time, to what one becomes—may be a critical marker for imminent risk. Two studies (Meloy et al., 2019; Goodwill & Meloy, 2019) also empirically supported the theoretical model of the TRAP-18: proximal warning behaviors were virtually absent among the non-attackers, while both groups showed a plethora of distal characteristics. One of the ironies in these studies was the significantly *greater frequency* of directly communicated threats among the non-attackers when compared to the attackers, a finding which supports the conventional belief across threat assessors in general that direct threats often lower the risk for targeted violence (Calhoun & Weston, 2016; Meloy & Hoffmann, 2014).

The march of science is the interplay of nomothetic and idiographic research. Several studies have also been published to advance a fuller understanding of the TRAP-18 in the context of the individual terrorist. Meloy, Habermeyer & Guldemann studied the proximal warning behaviors of a 2011 extreme right-wing Norwegian mass murderer (Meloy, Habermeyer & Guldemann (2015). Bockler et al. (2015) wrote a detailed study of the violent jihadist Frankfurt Airport attacker utilizing the TRAP-18, and identified fifteen out of eighteen indicators. Meloy and Genzman (2016) studied the case of the

violent jihadist Ft. Hood mass murderer with a particular focus upon threat assessment using the TRAP-18 by mental health clinicians; he evidenced thirteen out of eighteen indicators. Bockler et al. (2017) scrutinized the violent jihadist Berlin Christmas market attacker's proximal warning behaviors, which included pathway, fixation, identification, leakage, and last resort. Erlandsson and Meloy (2018) studied an extreme right wing Swedish school attacker and found fifteen out of eighteen TRAP indicators. The only proximal warning behavior that was not in evidence was a directly communicated threat. Case studies do not provide predictive data, but allow for a more nuanced and deeper contemplation of each fact pattern and how it correlates with the TRAP-18 indicators.

#### The Application of the TRAP-18 to the Oklahoma City Bomber

On April 19, 1995, Timothy McVeigh detonated a 5,000 pound ammonium nitrate and fertilizer bomb in front of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. 168 adults and children died, and hundreds more were injured.

Although it was initially thought by the popular media to be a jihadist attack, McVeigh was a right wing ethnic nationalist, a member of the Patriot Movement at the time, who believed that his attack would usher in the Second American Revolution. He was subsequently tried and eventually executed two months before the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. McVeigh's history and behaviors are viewed through the lens of the TRAP-18 to illustrate the application of the instrument, in

retrospect, to a lone actor terrorist. The data for this study are drawn from the author's case files while retained as an expert witness for the United States Attorney in *United States v. Timothy James McVeigh* and *United States v. Terry Nichols*, and other sources as referenced. Such an analysis, however, is inherently unfair to those responsible for counterterrorism at the time since all evidence is now aggregated and known to the public, and the extreme difficulties of threat management at the time, such as separating the signal from the noise, are lost. Such an analysis is also subject to hindsight bias: the knew-it-all-along effect, that is, the inclination, after an event has occurred, to see the event as having been predictable, despite there having been little known data for predicting it.

Nevertheless, individual cases allow for a more granular look at the indicators which may be useful to contemporary threat assessors. Here are the eight proximal warning behaviors which were present or absent:

1. *Pathway warning behavior*—McVeigh planned and prepared for the attack at least 18 months earlier. He formed a three-man cell with Michael Fortier and Terry Nichols, and target selection eventually settled on the Murrah building due to its easy access and the presence of the federal law enforcement offices (ATF) which had been involved in the Branch Davidian siege in Waco, Texas, two years earlier. During the course of the preparation, McVeigh and Nichols engaged in a burglary from a quarry in Marion, Kansas (September, 1994) and a robbery of gun dealer Roger Moore's home for money (November, 1994) near Hot Springs, Arkansas. The bomb was eventually constructed

using 55-gallon drums in a shaped charge in a Ryder Truck.

2. *Fixation warning behavior*—McVeigh was preoccupied with the siege and eventual destruction of the Branch Davidian compound by FBI and ATF agents on April 19, 1993. He was convinced that all members that died, including women and children, had been deliberately murdered by the federal government. Prior to this event, he was incensed by the Ruby Ridge incident in August, 1992 when Randy Weaver and his family had an armed confrontation with the FBI in Idaho; Weaver’s wife, son, and a federal agent were killed. His anger and perseveration on these topics were noted by others, and cemented his belief that the federal government and its employees were his enemy. His social and occupation functioning was in isolated limbo. His fixation also met the definition of an extreme overvalued belief:

