

CIA victim of 'Havana Syndrome' blames Kremlin: 'Russians are very aggressive' against U.S. gov't

Washington still stumped by suspected microwave weapon attacks

By Joseph Clark - *The Washington Times* - Thursday, June 3, 2021

Marc Polymeropoulos was a senior CIA case officer on a routine visit to Moscow in 2017 when he awoke in his hotel room with a severe case of vertigo.

His first inclination was that he had food poisoning and that the symptoms would soon wear off. Instead, it was the beginning of a brain-rattling affliction that would last for years and eventually force him out of the CIA.

“It’s incredibly unsettling,” Mr. Polymeropoulos said of that night. “The room was spinning. I couldn’t stand up. I was falling over. I felt like I was going to be physically sick. I had ringing in my ears. And so I knew something pretty significant had happened.”

Mr. Polymeropoulos had fallen victim to Havana syndrome, a debilitating affliction that U.S. Embassy staff suffered in 2016 in Cuba. The mysterious symptoms “are consistent with the effects of directed, pulsed radio frequency (RF) energy,” said a National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine report published in December.

Many believe the syndrome is a result of attacks with a microwave weapon or directed energy device, but the U.S. intelligence community doesn’t officially know any more now than it did five years ago.

After the diagnoses of more than 40 cases from Havana, the number of U.S. officials around the globe reporting symptoms, including on U.S. soil, swelled to 130.

Last month, reports revealed information about two U.S. officials struck by Havana syndrome near the White House.

Mr. Polymeropoulos said he believes Russia is behind the affliction because it has the capability to carry out such attacks and many of the officials affected have been involved in Russian operations. He said the attacks seem to be in line with Russia's treatment of U.S. diplomats.

"There has been a long line of U.S. officials who have developed some pretty severe health symptoms after serving in Moscow," he said. "That's something that is worth looking into again as well. Whether it's the old kind of signals intelligence systems that were turned up too high or the old spy dust, you know, the Russians are very aggressive against U.S. government personnel."

Nonetheless, he said, this is just his theory. He is not involved in the investigation into the matter and has no insight into the classified discussions about the cases of Havana syndrome.

U.S. diplomats in China also had episodes.

The House and Senate intelligence committees recently held closed-door hearings on Havana syndrome. Representatives from both committees declined to comment on the closed discussions, but a spokesperson for Sen. Mark R. Warner, Virginia Democrat and chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, said the senator “welcomes the IC’s renewed focus on these mysterious attacks and that he’ll continue to work with the IC to understand the cause and the attribution.”

In a joint statement after the hearing, Mr. Warner and committee Vice Chairman Marco Rubio, Florida Republican, vowed to find the culprit.

“Ultimately, we will identify those responsible for these attacks on American personnel and will hold them accountable,” they said.

The State Department, CIA and Pentagon have all started investigations. The National Security Council has begun leading what it called a whole-of-government inquiry into the anomalies. No official determination has been made as to the cause or who may be behind it.

“The Intelligence Community is taking these anomalous health incidents (AHI) very seriously and is committed to investigating the source of these incidents, preventing them from continuing, and caring for those affected,”

said a spokesperson for the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. "As of now, we have no definitive information about the cause of these incidents, and it is premature and irresponsible to speculate."

The intelligence community has not determined whether a foreign actor is responsible but the spy agencies have redoubled their efforts in recent months, the spokesman said.

Mr. Polymeropoulos said he understands why intelligence officials are taking a methodic approach. For him, however, supporting those affected by the attacks takes priority.

Because of little understanding of these attacks, Mr. Polymeropoulos said, he endured a long journey to receive the treatment he needed.

After spending most of his career as a case officer in the Middle East, he said, he did not expect a career-ending attack on his trip to Moscow — especially from within the walls of his five-star hotel near the U.S. Embassy. The symptoms persisted, even after he returned to the U.S., so he knew he had experienced something more serious than food poisoning.

He reported his symptoms to the CIA's office of medical services soon after returning.

"I couldn't even go to work for more than several hours a day because of the headaches, the dizziness and the brain fog," he said.

With no treatment available to him, Mr. Polymeropoulos decided to retire from the agency in 2019 and, still seeking treatment, hired a lawyer to press the agency.