An extreme overvalued belief is one that is shared by others in a person’s cultural, religious, or subcultural group. The belief is often relished, amplified, and defended by the possessor of the belief and should be differentiated from an obsession or a delusion. The belief grows more dominant over time, more refined and more resistant to challenge. The individual has an intense emotional commitment to the belief and may carry out violent behavior in its service. (Rahman, 2018)

3. *Identification warning behavior*—McVeigh saw himself as “the first hero of the second American revolution,” and believed that the bombing would begin a national uprising against the federal government (in letters to sister Jennifer reviewed by author). He closely identified with the US founding forefathers, especially Thomas Jefferson, and

wore a t-shirt during his bombing imprinted on the back with Jefferson's words: "the tree of liberty must from time to time be replenished with the blood of patriots and tyrants." On the front was a depiction of President Abraham Lincoln and the phrase, "sic semper tyrannis" (thus always to tyrants), purportedly yelled by John Wilkes Booth immediately after the Lincoln assassination. He had become a soldier for the Patriot Movement.

4. *Novel aggression warning behavior*—McVeigh showed no evidence of this warning behavior. He didn't need to test his capability for violence, since he had a history of sanctioned violence during "Desert Storm," as a Bradley vehicle machine gunner, August, 1990-February, 1991. He allegedly killed several Iraqis and was considered by some of his U.S. Army colleagues at his trial as a "soldier's soldier."

5. *Energy burst warning behavior*—The bomb was constructed in the back of a Ryder truck at Geary State Lake in Kansas—an enormous physical task involving the mixing of nitromethane, ammonium nitrate, diesel fuel and fertilizer in thirteen 55-gallon drums. It is unclear who helped him. One witness reported seeing a total of five people at the truck site; others saw no trucks. McVeigh stated it was only Nichols and him (Belew, 2018; Serrano, 1998; author's files). McVeigh then drove 250 miles on back roads to Oklahoma City, and slept in the truck the night of April 18, 1995. Just after 0900, he parked the truck under the overhang of the Murrah building, having lit two fuses as he approached. He then jogged away from the truck, the bomb detonated, and he accessed his 1977 yellow Mercury Marquis several blocks from the site where he had parked it a week earlier. He began driving north at exactly the speed limit to avoid attention.

6. *Leakage warning behavior*—McVeigh discussed his intent with his two cell members,



Nichols and Fortier. Fortier withdrew from the conspiracy, testified at trial, was given a reduced sentence, and released to witness protection (WITSEC) in 2006. Nichols pulled back, but then helped McVeigh construct the bomb. Neither one contacted authorities prior to the bombing. Nichols was eventually sentenced to 161 consecutive life sentences in federal prison without possibility of parole.

McVeigh also showed Lori Fortier, the wife of Michael, how he would construct a bomb in the back of a truck by stacking soup cans on the floor in Lori's kitchen in Kingman, Arizona. She was granted immunity at trial to testify against McVeigh and appeared to have full knowledge of the attack. In the months prior to the bombing, he also told his sister Jennifer his plans that something big would happen in the Spring 1995, "there's going to be a revolution," but did not tell her the weapon or the specific target. She then communicated this to several other people. Her friends reported that she became boastful at a Christmas party. "You'll see in either April or May something big is going to happen with my brother. I don't know what it is, but it's going to be big. There's going to be a revolution and you're either going to be with us or against us. I know I'm going to be ready" (Serrano, 1998). Later McVeigh sent her a letter, "something is going to happen in the month of the bull," and then told his sister to burn the letter (Serrano, 1998).

*7. Last resort warning behavior*—McVeigh believed that violence was the only answer to destroy the federal government, and his mission was to begin the second American Revolution. In February 1992, he wrote an op-ed piece for his hometown newspaper, saying in part, "Is civil war imminent? Do we have to shed blood to reform the current

system? I hope it doesn't come to that, but it might" (Michel & Herbeck 2002). In the months prior to the bombing, he gave his personal belongings to his sister, Jennifer. He wrote to her, "Who else would come to the rescue of those innocent women and children at Waco?!? Surely not the Sheriff or the state police! Nor the Army—whom are used overseas to 'restore democracy,' while at home are used to destroy it (in full violation of the Posse Comitatus Act), at places like Waco. I'm no longer in the propaganda stage... Now I'm in the action stage" (Serrano 1998).

8. *Directly communicated threat warning behavior*—There is no evidence that McVeigh communicated his intent to law enforcement or the target beforehand, consistent with other research on targeted violence (Meloy & Hoffmann, 2014).

Here are the ten distal characteristics which were either present or absent:

1. *Personal grievance and moral outrage*—McVeigh's personal grievance was his failure to pass the selection process at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina, to become a US Army Green Beret in 1991. He was invited to return again once he was back in shape, but declined to do so. He finished his enlistment at Ft. Riley and left the Army later that year. His dream of becoming the "ultimate warrior" was shattered. His moral outrage was his identification with both Randy Weaver, a retired special forces soldier, and his family whom he saw as victims of the federal government at Ruby Ridge in August, 1992; and his identification with members of the Branch Davidians whom he saw as the murder victims of the federal government in Waco, Texas on April 19, 1993. This was the spark on the oil slick of Timothy McVeigh's mind. He changed his birthday to April 19.

2. *Framed by Ideology*—Following his US Army service, McVeigh drifted further to the right and embraced the ideology of the Patriot Movement: the US Constitution was being violated, the federal government was the enemy, and power should only reside at the County level (*posse comitatus*). Within the Patriot Movement was a strong defense of the Second Amendment, as well as white ethnic Christian superiority and dominance, the latter often manifest through anti-Semitic and racist literature. His ideological framing supported two aspects of his terrorist planning and preparation: the bombing should occur on Patriot's Day (April 19), a celebration of the date in 1775 when the colonialists fired their first shot against the occupying British at Lexington-Concord and began the American Revolution; and the use of William Pierce's book, "The Turner Diaries," as a partial template for bombing a federal building. Pierce, a trained physicist, was the founder and head of the National Alliance, a very large, extreme right wing ethnic nationalist organization. He was an anti-Semite and neo-Nazi. McVeigh attempted to contact Pierce by telephone in the days prior to the bombing.

3. *Failure to affiliate with an extremist or other group*—Although McVeigh and Nichols attended some meetings of the Michigan militia, a local paramilitary group, after the bombing members of the group insisted that they leave due to their advocacy of violence. One other source reports that McVeigh served as a bodyguard to its leader, Mark Koernke, on a trip to Florida following the Branch Davidian compound conflagration (Belew, 2018).

4. *Dependence on the virtual community*—there was no public internet or social media at the time of the Oklahoma City bombing, so this characteristic is absent.

5. *Thwarting of occupational goals*—McVeigh’s rejection from special selection for the Green Berets, his personal grievance, thwarted his larger goal of being the “ultimate warrior” and a career soldier, although he could have continued to pursue this occupation but for his humiliation when he failed one endurance run. He tried other related paths—armed security guard, application to become a US Marshal—but was met with either boredom or failure.

6. *Changes in thinking and emotion*—McVeigh became more isolative after leaving the US Army, living as a drifter, selling paraphernalia at gun shows, and traveling between Decker, Michigan, the home of the Nichols family, and Kingman, Arizona, the home of the Fortiers. He became more angry, strident and absolutist in his beliefs following the Waco conflagration. His writings to his sister Jennifer reflected an increasing paranoia and grandiosity as the date of the bombing approached. He became more brooding and humorless. He left a note for the ATF on his sister’s word processor: “ATF Read: ATF, all you tyrannical motherfuckers will swing in the wind one day for your treasonous actions against the Constitution and the United States. Remember the Nuremburg War Trials. But...but...but...I was only following orders. Die, you spineless cowardice bastards!” (Serrano, 1998; author’s files). There was no longer any small talk. On February 10, 1995, he wrote Gwenn Strider, an older friend in Caro, Michigan, who had written to him about a local problem. He wrote at length about his commitment to militancy, and ended with the following statement: “Sorry I can’t be of more help, but most of the people sent my way these days are of the direct-action type, and my whole mindset has shifted from intellectual to animal (rip the bastards heads off and shit down their necks! And I’ll show

you how with a simple pocket knife....etc.)” He signed it, “Seeya, The Desert Rat.” (Serrano, 1998; author’s files). He could no longer stand to be around children. He was stressed and edgy. The primitivity of this latter comment may reflect his emotional shift from anger, to contempt and disgust for his enemy. Such emotional change has been shown to correlate with politically violent action (Matsumoto , Frank & Hwang, 2015).

His internal fantasies were also apparently becoming more violent and grandiose. He communicated to his sister that he would become the first hero of the American Revolution, and was intent on becoming the “ultimate warrior” (author’s files). As is often the case, he wore clothing and carried amulets consistent with these fantasies on the day of the bombing. Along with the t-shirt noted earlier, McVeigh carried in his pocket a gold commemorative coin inscribed on one side, “Battle of Lexington/Concord, April 19, 1775” and on the other side, “shot heard round the world,” a reference to the famous poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson.