"I want nothing more than to get to Walter Reed," he said he told his attorney and other senior former agency officials who weighed in on his behalf. "And that was communicated to the CIA very specifically. And it worked."

He said he had no interest in receiving a financial settlement. He just wanted treatment, which the agency refused.

In October, Mr. Polymeropoulos took an unusual step for someone who led an entire career in the shadows. He approached GQ journalist Julia Ioffe to make his case public.

He told the CIA he would do so and said the agency was not surprised, but he did not make the decision lightly after a 26-year career.

"It caused me a lot of stress and anxiety. A lot of people I work with, my former colleagues, were very upset with me and certainly shunned me after that."

But ultimately, it worked.

The published story put enough public pressure on the CIA to send him to a monthlong program at Walter Reed's National Intrepid Center of Excellence, he said.

When he arrived, he carried not only the symptoms from the attack but also persistent anxiety, which he blamed on skepticism about his story. The program helped him deal with the headaches and with what he described as the moral injury of feeling shunned.

He felt his claims were finally validated.

Mr. Polymeropoulos chalks up the agency's denials to what he describes as a leadership failure on the part of the office of medical services. He said CIA Director William J. Burns pledged in his confirmation hearing to prioritize the attacks, and the agency has established a task force to further examine the incidents.

"I think he just understands leadership," Mr. Polymeropoulos said of Mr. Burns. "I was asked to do some really unique things by the U.S. government as a CIA Operations Officer, but I always knew that you have this pact with leadership that they would have my back if something went wrong. And they really didn't. And I think he understands that they should have."

Mr. Polymeropoulos also credits lawmakers for beginning an inquiry into the incidents and for taking the claims seriously.

Sens. Susan M. Collins, Maine Republican, Jeanne Shaheen, New Hampshire Democrat, Mr. Warner and Mr. Rubio introduced the Helping American Victims Afflicted by Neurological Attacks (HAVANA) Act last month to provide financial support to those injured by the attacks.

"This is the way the system is supposed to work," Mr. Polymeropoulos said about congressional oversight. "I think it's an effort to kind of right some wrongs that were done. I and others who've been affected are incredibly grateful to the senators and House members on both sides of the aisle."

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Capitol Police to use Army surveillance system on Americans to 'identify emerging threat'

By Joseph Clark - *The Washington Times* - Saturday, July 10, 2021

U.S. Capitol Police will begin fielding military surveillance equipment as part of sweeping security upgrades as the force becomes “an intelligence-based protective agency” after the Jan. 6 attack.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin recently approved a Capitol Police request for eight Persistent Surveillance Systems Ground - Medium (PSSG-M) units. The system provides high-definition surveillance video and is enabled with night vision. The system does not include facial recognition capabilities, the Pentagon said.

“This technology will be integrated with existing USCP camera infrastructure, providing greater high definition surveillance capacity to meet steady-state mission requirements and help identify emerging threats,” the Pentagon said.

The technology allowed U.S. troops fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to monitor large areas 24/7 through extremely high-resolution cameras.

Some privacy rights advocates have raised concern that Capitol Police are getting into the business of spying on Americans.

In a wartime application, the persistent surveillance units were mounted on tethered blimps. The data could be stored, combined with sensor data from other platforms, and later referenced or rewound to track individuals or groups.

The military could use the system to develop “pattern of life” analyses on suspected enemy combatants or intelligence targets in war zones. It could determine, for example, who was responsible for placing an improvised explosive device.

The Department of Homeland Security has leased the same or similar technology, described as Persistent Ground Surveillance System(s) (PGSS), through the Department of Defense, according to a 2016 Government Accountability Office report. It is not clear whether any other agency has fielded the exact technology domestically.

A federal appeals court ruled last month against the Baltimore Police Department’s use of persistent surveillance technology similar to the Pentagon’s Gorgon Stare, which incorporates wide-area motion imagery pods mounted on aircraft. The system allowed police to track hundreds of moving targets at once throughout a large geographical footprint. The court said the program was unconstitutional and violated the Fourth Amendment protection against unreasonable search and seizure.