*7. Failure of sexually intimate pair bonding*—There is no evidence that McVeigh had any experience with sexually intimate bonding from puberty until his death. There is suggestive evidence that he engaged in sexual relations with women on occasion, but no enduring sexually intimate attachments whatsoever. He bemoaned the fact that he had not reproduced prior to his execution (Meloy, 2018; Michel & Herbeck, 2002).

*8. Mental disorder*—McVeigh had no known diagnosable mental disorder, and no mental condition was introduced by his defense team during trial to mitigate responsibility for his crimes. He may have been clinically depressed following his discharge from the U.S.

Army. Standardized IQ testing in the military found him to have an IQ in the superior range (FSIQ 120-129). He was an introvert by temperament, but could be intentionally friendly and talkative. He did not trust others, and did not form close relationships easily. His personality suggested a poised, overcontrolled individual, self-sufficient and self-reliant, who believed he was superior to others. He was usually serious, and gravitated toward esoteric political and philosophical beliefs. He nurtured a lifelong anger toward authority figures whom he believed were arbitrary and unreasonable. McVeigh was abandoned by his mother in mid adolescence, and his father was chronically emotionally withdrawn from the children (Meloy, 2004). There was no evidence of any diagnosable psychiatric condition as a child nor any antisocial behavior. Others viewed him as quiet and ruminative. His adult personality was similar to the “hypervigilant narcissist” described by Gabbard (Gabbard 1989; Meloy, 2004; author’s files).

9. *Creativity and innovation*—The bombing was innovative in size and consequences since it was at that time the largest terrorist attack in the history of the United States. However, the modus operandi was taken from Pierce’s novel, “The Turner Diaries,” and an ammonium nitrate/fuel oil bomb and Ryder Truck were utilized by al Qaeda in the first World Trade Center bombing in February, 1993. The Oklahoma bombing, however, was imitated, most recently by Anders Breivik on July 22, 2011 in Oslo, Norway. Breivik also idolized McVeigh and closely identified with him as a warrior for a nationalist cause (Meloy, Habermeyer & Guldemann, 2015).

10. *Criminal violence*—McVeigh did have one act of criminal violence by history prior to

the bombing: the robbery of Roger Moore in November, 1994 in Hot Springs, Arkansas.

McVeigh was positive on 14 out of 18 indicators (78%). If one extrapolates the 43 extreme right-wing terrorists from the Meloy & Gill lone actor terrorist sample (Meloy & Gill (2016)), McVeigh was positive on the four most prominent warning behaviors in that subgroup: pathway (81%), fixation (65%), identification (86%), and leakage (88%). The McVeigh findings, in retrospect, have no predictive value, but do demonstrate the goodness of fit—the ecological validity - when the TRAP-18 is applied to an individual terrorist. It also provides an organized template for understanding both proximal and distal risk indicators in a person of concern, and planning appropriate and timely intervention strategies. Group based comparative studies are necessary to draw conclusions concerning the predictive and discriminant validity of the TRAP-18, as reviewed earlier. McVeigh was a soldier for the extreme right, the white power movement, a political and social problem of underestimated magnitude that continues to haunt both North American and European countries (Belew, 2018).

## Conclusion

Prevention does not require prediction. In other words, one does not require specific prediction of a terrorist act in order to engage in countermeasures to thwart those who may pose a threat, and divert those who present early stage concerns into more prosocial and nonviolent pathways. With this principle in mind, the TRAP-18 was designed to document both proximal and distal indicators of risk. When only distal indicators are

present, research suggests that the case need only be monitored. When one or more proximal warning behaviors are present, the case should be actively managed. Such an approach to threat assessment of lone actor terrorism allows for the *prioritization* of cases, a problem endemic in counterterrorism efforts since the base rate for actual violence is very low, even within a population of general concern, the intelligence noise is very high, and the civil rights of individuals must be protected.

In this chapter the Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol has been introduced as a threat assessment tool, and the 18 indicators have been defined. The extant empirical research on the TRAP-18 has been presented, which is beginning to demonstrate interrater reliability, content validity, construct validity, discriminant validity, and postdictive validity across multiple studies. The instrument was also applied to one case of domestic terrorism in the United States, the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995. The TRAP-18 demonstrated both directionality and depth of understanding in assessing retrospectively the threat presented by Timothy McVeigh.

Eric Hoffer wrote in his book “The True Believer,” a passage utilized by the author in one of his reports to the federal trial judge concerning McVeigh and his co-conspirator, Terry Nichols (Eric Hoffer (1951):

For there is often a monstrous incongruity between the hopes,  
However noble and tender, and the actions which follows them.



It is as if ivied maidens and garlanded youths were to herald  
the four horsemen of the apocalypse.

Our task is to make sure these actions do not come to pass.

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