The technology used in the pilot program in Baltimore, known as Aerial Investigation Research, was owned by a private company and the pilot program was privately funded. The technology allowed the police department to capture up to 12 hours of footage per day.

An independent audit team from New York University's School of Law found that the Baltimore Police Department retained a significant amount of imagery from the surveillance system and used the footage to track individuals for multiple days.

Capitol Police provided few details when The Washington Times asked for specifics about how and where the department will use the PSSG-M equipment. The agency would not say whether the data will be stored or disseminated or whether the system will be used only for real-time observation.

The Pentagon said the Army will install the units and train Capitol Police officers to operate and maintain the system. The Army will not operate the units once they are installed.

When asked whether data from the PSSG-M system would feed to agencies besides Capitol Police or how specifically the fielding of the system would improve upon Capitol security infrastructure, the department declined to respond.

"Hopefully, you can understand it wouldn't be smart of us tell the world all our capabilities," a Capitol Police official told The Times.

As an agency of the legislative branch, U.S. Capitol Police is not subject to the Freedom of Information Act.

Lynne Bernabei, a lawyer based in Washington who specializes in civil rights litigation, said Capitol Police use of the PSSG-M technology does not immediately raise civil liberties concerns. Given the extraordinary circumstances of the Jan. 6 attack, she said, the use of the technology could be legitimate.

The problem with fielding surveillance technology has never been with the technology itself, but with how the resulting data is used to stereotype or target certain individuals and groups, Ms. Bernabei said.

Others are less convinced that the technology will be put to good purpose.

William Owen from the Surveillance Technology Oversight Project said the integration of the technology signals an alarming advance of police surveillance.

“These so-called improvements that the Capitol Police have implemented after the insurrection represent an expansion of police power and surveillance that STOP cautioned against in January,” he said.

“As awful as the events on Jan. 6 were, increased use of biased surveillance technology is never the answer,” he said. “Such technology will inevitably be used to target Black, brown, and Muslim communities and protesters, not White, racist, far-right mobs like those who were given free rein to enter the Capitol. So we need greater civilian oversight of police, not greater police power.”

The integration of the military technology was among several changes that Capitol Police announced last week. Another plan is to open field offices in California and Florida to “investigate threats to Members of Congress.” Additional regions are under consideration for field offices, the announcement states.

Capitol Police also announced increased intelligence-sharing with local and federal law enforcement entities and increased “partnership within the intelligence community.”

The House sergeant-at-arms announced last week that U.S. Capitol Police would remove the security fence that has surrounded the Capitol since the aftermath of the Jan. 6 attack. The statement said the decision was based on an assessment of the current threat environment.

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Biden crusade against 'domestic extremism' spurs thousands of FBI probes, fears of a police state

By Joseph Clark - *The Washington Times* - Saturday, November 6, 2021

The FBI has 2,700 open investigations of domestic extremism, more than double the usual number of cases, counterterrorism officials say, underscoring the Biden administration's accelerated pursuit of what it calls "domestic violent extremists."

The increase in domestic violent extremism that the Biden administration described is shocking. It suggests that the number of plots and racially motivated killings attributed to White supremacists has also multiplied. So far, the administration has not presented those sorts of numbers.

The Department of Homeland Security recorded an average of 1,000 investigations into domestic terrorism plots and incidents per year from 2017 through 2019, including 846 arrests of suspected domestic terrorists by the FBI and other agencies.

The agencies attributed 57 deaths from 2017 through 2019 to acts of domestic terrorism. Of those, 47 were racially motivated and carried out primarily by White supremacists, according to the report.

"It goes without saying that the threat from domestic terrorism is heightened and has significantly increased in the last 18 months," Timothy Langan, assistant director of the FBI's counterterrorism division, said in recent testimony before Congress.

In the wake of the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol, the Biden administration redoubled efforts to counter the threat of “racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists,” which Homeland Security described as a “national threat priority.”

Concerns are growing, however, that the hunt for domestic extremists has become politically charged and that a once-unthinkable authoritarian trampling of civil liberties in the U.S. is becoming a reality.

“Our concern is that the FBI, being a preeminent counterterrorism agency, along with the CIA [and NSA], that those assets could be turned inward to target U.S. citizens without a foreign nexus,” said Rep. Rick Crawford of Arkansas, the top Republican on the counterterrorism and counterintelligence panel of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.

“You have people that are ramping up the rhetoric on domestic violent extremism ... to sort of make the case for and essentially justify the misuse, potentially, of intelligence assets that are specifically authorized for foreign threats,” he said in an interview.

Attorney General Merrick Garland piqued fears of a burgeoning police state last month when he issued a memorandum directing federal law enforcement officials to discuss strategies “for addressing threats against” local school boards and administrators and to “open dedicated lines of communication for threat reporting, assessment and response.”

The memo was a response to a National School Boards Association letter to President Biden requesting “federal assistance to stop threats” from parents against public school officials.

Mr. Garland’s memo received swift backlash. Republicans on the Senate Judiciary Committee told Mr. Garland in a letter that they were concerned about “policing the speech of citizens and concerned parents.”

“It’s exactly this kind of intimidation of private citizens by government officials that our federal civil rights laws were designed to prevent,” Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, Kentucky Republican, wrote in a separate letter to Mr. Garland.

The NSBA has since apologized, saying there was “no justification for some of the language included in the letter.”

But Mr. Garland stood by his memo. He said the NSBA’s apology “does not change the association’s concern of violence or threats of violence.”

For Mr. Crawford, the episode is a clear warning sign that the domestic terrorism narrative has gotten out of hand.

"We're playing fast and loose with the definition of what constitutes a domestic terrorist, and that's the danger of going down this road without the appropriate safeguards," he said.

Driving a narrative

The Biden administration announced a sweeping strategy this summer for confronting a rising domestic terrorism threat that it said largely "emerges from racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists and networks whose racial, ethnic, or religious hatred leads them towards violence."

The Biden strategy document warns that domestic terrorists take on a variety of forms, including lone actors and "informally aligned individuals."

"These actors have different motivations, but many focus their violence towards the same segment or segments of the American community, whether persons of color, immigrants, Jews, Muslims, other religious minorities, women and girls, LGBTQI+ individuals, or others," it said.

The document stressed that the definition of "domestic terrorism in our law makes no distinction based on political views."

Former acting Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf was quick to raise red flags about the focus on domestic terrorism. He said the number of domestic terrorism attacks, while concerning, does not rise to the level of a national priority on par with foreign terrorist organizations, cybersecurity breaches or pandemics.

The Biden administration also prioritized right-wing extremists and Jan. 6 rioters, whom Democrats labeled "insurrectionists," while overlooking left-wing extremists such as Antifa that were responsible for months of rioting

and unrest across the U.S.

“The administration’s new strategy on dealing with domestic terrorism only makes the bias more apparent,” Mr. Wolf wrote in a June essay for The Heritage Foundation. “On the one hand, the document is a public safety policy ‘nothing burger.’ There really isn’t anything new or different. On the other hand, it is a messaging document designed to tar progressive opponents as dangerous and unstable.”

Still, the focus on domestic terrorism and the perhaps more nebulous scourge of “domestic extremism” has become a priority focus across federal agencies.

Few agencies have attended to the threat of “domestic extremism” with more vigor than the Department of Defense. After several active-duty service members were identified in the pro-Trump mob that stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6, rooting out extremism became a focal point for the Pentagon’s top brass.

“The job of the Department of Defense is to keep America safe from our enemies, but we can’t do that if some of those enemies lie with our own ranks,” Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said during his confirmation hearing just weeks after the riot.

Mr. Austin ordered a 60-day “stand-down” across the Defense Department this spring to discuss the scourge of extremism. He established a working group to address further steps needed to defeat its enemy within and, notably, to update the Pentagon’s definition of extremist conduct.

Some lawmakers are suspect about the Pentagon's focus on right-wing extremism.

Last month, 12 Republicans on the Senate Armed Services Committee penned a letter to Gen. Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, with concerns about "this administration's imposition of political narratives on our military."

The Pentagon's "countering extremism working group" was among several concerns outlined in the lawmakers' letter, a copy of which The Washington Times recently obtained.

"A global 'stand-down' curtailed essential military operations so that troops could discuss the perils of 'right-wing' extremism," they wrote. "Six months into its existence, a bloated "Countering Extremism Working Group" plods through its endless review of DOD's longstanding definition of extremist conduct.

"All this is taking place despite clear data that pegs the number of extremists in our military as minuscule."

Still, Democrats in Congress warn that active-duty troops and veterans are uniquely susceptible to recruitment by far-right and White supremacy groups.

"The corrupting influence of domestic violent extremist groups that recruit veterans is a critical issue at a time where our nation remains deeply divided," House Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Mark Takano, California Democrat, said recently at the launch of a series of hearings on the topic.

Republicans on the panel said the Democrats were perpetuating false narratives and portraying veterans in a bad light.

The committee's top Republican, Rep. Mike Bost of Illinois, said "headline-grabbing" anecdotes about veterans in extremist groups don't prove a trend.

"There is very little data on how many veterans are actually involved in violent extremism and the actions that follow," he said. "And there is no question that the vast majority of veterans are law-abiding and peaceful. We cannot let a few bad apples spoil the whole bunch."

Rep. Jim Banks, Indiana Republican, said at the hearing, "The fact that you're going to save our veterans from becoming political terrorists is offensive to every veteran in America."

Lora Ries, a senior homeland security research fellow at the conservative Heritage Foundation, said Democrats were using a false narrative to target Republicans.

"This is what the left is focusing on and running with and continuing this narrative of domestic violence and White supremacists specifically being the most persistent and lethal threat in the homeland," she said in an interview. "They completely ignore what actually happened in 2020. They don't mention Antifa or [Black Lives Matter]. And so this is completely biased, and it's being used to go after conservatives and, in the instance of this hearing, to go after veterans and silence them from free speech."

Thin Ice

Similar hearings on domestic terrorism have dotted lawmakers' calendars in recent months.

Retired FBI Special Agent Kenneth Gray, who spent most of his career in domestic and international counterterrorism, said the rise in domestic terrorism as reported by the FBI and Homeland Security Department is concerning. Still, he said, countering the threat becomes more complicated when the conversation surrounding domestic terrorism becomes politicized.

"I think both are occurring at the same time," said Mr. Gray, who now serves as a senior lecturer at the Henry C. Lee College of Criminal Justice and Forensic Sciences at the University of New Haven.

"There is a rise in racially or ethnically motivated violent extremism, and there is a rise in the anti-government violent extremism," he said. "But it is also being used as a cudgel on both left and right on the political side."

He fears the increasing threat of domestic terrorism combined with increased polarization could lead the U.S. toward more intrusive methods for infiltrating and rooting out groups and individuals deemed to be domestic terrorists or extremists.

Mr. Crawford said he sat with a similar fear Wednesday as Democrats called an open hearing on domestic terrorism before the House intelligence committee.

Committee Chairman Adam B. Schiff, California Democrat, reiterated in his opening remarks the threat of White supremacists that is at the heart of the administration's strategy.

"We must also acknowledge the persistent role White supremacy and White nationalism have on the frequency and severity of these threats," Mr. Schiff said. "It is an indisputable fact that a growing number of domestic terrorist threats arise from people driven by hatred and a stated desire to harm people because of the color of their skin or their religious beliefs.

"We are seeing a sharpened edge to the threat, an increasingly persistent and coordinated effort to terrorize based on these repugnant views," he said.

Mr. Crawford said he is concerned about any uptick in domestic terrorism and supports the FBI and Homeland Security Department's work to combat the threat. Still, he said, he is concerned about Mr. Schiff's direction for the committee, which oversees funding for national intelligence programs to counter foreign threats.

After the hearing, he said it was clear to him that the intent of the open hearing, rather than a closed hearing where the committee could ask more pointed questions, was to put on a show for the media and "make a political statement."

No member of the intelligence committee advocated for the use of foreign intelligence capabilities to target domestic terrorism. All committee members and witnesses at the hearing cited the importance of protecting civil liberties.

In the politically charged environment, however, Mr. Crawford increasingly worries that those guardrails will be removed in the name of combating domestic violent extremists.

“We’re kind of treading on thin ice here with regard to just sort of cavalierly throwing this term around,” he said. “I think we’ve gone a step too far — well beyond a step too far. I think this is dangerous.”

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